

Chapter 1

The Educational Context of the Eight-Year Study

There is no need to re-present the history of progressive education. Patricia Graham's *Progressive Education*, Lawrence Cremin's *The Transformation of the School*, and William Reese's *Power and the Promise of School Reform* have already done so, and their work proves as insightful today as when first published.¹ Yet countless myths still surround both progressivism and the PEA. We wish to discuss lore that affects our conception of the Eight-Year Study as we attempt to broaden the common definition of progressive education in view of current perceptions of the late 1920s–1930s era. We also will examine the societal tensions of the 1930s, particularly those concerning the future of democracy, since public fears greatly influenced the direction of the project. We conclude this chapter with a discussion of the unique type of research conducted by the Aikin Commission staff.

Conceptions of the Progressive Education Association

Although progressive education has no official creed, it has its distinctive points of view and activities. (John L. Childs, 1939)²

The Progressive Education Association was far from being united in the late 1920s during the Eight-Year Study's early stages of conception. Formed in Washington, D.C., in 1919 under the leadership of Stanwood Cobb, the PEA, originally titled the Association for the Advancement of Progressive Education, attracted individuals more critical of established school practice rather than those sharing a common vision for bettering education.³ Having witnessed unsuccessful efforts to form a Montessori society in the United States, PEA members believed the association would fail at the national level if founders focused on any specific approach to schooling.⁴ Throughout its history the PEA would explore many different and sometimes contending orientations to teaching and learning—

the ideas of Pestalozzi, Montessori, Rousseau, the American transcendentalists, Freud, Steiner—and not just the ideas of John Dewey. While Dewey (and the early University of Chicago Laboratory School) defines progressive education for us today, he did not embody the movement for PEA founder Cobb and other PEA members who instead turned to eighty-five-year-old Charles W. Eliot to lead the organization. Eliot, emeritus president of Harvard University, declined the PEA presidency due to failing health but agreed to serve as the honorary first president, proclaiming his belief in the principles and aims of the organization.⁵ Years later, after Eliot's death in 1926, Dewey would serve as honorary president.

The PEA is also often viewed as a small, obscure organization of Dewey disciples centered at Teachers College, Columbia University, or a group of "dauntless women" who started private, elite elementary schools centered on developing the interests and fostering the creative spirit of children. Historical narratives continue that the PEA turned to a more political, social reform agenda, sparked by George Counts's 1932 "Dare Progressive Education Be Progressive?" speech that led to great turmoil and fragmentation within progressive education circles.⁶ The tale of the PEA concludes with the association imploding in the late 1940s and disappearing in the 1950s in what follows a general organizational biography: birth, growth, maturity, and death. These impressions implicitly assume that progressive education was the near-exclusive domain of PEA members.

This story of the PEA, similar to the morality play of progressive education described in the introduction, is not necessarily wrong—merely too simple. As is commonly believed, the PEA was indeed small. Yet its membership was not quite as modest as some assume and certainly larger than many well-known educational organizations today. From the first meeting in 1919 with eighty-six in attendance, membership rapidly expanded, increasing fourfold between 1924 and 1930 to 7,600 members. By the late 1930s membership peaked at approximately 10,000, although according to Harold Rugg, the association was more than twice this size based on conference participation.⁷ PEA meetings were not small gatherings either, and regional conferences were often as popular as national events. For example, the 1934 PEA Southern New England Conference attracted over 2,000 attendees.⁸ Neither were these all private school educators, as some may assume. It is true that the PEA was first composed of an elite, East Coast private school constituency, yet Cobb maintained that this merely reflected opportunities for educational innovation, since private schools were freer to experiment than were public schools. For Cobb, the PEA encouraged educational reform for all schools, and he maintained, "It is in and through the public schools that the ultimate success of the progressive move-

ment must be sought.”⁹ By 1933, approximately 35 percent of PEA members were from the public schools, and the largest subgroup of members consisted of public school administrators.¹⁰ Further, the PEA may not have been quite as obscure as is often assumed. The organization received substantial national attention throughout the 1930s. Newspaper accounts described the Eight-Year Study and its preliminary results in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The cover of the October 1939 *Time* magazine featured PEA Executive Director Frederick Redefer with the subtitle “We are no longer a rebel group,” and the then-current U.S. Commissioner of Education, John W. Studebaker (who served in this role from 1934 to 1948), was directly connected to the PEA and the Eight-Year Study as a former superintendent of one of the participating school systems.¹¹

