

SCHOOLING IN CAPITALIST AMERICA

*Educational Reform and the
Contradictions of Economic Life*

SAMUEL BOWLES

and

HERBERT GINTIS

(1976)

Basic Books, Inc., Publishers • New York

Bowles
+ Gintis

CHAPTER 7

Corporate Capital and Progressive Education

Confronted with a "heterogeneous high school population destined to enter all sorts of occupations," high school teachers and administrators and professors of education needed some justification for a complete overhauling of a high school curriculum originally designed for a homogeneous student body. . . . After closing John Dewey's volume, *Democracy and Education*, I had the feeling that, like the Austro-Hungarian Empire of the nineteenth century, if John Dewey hadn't existed he would have had to be invented. In a sense perhaps he was. . . .

JAMES CONANT, *The Child, the Parent, and the State*, 1959

The period 1890–1930, extending from the early years of the Progressive Era to the Great Depression, constitutes our second major turning point in the history of U.S. education. Like the reform movement of the mid-nineteenth century, Progressive education was born in a decade of labor strife and was fueled throughout its course by social unrest and the specter of political upheaval. Like the earlier movement, Progressivism coincided with a dramatic shift in the structure of the economy and the integration of masses of new workers into the wage labor system. The Progressive Movement, like the common school revival, gave birth to a radically new educational philosophy. It stressed diversity, unity of the school with community, and what is now called "child-centered" instruction. Forcefully articulated by John Dewey and others, the precepts of Progressive education were selectively implemented by Ellwood Cubberly and the small army of "education executives" trained and deployed across the country. This period again witnessed the familiar coalition of liberal professionals and business leaders, often working through philanthropic foundations, who pressed the cause of educational reforms.

During these years, the public high school became a mass institution: In 1890, high-school graduates constituted less than 4 percent of all seventeen-year-olds; by 1930, 29 percent of seventeen-year-olds were graduates of

high school. In 1890, high-school students represented 1 percent of all children enrolled in elementary and secondary education (86 percent were in public primary schools and the rest were in private schools); by 1930, this figure had risen to 15 percent.¹ In 1890, there were 6.8 times as many fourteen- to nineteen-year-olds at work as at school. In 1930, 1.8 times as many were in school as were at work.² Between those two dates, the percentage of all fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds attending public high schools rose from 4 percent to 47 percent. By 1930, private secondary schools enrolled only 7 percent of all secondary school students.³

Like the earlier common school reformers, the Progressives left their mark on U.S. education. We have examined the educational philosophy of Progressivism at some length in Chapter 2. The educational practice of Progressivism brought us the comprehensive high school, tracking, educational testing, home economics, the junior high school, the student council, the daily flag pledge, high-school athletics, the school assembly, vocational education and guidance, clubs, school, newspapers and monopolization of executive authority by superintendents and other professionals.⁴

The legacy of this period, the reader may suspect, is not exactly what John Dewey had in mind. The Progressive Movement lacked the ideological unity and the fusion of educational theory and practice of the common school revival. The name embraced such self-proclaimed socialists as Dewey, businessmen, and major capitalist foundations, upper-crust "good government" groups, and even a few trade unionists. From the ideological and political crosscurrents of this movement emerged a radically transformed school system, one which has set the pattern for elementary and secondary education today and which—as we argue in Chapter 8—is increasingly invoked as the model for mass higher education as well.

In the selective implementation of reformers' ideas, the reader will detect the practical force of the contradictions of progressive educational theory which we outlined in Chapter 2. The imperative of producing a labor force for corporate enterprises is starkly revealed in the mixed record of progressive success and failure. The objective of social equalization and full human development, so central to the thinking of John Dewey and his followers, were pursued within the constraints set by this imperative. Indeed, Dewey himself seems to have been aware of the nature of these constraints. True to his philosophy of pragmatism, he operated consciously and knowledgeably within them.⁵ In the end, the role of education in capitalist expansion and the integration of new workers into the wage-labor system came to dominate the potential role of schooling as the great equalizer and the instrument of full human development.

