The Debate Between Traditional and Progressive Education in Light of Special Education

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Abstract

The debate between progressivism and traditionalism has reached an impasse. No educational institution exists that is purely progressive or purely traditional in its educational approach. At the same time, no school exists that has managed to escape the influences of either theme. Nonetheless, the traditional system of teaching may have worked well for many students over the last 100 years; however, research shows that the industrial epoch's "factory-based" approach to education is failing to serve the needs of 21st century students, let alone special education students. What follows is a discussion of the characteristics of each theme and its overall impact on special education students.

Keywords: special education, inclusion, progressive education, traditional education, Franklin Bobbitt, John Dewey, Individualized Education Plan (IEP), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), exceptional children

Introduction

The debate between progressivism and traditionalism has reached an impasse. This battle in curriculum is "a root cause of significant troubles in education" and has been a rift for over a century (Lackéus et al., 2016, p. 779). No educational institution exists that is purely progressive or purely traditional in its educational approach. At the same time, no school exists that has managed to escape the influences

of either theme. Nonetheless, the traditional system of teaching may have worked well for many students over the last 100 years (Sullivan & Downey, 2015); however, research shows that the industrial epoch's "factory-based" approach to education is failing to serve the needs of 21st century students (Berrett, 2012; Silva et al., 2015), let alone special education students. This review aims to compare and contrast the themes of traditionalism and progressivism under the light of special education in order to determine the theme that best meets the needs of special education students.

Before beginning the conversation on traditionalism and progressivism, let's first define special education. As stated by Heward (2013), "Special education is individually planned, specialized, intensive, goal-directed instruction" (p. 33). Carrying this definition forward, what follows is a discussion of the characteristics of each theme, how it aligns with the fundamental definition of special education, and its overall impact on special education students.

Traditionalism

Franklin Bobbitt, a self-proclaimed pioneer of the field of education, wrote of thoughts and ideas that introduced some of the early traditions of curriculum studies in 1918, at a time when "civilization and humanization" had never "advanced so swiftly" (Flinders & Thornton, 1998, p. 15). Bobbitt believed in the interests of efficiency and the elimination of waste. His aim was to increase student learning while maintaining the minimum amount of cost to society as possible (Flinders & Thornton, 1998). He believed that the curriculum at the time was out-of-date when compared with the twentieth-century breakthroughs in the education field. To Bobbitt, schools were instruments of social adaptation to the preexisting status quo, and the needs of individual students were determined by the demands of adult life (Flinders & Thornton, 1998). Bobbitt's thoughts and beliefs were integral in the formation of the traditional theme of education as it is known today.

The traditional approach to education is intrinsically centered around academics. Students' intellectual growth is determined and evaluated by their verbal and mathematical proficiency. Traditional educators emphasize the importance of academic competence and mastery of the curriculum without much attention to or concern for the emotions of students if and when their efforts fall short (Ackerman, 2003). Students are evaluated with elaborate and exaggerated rubrics and graded on complicated details with even more intricate grade-substitutes (Kohn, 2008). These measures are neither highly accurate measures of academic

ability nor highly accurate measures of the academic accomplishment of the individual student (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013).

Traditionalism and Special Education

It is dangerous to rely on standardized achievement tests to evaluate students' academic achievement, particularly for special education students, who are in need of specially designed services. Traditional environments typically implement a consequence-based system of control, in which school staff and personnel focus on order and compliance rather than on the development of students' ethical intellect, social skills, and independence (Kohn, 2008). This interjects with special education program structures that, as most professionals in the special education field assert, should be designed to build, support, and develop students' moral reasoning and social skills, which have shown to improve with inclusive peer-oriented classroom structures (Hoza et al., 2000). In terms of coursework, traditional educators are encouraged to assign, on a daily basis, homework that does not necessarily deepen students' understanding of ideas; rather, it serves as a model for supplementing what students were just taught (Kohn, 2008). Traditional educators' instruction is based on predetermined curricular hierarchies that implement a "one standard fits all" model. Conversely, one of the components of each special education student's Individualized Education Program is a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided for the child to advance appropriately towards achieving the annual goals, to make progress in the general education curriculum, and to be educated and participate with other non-disabled students in nonacademic activities (IDEA, 2004).