One aspect of PEA lore is perplexing, however. Cobb maintained that a Teachers College, Columbia University, group stole the PEA from the founding members. Cremin first described this anecdote in 1959, and Cobb restated the story to Graham in 1962 and again to Bullough in 1974.¹² Since no Teachers College faculty member ever served as president of the PEA, Graham places the comment in a broader historical context and notes that the informal power structure of the PEA did shift from Cobb’s private school, Washington-related crowd to the Teachers College faculty, and there clearly were shifts in power and ideology.¹³ Counts’s 1932 *Dare Progressive Education* conference presentation and the Teachers College-Social Frontier group altered progressive education rhetoric in the 1930s and early 1940s, focusing attention on the many Teachers College faculty who were actively involved in progressive education. Even the PEA offices moved from Washington to New York City in 1935.

Yet when asked about Cobb’s claim, Donald Cottrell, a faculty member at both Teachers College and Ohio State University during the 1930s–1950s period, expressed doubt and maintained that while Teachers College faculty unquestionably constituted an informal power center in the 1930s, other communities emerged as well, in particular in the Midwest at the University of Illinois and Ohio State University.¹⁴ In addition, PEA activities in California, specifically at the University of California, Berkeley, must not be overlooked as another center of important activity. As we examined Commissions’ school accounts, we felt that much of the more interesting work occurred in areas other than New York City, even though recent descriptions of progressive education have tended to feature New York schools. Suffice to say that Teachers College was not the sole center of the Progressive Education Association, although it was certainly one of the more influential.

Cobb was quite correct, however, in saying that “something happened” in the 1930s that dramatically shifted the power structure of the

organization. PEA leaders decided to expand their involvement in school research and experimentation, a decision confirmed at a 1930 Board of Directors' retreat when they decided to seek external funding for program development and dissemination (a decision that helped establish the Eight-Year Study). Thus began the Association's rather anxious quest for research funds at a time when the organization was near bankruptcy. When Cobb charges that the PEA was stolen from its membership, we see as culprits not the Teachers College faculty but instead the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the General Education Board (GEB) for taking control of the direction of the organization during the 1930s. William Learned and Henry Suzzallo of the Carnegie Foundation and Lawrence K. Frank and Robert Havighurst of the GEB exerted substantive influence in the PEA by determining which projects would be funded and which would not. At times PEA funding seemed to serve Frank's interests as much, if not more, than the PEA's. By the 1940s these foundations moved on to other projects and, having abandoned the PEA, left the organization dependent on outside monies that were no longer available. When in the 1940s the GEB staff decided they were no longer funding general education projects, the decline of the PEA began.¹⁵

Finally, we wish to address one other general misimpression—namely, that the progressive education movement was synonymous with the Progressive Education Association. Cobb acknowledged that the PEA did not create the movement but gave it "form and body."¹⁶ While this may well be the case, other organizations were heavily involved in developing and promoting progressive practices, most notably the American Council on Education (ACE), founded in 1918 to serve as a national forum for higher education institutions and to provide easier access to college education for larger numbers of students. The Council received financial support from the GEB during the 1930s and through the 1940s that most likely would otherwise have been directed to the PEA. The ACE's American Youth Commission's studies addressed issues of central concern to the PEA membership and to leaders of the Eight-Year Study. In addition, the Council received funding for the Cooperative Study in General Education, a project coordinated by Ralph Tyler from 1939 to 1945 in what was a direct outgrowth of the Eight-Year Study's curriculum development efforts at the college level.¹⁷ There were many other groups working during the 1930s and 1940s to promote progressive education. When Hollis Caswell, president of Teachers College from 1955 to 1964, assessed progressive education during the 1930s, he made a point of highlighting the contributions of the Society for Curriculum Study, the Educational Policies Commission

(formed in 1935 by the NEA and the American Association of School Administrators), and the California and Michigan state departments of education.¹⁸

In addition, other research groups were exploring many of the topics central to the Eight-Year Study. Three years before the Aikin Commission on the Relation of School and College was established, the Educational Records Bureau, described as a Who's Who of progressive educators in the eastern states, formed its own Committee on School and College Relations. This group, also composed of secondary school and college educators, met at the Carnegie Foundation offices to "discuss college entrance problems." The Bureau's committee, chaired by Eugene Smith, former president of the PEA and a key figure in the Eight-Year Study, in essence, functioned in parallel to the Aikin Commission and continued to meet through the 1930s, releasing reports in 1932, 1933, 1935, and 1942. In many respects, the Educational Records Bureau's Committee was more active in its attempt to break the stranglehold of Carnegie units on American secondary education than was the Aikin Commission and was more successful in promulgating the use of the cumulative student record form once this was no longer a focus of the Eight-Year Study.¹⁹

