

Recounting Counts: A Review of George S. Counts' Challenge and the Reactions to "Dare Progressive Education Be Progressive?"

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During the February, 1932, Annual Conference of the Progressive Education Association, George S. Counts made a speech to his colleagues which reverberated throughout the progressive movement. Reactions to Counts' speech ranged from "inspirational" and "stirring" to "impractical" and "un-American." This essay reviews a number of articles, both pro and con, written in response to the controversial address. It also includes a reply by John Dewey, advocate of child-centeredness, who philosophically opposed Counts' social welfare stance. The authors conclude that Counts' speech split the movement beyond reconciliation, and that this polarization began the slow erosion and ultimate demise of education's most influential era.

En février 1932, lors du congrès annuel de l'Association d'éducation progressive, parmi ses collègues, George S. Counts prononça un discours qui fit fureur à travers le mouvement progressif. Les réactions à ce discours étaient variées, d'un extrême à l'autre, de l'inspiré et l'émouvant au non-pratique et non-américain. Cet essai revoit plusieurs articles, soit pour ou contre, rédigés en réponse à cette controverse. On y trouve aussi une réplique de John Dewey, l'avocat de l'enfant, qui s'oppose philosophiquement à la position de Counts sur le bien-être social. Les auteurs concluent que ce discours mena à un schisme irréparable et que cette polarisation est la cause de l'érosion graduelle et de l'ultime défaite de l'époque la plus influente en éducation.

Introduction

The great weakness of Progressive Education lies in the fact that it has elaborated no theory of social welfare.

George S. Counts

During the Annual Conference of The Progressive Education Association in February, 1932, George S. Counts made a speech which reverberated throughout the progressive movement. The message to his colleagues was precise and

unambiguous: They must broaden their definition of progressive education to include more than a child-centered, learner-interested, status quo, upper-middle class philosophy. The future must be direct, forward moving, and truly progressive. Most importantly, the center of gravity for progressivism could no longer be the child. A theory of social welfare which spanned the entire range of American life must become the new fulcrum. To be included were great crises of the time — poverty, unemployment, hunger, and human injustice. Counts also urged a mingling of all social classes in the schools; the source for curriculum was society which should team with the schools to pursue a democratic America. His curriculum theory was based on indoctrination of a socialistic view that would eliminate moral indifference and produce a better world for all.

Reactions to Counts' speech ranged from "inspirational" and "stirring" to "impractical" and "un-American." It produced earnest thought, heated debate, and vigorous discussion.

The challenge of Dr. Counts was easily the high point of the program. Following the dinner meeting at which he spoke, small groups gathered in lobbies and private rooms to discuss, until far into the night, the issues raised in Dr. Counts' sharp challenge. These discussions were marked by a general willingness to accept the viewpoint of Dr. Counts that the schools have a real responsibility for effective social change. There was, however, a considerable difference of opinion as to how this was to be accomplished. The method of indoctrination, advocated by Dr. Counts, was widely questioned. (Notes on the convention, 1932, p.288)

A number of Counts' contemporaries wrote articles in response to his controversial address. Several were favorably impressed with his appeal, while others were vehemently opposed. None, however, was dispassionate. Fifty-five years later it is timely to reflect upon Counts' words in light of the recent flood of reform reports, and the convening of such bodies as the Holmes Group and Carnegie Forum. Educators ought to consider both the viability of Counts' charge and how far education has traveled along the continuum.

Reactions of Counts' Contemporaries

The most emotional reaction questioned Counts' attack upon the present ideals of progressive education (Geer, 1932). Counts was accused of attempting to indoctrinate impressionable young children with his socialistic theories. Teachers must seize power and impose values on students. This was the same type of educational practice that the progressives had, in their inception, vowed to oppose. Also ridiculed was the concept of saturating children with social theories which would be hopelessly outdated by the time they were adults. Counts wanted to revolutionize curriculum and deal with real issues. This same outcry can be heard from practitioners today who state that institutions of higher education must make teacher education more relevant so that there is less disparity between theory and practice.

A second major opposition involved Counts' new interpretation of the term "progressive" (Madsen, 1933). Refuted was the charge that education could not

be called progressive unless it had the courage to produce a new social theory. Madsen accused Counts of simply searching for a definition of progressive which was more descriptive of his particular bias, one which included social reform beginning in the schools. The contention was that Counts took the word out of an educational context and submerged it in a left-wing political one. In the 1980s, such statements would not necessarily be considered left-wing. Striving for excellence and even competitiveness has received non-partisan support. Some fundamental religious movements, often considered right-wing, are currently seeking sweeping reform in schools.

Several contemporaries agreed with Counts' basic premise but questioned how it could be incorporated in the schools (Clapp, 1932; Hanna, 1932; Seeds, 1932). They favored what he favored, a progressive movement with direction toward a definite consistent goal, a change in education's status quo philosophy, a commitment to social reform, and a curriculum that exposed students to real-life problems and experiences. Their concerns, however, for practical application centered on two issues.

First, to prepare students to live in a changing world, teachers needed to understand the world's social problems. Because teachers had little formal coursework in economics, political science, sociology, psychology, morals, or ethics, a fear existed that they would ". . . find themselves quite incapable of understanding and dealing with contemporary social problems" (Hanna, 1932, p. 273). *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and other reports reiterated these same fears. Those choosing to be teachers are not the best and the brightest. Institutions of higher education are not producing knowledgeable, competent teachers. Preservice teachers are submerged in methods courses and have little time for electives. Partly because of the former, and severe teacher shortages in some disciplines, several states are following New Jersey's policy of replacing methods with content.