As Ackerman (2003) states, "For students to achieve understanding, they need to do more than press the record button in class and subsequently play back the teacher's words. Students need to think about what they have heard or read" (p. 348). In a traditional environment, where everything can be systemized and manipulated, learning encompasses a "pound it into them" process; there is no place for a child's behavioral or emotional disability (Brady et al., 2011; Pogrow, 2006). The traditional approach to education does not consider the differences that exceptional children display from one another in terms of their learning aptitudes that ensure their provision of instruction that is appropriate to their needs and abilities. The term *exceptional children* describes children with an inability to cope with normal situations and those who may need modifications in curriculum and instruction to grow and develop in the best ways possible (Boykin, 1957).

As Kohn (2008) states, in a traditional classroom, students are "separate selves at separate desks" (p. 20); the default classroom arrangement consists of students doing things on their own. They are rarely encouraged to work together in class or on assignments; instead, they are pitted against one another in competition through various means, including honors classes and awards assemblies, thereby undermining a feeling of community (Kohn, 2008). It is futile to establish a successful special education program under the traditional approach to education, as special education programs are heavily based on students' learning needs, and use individualized or adapted materials and methods. Based on the definition stated in the Introduction, special education is everything that traditional education is not.

Moreover, traditional classrooms implement an economy in which students are rewarded for complying with adults' expectations and punished for failing to do so. According to Dewey (1907), in traditional settings, the center of gravity is outside the child; students are expected to adjust to the school's preexisting system and curriculum. These students are rarely thought of or taken into account when educational policies are being reconsidered; similarly, they hold no active role in the design of the curriculum or in other decisions, such as classroom decoration, management, and assessment (Kohn, 2008).

The traditional approach to education is characteristically interested in improving the short-term skills of students, rather than their long-term dispositions. It thrives in its focus on the rote memorization of lists of facts that rarely have apparent connections to other disciplines (Kohn, 2008), which is problematic for students, especially those with learning disabilities, who are typically unable to retain information on a short-term basis. Traditional education confuses excellence with rigor, and insists that harder material is better. Students are expected to passively absorb vast amounts of information at a time, with no emphasis on or attention to whether they actually understand it. "They end up…spending so much time thinking about how well they're doing that they're no longer as engaged with what they're doing" (Kohn, 2008, p. 21); students are less interested in what they're doing because of the emphasis on getting the right answers. Essentially, they are not constructing their own understanding of ideas; rather, the student's task is translating those of the teacher's.

The traditional approach to education implements a time- and credit-based, instructor-led, text-driven curriculum that is delivered to all students at the same time, with no regard to their individual ability (DeLorenzo et al., 2009; Jerald, 2009; Silva, et al., 2015). The curriculum is tailored to neither the uniqueness of each child, nor the background

that s/he brings with them (Sullivan & Downey, 2015). Students typically construe new information in terms of what they previously trust to be true; hence, not taking into consideration a child's background knowledge is problematic because it often causes a child to subconsciously alter the intended meanings of the teacher's words (Ackerman, 2003). This is especially important for each special education student, who is exceptional and unique; therefore, a single set of procedures, expectations, or coursework that ignored their interests "would be as counterproductive as it was disrespectful" (Kohn, 2008, p. 21). Kuykendall (2004) described the following approach to enhance students' motivation to learn and hope for the future: "Curricula must be revised to foster an appreciation of all the positive components of the students' racial or cultural group as well as the most accurate portrayal of history from the perspective of the particular racial or cultural group" (p. 67), characteristics that are not evident in the traditional environment.

Progressivism

In a progressive setting, on the other hand, a plethora of learning resources are utilized to address each learner's academic and social goals. Child-centeredness, a primary pillar in progressive education (Fallace, 2015), encourages free activity and promotes individuality by presenting children with opportunities to help them adapt to an always-changing world (Powell, 2007). As Har (2011) states,

> [Progressive educators] take a humanitarian view and focus on the use of education to draw forth latent potentials for human development and to cultivate social, intellectual, constructive, and expressive instincts vital for human living. (p. 22)

These progressive characteristics were ultimately founded John Dewey, whose view of curriculum provides an ostensible distinction with Bobbitt's industrial model. Dewey, known as the father of the progressive education movement and the originator of learning-by-doing, advocated for a child-centered method of democratic teaching, in which students played an active role in their learning (Conner & Bohan, 2014). Although there exists critique of his stance on child-centered progressive camps (e.g., Cohen, 1998), Dewey's educational philosophy was a product of the Progressive Era, during which system reform and the need for modernization were the focus. These critiques are, rather, a question of willingness to commit to social transformation (Counts, 1932).

