

# DIRECTIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** *This paper is meant to outline the main directions in the contemporary American Education and its main forms of manifestation starting with the progressive education, and ending with the career oriented education.*

**Key words:** *progressive education, social meliorism, humanism, social-efficient education.*

## 1. Introduction

The problems of education cannot be resolved in a universal and eternal valid manner. They must be studied by means of thorough research which exceeds national limits, expands over particular forms of manifestation belonging to other countries, and indicates general trends of progress. The study of educational manifestations in various countries sprang from a need to improve educational systems, which, although specifically national, are confronted with common fundamental problems [4].

Viewed from the transatlantic relations perspective, the cultural and institutional paradigm of American society represents a successful model in the age of globalization due to: the American multiculturalism, currents of thinking, the power status and the principle of separating the powers of state, the human rights and individual freedom, the

transition from a participative democracy to a normative one. All these phenomena have been decisively influenced by American education.

## 2. Ideological Management

Educational history has a great importance on the development of ideological management.

The history of education, in Joel Spring's opinion, is an integral part of the *ideological management*, the concept illustrating a major phenomenon in the contemporary world. The control of ideas has always been a source of power.

As a part of current ideas dissemination study, the history of education and its comparative approach may be an important contribution to the development of a general theory regarding the formation and distribution of ideas in modern society. In addition, we can reach a deeper understanding about how knowledge

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control can be used as an instrument of power. What people know, the ideas they believe in, the way they perceive the world have an important effect on their choices and actions.

In totalitarian societies, ideological management is performed by a central office that coordinates the ideological messages transmitted to the public through various means (media, schools, and so on). In societies that have no centralized control (as in the United States) struggles often take place between different political and economic groups over ideas and values that will be transmitted to the public.

***Ideological management*** is a complex concept, much more comprehensive than “*propaganda*”, which it is often associated with. Usually propaganda is seen as a manipulation of information by government officials, with the purpose of exercising control upon the propagated ideas. The concept of ideological management includes not only propaganda, but also attempts of public and private groups to influence these ideas and the information transmitted to the masses [2].

While propaganda suggests that there is a default message to be transmitted, competition and conflict between different groups appear within ideological management, generated by the ideas and information that should be transmitted [2].

In the twentieth century, in the U.S., various groups fought to ensure that their political, moral and social concepts were taught in school. In this case the ideological management is the result of conflicts, compromises and negotiations. Of course, victory in these battles belongs to the most powerful and active groups.

The history of education appears as a part of this broad concept, connected to the way that ideas are transmitted in modern society. The history of education can be considered as part of the study of political and economic forces that shape both the process and concept of ideas disseminated to the public. Different political and economic groups consider schools to be a way of spreading their ideology among the majority population.

The role of public schools is more extensive, parents and students recognizing in the increased opportunities in education a possibility to increase the chances of placement in the labor market, and other social categories wanting school to serve humanitarian purposes.

In the twentieth century, different groups fought so that their various political and moral concepts could be taught in schools. Decisions taken by the federal government and private foundations have great importance concerning the types of research that will be funded, decisions that are based on political and economical objectives.

The way research is funded has considerable effects on the development of society in the future. In other words, the industry of knowledge, which includes education, the publishing industry and the testing industry, create their products for a market influenced by political and economic forces. The study of history is extremely important to understand society.

A proper understanding of history is essential for making proper decisions in the future. To think critically about the American school involves critical thinking on the history of American education.

This paper will firstly present the basic guidelines of education during the first half

of the twentieth century: “*pragmatism and the progressive school*”. It will continue by presenting some of the reactions against them in the trends of “*humanist education, social meliorism, and education for social efficiency*”. All throughout, this work will look at the reflections of these orientations in the *American curriculum*, across different chronological stages, noticing the place of the teaching methods during this evolution.

### 3. Progressive education

*The progressive theory* meant a Copernican revolution in education, promoting “*the child centered school*”.

From the progressivists’ point of view, the educational process includes two aspects: psychological and sociological; the psychological one is considered fundamental. In their view, experience is based on the processes of experience, both in theory and practice. The school does not mean preparation for life, ‘*but is life itself*’.

The progressivist theory is the most radical of the four types of education, “*paving the way for active teaching; It took into account the individual particularities of the students, stimulated teachers’ creativity and gave the school a practical orientation*” [3].

Unfortunately, progressivism had the weakest influence on public schools, often being considered an anti-intellectual current, not offering to students the necessary skills to function effectively in society and to be competitive in the labor market.

Progressivists are held responsible for the destruction of traditions and intellectual foundations of school. The most vehement attacks against

progressivism, on this subject, were launched by humanists who consider the role of school to be cultivating intellect.