The second concern dealt with selecting real-life situations for classroom use. The schools should educate toward a social philosophy, but what activities were to be used and how were they to be selected? The suggestion was that these problems could be addressed by insisting upon more dynamic community involvement from all educators. In addition, a new philosophy of teacher training and education was required. For the most part today, community involvement is still viewed skeptically by practitioners. They are apprehensive about going out into the community, and even more so about letting the community come into the school. Teaching real-life situations is met with resistance by educators and parents. Cultural pluralism is not in most curricula even though by the year 2000 persons of color will be the majority; sex education continues to be avoided so much that the Surgeon General is calling for its infusion into the curriculum.

Another source found the speech to be an inspiration, but disagreed with Counts' recommendations regarding the scope of schools' social involvement, which was to include the elementary grades (Moos, 1932). The argument was that the focus for elementary schools should continue to be one of emotional and spiritual growth. Social indoctrination had no place in lives of elementary students.

Today, parents, television, and computers indoctrinate children at a very early age, so that emotional and spiritual patterns are usually in place long before children enter school.

One writer chose to take a stance neither pro nor con, asking instead that progressives take a look at what their schools were presently doing, then weigh this against what Counts was requesting they do (Hickerson, 1932). Were the schools to continue to educate for individual success, competition, and the sanctity of property rights, or were they to educate for cooperation, responsibility to community, and social reform? Progressive educators could, after careful consideration, determine their choice — right, left, or neutral. The same choices exist today.

Others expressed complete agreement with Counts and his challenge. One lauded him for recognizing education's obligation and role in social reform (Curti, 1934). Counts was referred to as one of the few educators in history to ally education with the masses and their struggle for radical social action. Other educators were accused of remaining aloof from social injustices and refusing to analyze the conflicts realistically. Another supporter labeled Counts as a progressive in the purest meaning of the word (Coe, 1933). In addition to standing for all that progressivism meant, Counts wanted the schools to commit to a definite social policy, a responsibility that other progressive educators had ignored. Presently, various commissions and committees have suggested that educators commit to excellence in much the same manner.

Finally, one writer stated that he could not conceive of education as anything except a social force which contributed to the general welfare.

I heartily agree with him on the necessity of bringing into education . . . the present vital issues of our common life. He wants education to wean young people from the unreflective individualism which leaves them concerned only with their own fortunes in the world, their own accomplishments, their own possessions, power, and position. So do I. (Holmes, 1932)

The hope was that, in the schools' new era of social reform, wealth would count for less, while intellect and courage would count for more, a hope that is as relevant today as it was in decades past.

Dewey's Response

How did John Dewey react to Counts' challenge to the progressive movement? In a 1933 address to the Minneapolis Department of Supervisors and Directors of Instruction, Dewey outlined a method by which educators should confront social problems. He made recommendations in three areas: (1) the teachers' role in social reform; (2) the selection of socially relevant life activities for study; (3) the necessity for developing social objectives.

The first recommendation involved educators' realizing and accepting that they were an integral part of the social crisis. Schools were not in a vacuum, isolated from real-life problems. Unfortunately, most educators shared in an economic illiteracy which was prevalent, an illiteracy resulting from their aloof

and remote posture. Educators had an obligation to assist in the search for social solutions, and Dewey appealed for them to realize that fact.

Regarding the second recommendation, he stressed that the study of social problems must begin with that area educators knew best — their local community. It contained the conditions that affected them, their schools, and students the most. Only after learning the social problems locally could they begin to understand those of the nation.

Finally, social objectives to assist educators in this massive reform were to be developed. Dewey believed that one source for the organization of objectives included those factors which caused the social problems. “We must frame our social objectives on the basis of knowing the forces and causes which produce the evils from which we suffer” (Dewey, 1933, p. 386). Additionally, he suggested that the objectives reflect both an idealistic purpose and a realistic appraisal of existing conditions.

Dewey’s reaction to Counts’ challenge involved more than rhetoric; he proposed a plan of action. In it he reaffirmed the educator’s role in social reform and recommended a format in which it could occur.

Conclusions

Counts’ speech stands as a significant milestone in the history of progressive education. The consequences it produced, however, were undoubtedly not what he intended. Instead of achieving unity based on a singular philosophical stance, the challenge split the movement even more. The chasm between child-centered supporters and social welfare advocates became too vast to bridge. With this polarization began the demise of a once proud and influential era.

Other conditions certainly contributed to the end of the progressive movement. These included the following: (a) accusations that progressive influences had produced the nation’s social miseries; (b) World War II and the post-war criticisms of education orchestrated by Admiral C.W. Nimitz; (c) a renewed commitment by other prominent educators to basic skills and subject-centered education; and (d) the so called “un-American” activities of the movement’s leaders (Schubert, 1980). Not even the Eight-Year Study’s glowing report in 1942, which emphasized the positive influence of progressive schools, could reverse the trend.

A current counterpart to Nimitz may be William Bennett, U.S. Secretary of Education, who continues to make front page news with his criticisms of higher education and public schools. He and other prominent educators are promoting competency based education with emphasis on mastering the basics. Also, there is a small movement to challenge the academic freedom of professors who are perceived as liberals. It is apparent that criticism of education continues to exist.

These factors were, for the most part, external. Counts’ challenge to his colleagues, when viewed in retrospect, emerged as a dominant internal force, the impact of which helped to divide permanently those within the movement. Although the death knell did not officially toll until two decades later, the drawn-out eulogy was begun by George S. Counts himself at the Baltimore Conference.

The larger question that he raised, however, is one that is in the forefront of education today. He wanted to liberate society through education, by eliminating myths and promoting a political, pluralistic philosophy. Perhaps if he spoke today, he just might receive a standing ovation.

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