Bowles + Gintis

Vocational Education and the Demise of the Common School

Until very recently [the schools] have offered equal opportunity for all to receive *one kind* of education, but what will make them democratic is to provide opportunity for all to receive such education as will fit them *equally well* for their particular life work.

Superintendent of Boston Schools, 1908

As large numbers of working-class and particularly immigrant children began attending high schools, educational reformers began to propose a system of stratification within secondary education. The older ideology of the common school—that the same curriculum should be offered to all children—increasingly came under attack. The uniform curriculum sym-

Bowles + Gintis

bolized, for liberal reformers, an elitist and anachronistic holdover from the nineteenth century. The high school could not remain as a minority institution designed, in the words of an 1893 Declaration of the National Education Association Committee of Ten:

To prepare for the duties of life that small proportion of all the children in the country . . . who show themselves able to profit by an education prolonged to the eighteenth year, and whose parents are able to support them while they remain so long in school.²⁴

Education, the Progressives argued, should be tailored to the "needs of the child." Progressive indeed was the demand for flexible programs to handle ethnic diversity in language skills. Progressive too was the demand for a curriculum sensitive to the later life and family surroundings of the students. Indeed, the uniform curriculum made the teacher's task next to impossible. The expansion of public secondary education, and its transformation from an upper class preserve to a mass institution was eminently consistent with democratic and egalitarian traditions.²⁵ In the context of a rapidly developing corporate division of labor, however, such demands spelled not equality and democracy, but stratification and bureaucracy.

Special curricula were developed for the children of working families. The academic curriculum was preserved for those who might later have the opportunity to make use of book learning, either in college or in white-collar employment. Typical of the arguments then given for educational stratification is the following by a Superintendent of Schools of Cleveland:

It is obvious that the educational needs of children in a district where the streets are well paved and clean, where the homes are spacious and surrounded by lawns and trees, where the language of the child's playfellows is pure, and where life in general is permeated with the spirit and ideals of America—it is obvious that the educational needs of such a child are radically different from those of the child who lives in a foreign and tenement section.²⁶

Nowhere are the arguments for and against educational stratification more clearly exhibited than in the course of the vocational education movement.²⁷ Building on the quite distinct manual training movement of the 1880s, the vocational education movement during the 1890s gathered the political support of major educators and the financial backing of a number of leading capitalists—J. P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller among them.²⁸ With the founding of the National Association of Manufacturers in 1896, the movement gained what would become its most important advocates and acquired a strong antiunion orientation. From the late 1890s until World War I virtually every national N.A.M. conference passed resolutions advocating vocational education.

The reasons for this widespread support among employers are simple enough. As late as the 1890s, skilled workers exercised considerable power within the enterprise. In many industries, they collectively retained control of the shop floor, often hired their own assistants, and, most important for this story, substantially influenced the recruitment of new skilled workers through their control over the apprenticeship system.²⁹ The employers' strategy to break the power of the skilled workers was spearheaded by a largely successful attempt to destroy their unions. The ideological rationale for limiting the power of the skilled workers was propagated by the school of scientific management, which held that the behavior of workers, down to the very movements involved in a mechanical operation, must be controlled and dictated by technicians and managers according to scientific principle.

Employers seized upon vocational education as a means of breaking the workers' control over skills training. In 1906, the N.A.M. committee on Industrial Education reported: "It is plain to see that trade schools properly protected from the domination and withering blight of organized labor are the one and only remedy for the present intolerable conditions."³⁰ Moreover, vocational education offered a useful method of training and labeling the growing strata of foremen so as to set them above and apart from other production workers.