## 4. Humanist Education

### 4.1 Traditional humanism

Introduces students to cultural traditions of society and rejects the idea that the school’s role is to prepare students as future labor power. Humanists want to organize the curriculum around traditional subjects such as literature, history, foreign languages, arts and sciences. They share a theory stating that the mind has the power to distinguish the essential characteristics of the world and of human nature. They believe that artistic and intellectual subjects contain immutable truths that have withstood critical thinking over the centuries, and that this has to represent the standards for the content and process of human life and education. The humanist theory supports an education that aims to develop a harmonious and balanced human personality.

Traditional humanism promotes rigorous academic standards, a firm code of discipline, and declares itself against anything that is not intellectual content. The main purpose of schooling should be, in their view, to ensure a good preparation for youth by transmitting cultural heritage. Instruction is done through theoretical education.

The school must not become life itself, as in the progressive vision, but must maintain its autonomy from society and act “*with a stabilizing role*”, as an institution that preserves the past and not as one that induces change.

In addition to ensuring good intellectual training by transmitting cultural heritage,

provided by a mostly theoretical education, traditional humanism also promotes individual values, subjectivity, emotions, personal identity, self-discovery, coming closer, in this way, to New Humanism.

Conceptions regarding the truth about human nature differ radically. For traditional humanists, the individual becomes truly human only by controlling his impulses and emotions through reason and knowledge; for the new humanists, humanity lies in the elimination of inhibitions, the gratification of impulses and desire. While traditional humanism establishes its standards of what we call human nature, reality and truth, new humanism celebrates subjectivity, individualism, pluralism and relativity.

#### 4.2 New humanism

New humanism is trying to establish the importance of the self, especially in its affective and volitional manifestations.

Every student should have the opportunity to have an experience that offers him an intrinsic satisfaction to contribute to individual liberation and development. The goals of education are linked to the ideas of personal development, integrity and autonomy. The ideal of self-satisfaction is in the midst of concerns, being a basic necessity, each student having a self to be discovered, developed and shaped by learning.

In the new humanists' opinion, it is important that education should be student-centered and characterized by the student's responsibility for education and learning. It is necessary for the instructive-educational system to focus on what is possible and potential and not on what is utilitarian, to focus on maintaining the advantages that

creativity, problem solving and the innovative character have to offer.

The main objectives of new humanism work together for expressing human individuality and liberating the individual from any constraints and oppression. To this goal, humanists were helped by the movements of social liberation, which required students of different social classes, races, genders, or ethnic groups to have equal opportunities, eliminating inequalities related to the various affiliations. This could not be achieved through a solely humanist or progressive education, but only through an education that induces social reform throughout the educational system.

#### 5. Social meliorist Education

**Social meliorism** reflects the social reform in the American education. It requires education 'to bring change' and social improvement and focuses on changing the existing society, considering that "*society needs to be changed and that students have to plan and implement ways of changing it*" [5]. The concept of "*social meliorism*" appeared approximately 70 years ago, known as "*reconstructionism*", and it is still active today.

From the social meliorists' point of view, "*education needs to have as objectives the growth of social standards and inducing social changes*" [1] and in this respect, courses are provided for each new social problem that occurs, assuming that students are taught about economic and political changes, about living together in modern and democratic society, about diversity, tolerance and pluralism, about combating poverty and about social

problems like alcohol abuse, drug addiction, AIDS, and Sex Education.

Beyond social meliorism, which wanted education to bring change and improve society, the political and economic environment played an important role in the substantiation of educational policies, acting in order to make education more socially effective.

## 6. Social efficient education

*“Education centered on social efficiency has had the greatest influence on the American schools”* [1]. School, in this sense, should serve economic interests and its main purpose should be preparing future labor power.

This type of education manifests two trends: *“the academic trend and the vocational trend”*. Although academic rationalism and vocationalism tend to separate as a result of the influence of Greek philosophy, they can be merged through the concept that the *“goal of education and curriculum is to reproduce efficiently, the existing culture”* [6]. The theoretical subjects are related to the vocational ones having as objective the formation of human capital.

A series of reform projects in the field of education have been initiated in recent decades by American administrations, with the purpose of making education socially efficient. They started during the Cold War and continued with the movement in favor of standards, a movement initiated in 1983 by the *A Nation at Risk* report, which responded to a large extent, to corporate executives, who believed that the superiority of Japanese and German economy was due to their superior educational systems.

The movement in favor of standards culminated with the launch of reform projects during the G.H. Bush administration, *America 2000*, the Bill Clinton administration, *Goals 2000*, and the G.W. Bush administration, *No Child Left Behind*.

All these reforms have been the result of complex interactions between the political, social, economic and ideological forces in the U.S.

## 7. Conclusion

The way in which the main directions that have marked the American education during the contemporary period – progressive education, humanism, social meliorism and education centered on social efficiency - are reflected in the American curriculum in its various forms, and their influence on centering teaching methods on students or teachers demonstrate the obvious interdependence between them.

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