



A Brief History of Progressive Education

With Dr. Jason Edwards

Lesson 9:
The “End” of Progressive Education

Outline:

“The real nature of education is at variance with the account given of it by certain of its professors.”

Socrates from Plato’s Republic

“If I were seriously ill and in desperate need of a physician, and if by some miracle I could secure either Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, or a young doctor fresh from the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, with his equipment comprising the latest developments in the technologies and techniques of medicine, I should, of course, take the young doctor. On the other hand, if I were commissioned to find a teacher for a group of adolescent boys and if, by some miracle, I could secure either Socrates or the latest Ph.D. from Teachers College, with his equipment of the latest technologies and techniques of teaching, with all due respect to the College that employs me and to my students, I am fairly certain that I would jump at the chance to get Socrates.”

William Chandler Bagley

Summary: The dominant belief that remained, after progressive education had matured to its full actualization in the U.S. through World War I and World War II, was that schools were meant to adjust children to society. Progressive educators assumed that educating the child through “scientific” means, and deliberately indoctrinating the child in the dogmas of social democracy, would ensure the reconstruction of society itself - a supposedly “better,” that is, a more efficient, scientific, and democratic society. Above all else, the progressive educators thought of knowledge in its pragmatic application and usefulness to the child’s future vocation as well as to the overall productivity and efficiency of the social machinery. Consequently, progressive educators dispensed with the idea of education as academics and overall mental development.

- **Charles Prosser** (“Father of Vocational Education”)
 - He is best known for the “Life Adjustment Movement” (1950s), which marked the “end” of the progressive education movement in the United States.
 - He thought that 60% of United States children in the years following the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War needed merely basic, vocational training: “Business arithmetic is superior to plain or solid geometry...learning the technique of selecting an occupation is more important than studying algebra...” (1939)



- **William Chandler Bagley**
 - Professor of education at Teacher's College, Columbia University
 - He critiqued progressive education.
 - He advocated a uniform presentation of academics in the school system.
- **Arthur Bestor**
 - Academic historian at Teacher's College, Columbia University
 - He critiqued progressive education, though he defended the work of John Dewey.
 - He believed that the school was intellectual training, and therefore, the U.S. school system needs to reject the life adjustment curriculum, and instead, incorporate art and science.
- **The Seven Reasons for the “End” of Progressive Education:**
 - Factionalism
 - It is only defined by the negative.
 - It has difficult goals.
 - It grew stale and stagnant.
 - The United States became more and more conservative.
 - Professionalization undermined lay support.
 - It didn't change with the times, (i.e. the economy was booming in the 1950s and America was a super-power; the U.S. Federal Government started funding education, specifically in mathematics and science, in order to compete with the Soviet Union).