Until the turn of the century, organized labor took little part in the discussions of vocational education. A survey of labor organizations in New York, in 1886, revealed substantial support for manual training and trade schools. Opposition, while a minority position, was vociferous. The Secretary of Cigarmakers Union No. 144 called trade schools "breeding schools for scabs" and the Secretary of the Twist and Warp Lace Makers Association warned that vocational education ". . . would be rather a curse than a blessing by placing at the disposal of every capitalist bent on grinding down wages to the lowest point an unlimited number of skilled out of work, to supercede those who might resist his tyranny."³¹ The flagrantly antiunion advocacy of vocational education by the N.A.M. hardened labor's opposition and, by the turn of the century, Samuel Gompers and the A.F. of L. had taken a firm position against the movement.

However, with the growing momentum of the vocational education movement, labor's position shifted. Faced with the virtual certainty of a federally funded vocational education program, organized labor sought, by joining the movement, to gain some influence over its direction. By the eve of World War I, there was virtually no organized opposition to federal aid to vocational education. The movement culminated in 1917 with the suc-

Bowles + Gintis

SCHOOLING IN CAPITALIST AMERICA

cessful passage of the Smith-Hughes Act, providing federal support for vocational education. While in most respects reflecting the views of N.A.M., the final legislation was not all that some employers had hoped for. Federal aid was to be restricted to those over fourteen years of age, thus dampening the hopes of some advocates that the newly formed junior high school could become "the vocational preparatory school of the future."

Labor was successful in preventing the development of dual school systems. In Massachusetts, a partially implemented plan for the housing of vocational education in separate trade schools incurred substantial opposition from educators as well as organized labor and was ultimately rejected. In Chicago, a similar proposal arrayed the Chicago Federation of Labor, supported by most of the city's teachers and its most renowned educator—John Dewey—against a coalition built around the Chicago Association of Commerce and including virtually every major business organization in the state of Illinois.³² At issue was the Cooley Bill, which would have provided a dual vocational and academic secondary-education system for the state. Introduced in 1913 and in subsequent years, the bill was defeated. As the 1920s progressed, it became clear that the impact of the vocational education movement would not be—as many of its early business backers had hoped—separate school systems, but rather the development of vocationally oriented tracking within the comprehensive high school.

By the time the Smith-Hughes Act was passed, the original claims of both labor and capital were probably somewhat outdated. The power of the skilled workers had been decisively broken in a number of major lockouts and unsuccessful strikes; apprenticeship was clearly on the wane. But one detects a more contemporary ring in the Chicago Federation of Labor's opposition to the Cooley Bill, and its continuing opposition to other mechanisms of early selection and educational stratification—the junior high school and educational testing. They claimed, as did the more radical of the progressive educators, that vocationalism would have the effect of channeling working-class, immigrant, and black children into manual jobs. Indeed, we believe that the evidence strongly supports the thesis that the vocational education movement was less a response to the specific job training needs of the rapidly expanding corporate sector than an accommodation of a previously elite educational institution—the high school—to the changing needs of reproducing the class structure. Particularly important in this respect was the use of the ideology of vocationalism to justify a tracking system which would separate and stratify young people loosely according to race, ethnic origins, and class backgrounds.³³

The history of the vocational education movement illustrates well the

Corporate Capital and Progressive Education

contradictions of Progressive education described in Chapter 2. For while Dewey and other Progressive educators sought to replicate the community in the school and to build a sense of unity and common experience among students, the stratification of the high school—pressed by those more concerned with processing future workers—advanced apace. As we have seen, those who opposed stratification gained important concessions. Yet they could not resist tracking within the high school. Within the school, the reformers' attempts to bring students together and to forestall differentiation were limited to the more or less peripheral sphere of extracurricular activities. But no amount of schoolwide assemblies, clubs, or athletics—all of which were institutionalized during this period—could bridge racial, ethnic, and class divisions which were symbolized and reinforced by curriculum tracking. True to form, the Progressive thrust of educational reform turned out to be little more than a Band-Aid remedy.

Bowles + Gintis