Dewey's ideas have had an astute influence on the educational confabulation (Har, 2011). Dewey championed the educational theory that children learn best by actively doing and argued that education should

incubate through the encouraged interest of the student by the society around him (Flinders & Thornton, 1998). In his book, *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey defines education as more than a structure that exists to train immature members of communities in the development of their thought processes; rather, it serves as a liaison between children and society by helping them learn how to be members of a tribe. Through group membership, Dewey (1916) asserts that each member of this tribe can contribute successes and failures alike in order to foster solicitude for peers. This is considered to be one of the founding principles of special education reform (Stone et al., 2016), seeking to serve students with disabilities as well as their same-aged peers.

Dewey's ideal child-centered curriculum emphasized activity, problem solving, and creative thought (Pring, 2007). As confirmed by Flinders and Thornton (1998), comparing and contrasting Bobbitt and Dewey's perspectives exemplifies how different epitomes of the meaning of "curriculum" cause fundamentally different views of educational intentions and practice. Unlike Bobbitt, Dewey believed that looking to the adult society to assess the needs of the school curriculum leads to confining the student to a predetermined fate. This relates back to special education individualized transition plans (ITP), which describe measurable postsecondary goals based on age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills, in addition to the transition services needed to assist the child in reaching those goals.

Dewey spoke of schools, and education as a whole, as mediums for ameliorating democratic life in the United States; he considered them an important part of community life and instruments for social progress and reform (Flinders & Thornton, 1998), while Bobbitt thought schools existed merely to match students with the preexisting status quo. Dewey believed that the curriculum held the potential for society to remake itself and insisted that no strict boundary should exist between curriculum and community life (Flinders & Thornton, 1998). He insisted that curriculum planning must begin with the experience of the child. Dewey & Small (1897) and Dewey (1916) emphasized the need for educational institutions to be a direct reflection of the community in which they are placed, and that no part of this community should be neglected or disregarded. He also discussed the negative effects of seclusion on societies, declaring, "an alert and expanding mental life depends upon an enlarging range of contact with... the sphere of social contacts" (Dewey, 1916, p. 93). Dewey also explains that "the two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members,

and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups" (Dewey, 1916, p. 106). This rationale of the progressive philosophy is a true testament of today's inclusivity.

Progressivism and Special Education

The progressive approach to education was established in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century "against the prevailing ideology of big business…cultural uniformity," and citizenship transmission (Krug, 1972, p. 179). Progressivism is a pedagogical theme of American education that has inevitably reflected the social and political happenings of its time. Progressive education emphasizes a "child-centered, experiential curriculum, an issues-centered approach to learning, and a critical analysis of society" (Conner & Bohan, 2014). Here, there exists a direct relation between progressive education and special education in terms of their focus on "child-centeredness." This is discernable from the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* of 2004 (IDEA), which requires states to provide special education services to all children with disabilities to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living; they include a voluntary incentive grant program for early intervention services to infants, toddlers, and their families (IDEA, 2004). The child-centered progressive theme is also echoed in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA, 2015), which adopts a more flexible approach to student testing and school accountability by holding states accountable for fixing under-performing schools and encourages states to provide personalized learning for students.

Progressive education focuses on the integration of students through hands-on learning and their development in a democratic setting (Flinders & Thornton, 1998). This approach values students' experiences and focuses on their experiential learning that prepares them for life outside of school. Progressive education also puts emphasis on a child's lifelong learning and social needs by encouraging a combination of group work and independent work, critical thinking, and creativity (Kohn, 2008). This theme is evident in the special education student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which explicitly describes, among other things, the services and supplementary aids that are to be provided to a student to ensure that his/her needs are met through the necessary, individualized accommodations (IDEA, 2004). According to Heward (2013), a student's IEP "spells out where the child is, where she should be going, how she

will get there, how long it will take, and how to tell if and when she has arrived" (p. 62). These progressive thoughts, as well as their implementation, are also reflected in IDEA, which mandates that no child with disabilities may be excluded from a free public education regardless of the nature and severity of the disability, a free appropriate public education (FAPE), and a least restrictive environment (LRE), where disabled students receive their education with non-disabled students to the maximum extent appropriate (IDEA, 2004).

Research has indicated that a progressive approach to education is far more effective than a traditional one. According to Kohn (2008),

> A truly impressive collection of research has demonstrated that when students are able to spend more time thinking about ideas than memorizing facts and practicing skills—and when they are invited to help direct their own learning—they are not only more likely to enjoy what they're doing but to do it better. Progressive education isn't just more appealing; it's also more productive. (p. 24)

This inference is only reinforced by the lack of research supporting the value of "standardized tests, homework, conventional discipline, competition, and other traditional practices" (Kohn, 2008, p. 24; Kohn, 2006; Kohn, 2000; Kohn, 1986). More recent studies confirm that traditional academic instruction for young children is counterproductive. A study conducted by Wenglinsky (2004) showed that students in elementary and middle schools enjoyed and did better in science when instruction was "centered on projects in which they took a high degree of initiative. Traditional activities, such as completing worksheets and reading primarily from textbooks, seemed to have no positive effect" (p. 33).

Discussion

As the United States continues to move away from proletarian employment opportunities and toward 21st century jobs (Sullivan & Downey, 2015), the implication is that "districts must do a better job attending to the application of knowledge and skills, going beyond simply teaching students to 'reproduce' what they are taught within familiar contexts" (Jerald, 2009, p. 69). If students aren't learning effectively, it may be because of the persistence of traditional beliefs and practices in schools with students that are no longer capable of learning in this manner (Kohn, 2008). This is evident in special education students' IEPs, which must contain, as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), appropriate measurable postsecondary goals related to training, education, employment, as well as the transition services required to assist the child in achieving these goals (IDEA, 2004).

Considering the historical, social, political, and philosophical events of the time are vital when analyzing the traditional and progressive themes of education. The development of each approach reflected the changes taking place in American society due to industrialization, urbanization, and immigration (Shortridge, 2007), as well as other significant events that contributed to the rise and ultimate decline of their adoption. The stock market crash of 1929, for instance, along with its political/social influences, caused a shift in the educational climate in favor of the progressive movement (Conner & Bohan, 2014). The need for social reform was evident as the number of school enrollments climbed exponentially because of the even greater number of unemployed Americans; accordingly, social reconstructionists demanded a change in the social studies courses being delivered to students to reflect the social problems facing the country (Conner & Bohan, 2014). The Depression era (1929 to 1939) arguably held the most weight on the change and innovation of the American curriculum, particularly in social studies courses. Progressive textbook authors of the time completely changed the tone of textbooks and provided an intrepid and more critical analysis of American history in their work (Moreau, 2003); hence, instruction moved away from traditional characteristics.

Over a decade later, Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941. According to Conner & Bohan (2014), before Pearl Harbor, the progressive education movement had reached its peak and characteristics of traditional education had nearly escaped educational institutions, but after this momentous event that had an enduring impact on American education, the decline of the progressive education movement and the re-implementation of the traditional theme had commenced (Conner & Bohan, 2014). During World War II, certain characteristics of progressive education, such as the need for critical analyses of society, became too risky and proposed a threat to the war effort (Conner & Bohan, 2014); thus, the educational climate during the Second World War initiated a shift from questioning American institutions to celebrating them (Altenbaugh, 2003). Now, good citizenship meant a compliant and patriotic student, as well as a teacher that taught and supported such citizenship (Altenbaugh, 2003). As it had in World War I, education became more centralized during the Second World War (Evans, 2004), and many educational organizations were mobilized to support the war effort (Conner & Bohan, 2014). The war itself influenced both educational rhetoric and practice in secondary and postsecondary institutions. Although the war was fought overseas, “American schools [played] their part on the home front” (Kliebard, 1995, p. 203).

Conclusion

The application of progressivism in American curricula, a major content area within the field of education, can be analyzed at the zenith of the progressive education movement, and again at its decline. During the former, progressives had pushed for a change in curricula in order to reflect the reality of the societal and economic events influencing the conditions of the nation. They believed that students should be exposed to the actual events that had taken, or are currently taking, place within their community. In contrast, during the latter, the American curriculum was expected to portray the nationalistic and ideal American values and traditions to inspire patriotic, unquestioning youth and obedient teachers that encouraged such transformations.

Effectively serving special education students in regular school environments has been and continues to be an important progressive theme of special education reform (Wang & Reynolds, 1996). According to Wang and Reynolds (1996), it is a great victory that each phenomenon of legislation pertaining to special education strives to secure an inclusive and beneficial education for all children, showing a "steady trend of progressive education" (p. 20) in its focus on the individual needs of the students. Often, educational institutions find that they are no longer committed to being unapologetically, *educationally* progressive; instead, they have adopted an atmosphere of progressive in only the political or cultural sense of the theme (Kohn, 2008) and are actually employing an adversarial approach throughout the school. Of course, it is unrealistic to expect an educational institution to implement progressive ideas in every detail. Schools can, however, adopt progressive characteristics that reflect a commitment to such an approach.

A progressive approach in a special education classroom means students' inclusion (Danforth, 2008), treating them as valuable members of society, and ensuring their provision of the relevant services to help them succeed in their least restrictive environment. The needs of a special education program can only be met through the implementation of an individualized progressive approach to education in American institutions.

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