The PEA's Commission on Secondary School Curriculum and Commission on Human Relations also had counterparts of sorts. The Educational Records Bureau staged a five-year, public school demonstration project in educational guidance (from 1933 to 1938) somewhat similar to the research of the Zachry Committee of the Thayer Commission. With funding from the Carnegie Foundation, the Bureau released its 300-page final report, *Guidance in Public Secondary Schools*, in 1939. Also, the American Council on Education's Committee on the Relation of Emotion to the Educative Process, formed in 1934 and funded by the General Education Board, examined the emotional life and needs of young people in ways quite similar to the "human relations" work of the Kelihier Commission and Zachry's Committee, and the ACE's Motion Picture Study, also funded by the GEB, conducted research that was integrated into the work of the PEA's Commission on Human Relations.²⁰ Our point is merely to note that progressive education of the 1930s must not be reduced to a PEA battle between child-centered educators, clutching their Project Method pamphlets tightly in hand, and *Social Frontier* radicals reading quotations from *Dare the School Build a New Social Order*.²¹ While the PEA began its "ultimate demise" and fragmentation in the late 1930s and early 1940s, there was great diversity within progressivism, and many other organizations were involved in similar activities. The PEA was but one group among many that sought to advance the cause of progressive education.

Definitions of Progressive Education

The many myths surrounding the Progressive Education Association are actually less complex than the variety of definitions of *progressive education*, in the 1930s as well as today. In *The Transformation of the School*, Cremin warns against formulating any capsule definition: “None exists, and none ever will; for throughout its history progressive education meant different things to different people.”²² And this was certainly the case when one looks carefully at the PEA, an organization of competing coalitions among its constituency, each holding different views of progressivism. In fact, at the 1938 annual meeting, a committee reported on its efforts to define the term, and while a statement was produced, nearly the entire group objected, explaining that progressive education is not a definition but “a spirit.”²³

Despite the PEA’s failure to adopt an official definition, a vague and widely shared description of progressive education has emerged over time, tied to slogans such as “learning by doing,” “teaching the whole child,” and “fostering creative expression.” These catchphrases became the basis of caricatures by critics in the 1950s who popularized images of cheerful children doing as they pleased, greeted with smiling approval from their poorly educated but tolerant teachers, stereotypes that live to this day. William Heard Kilpatrick’s version of the “project method,” a confusing pedagogical practice from its conception, may have caused more damage to progressive education, particularly to its image, than virtually any other curricular or instructional innovation.²⁴ Rather than attributing the slogans to Kilpatrick, however, many of today’s critics castigate Dewey, often without reading his educational works or appreciating his disciplinary focus.

Whatever the original spirit of progressive education may have been, as we researched the Eight-Year Study we were surprised by various distinctive points of view and many forgotten names. V. T. Thayer, Alice Keliher, Harold Alberty, Caroline Zachry, Burton Fowler, Robert Leigh, and Eugene Smith are just a few of the educators who do not appear in today’s descriptions yet who were quite influential in furthering the PEA’s mission. While we have tried to make sense of the term *progressive education*, we see little clear pattern in its use. Tyack notes that the loosely applied label represents a diverse group of reformers, philosophies, and practices, and that those identified as “administrative progressives” had little in common with other wings of educational progressivism.²⁵ At times too focused and at other times too comprehensive, the use of the term is, according to Kliebard, “not only vacuous but mischievous” and was “studiously avoided” in *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*.²⁶ Aikin must have felt the same. Although the

indexer for *The Story of the Eight-Year Study* inserted the term on a variety of pages, Aikin never used “progressive education” except once in reference to a quotation. We have tried to follow Aikin’s model and Kliebard’s advice and have used the term cautiously and carefully.

At one time, we also thought of preparing a configuration of progressive educators. We concluded, however, that there really is no need for yet another overview, and that the past classifications have been quite helpful as we have tried to make sense of the field. Cremin’s designation of progressives as scientists, sentimentalists, and radicals helped sort out many educators working in the early twentieth century. Additional groupings such as Kliebard’s social meliorists, Tyack’s administrative and pedagogical progressives, and even Rugg’s “scientific methodists” and “project methodists” clarified an unwieldy movement.²⁷ But each arrangement has also raised questions, not just what defines a progressive educator? But does the distinct adherence to a set of beliefs or historical fiat determine one’s classification; that is, are progressive educators defined by ideology, or are progressives defined as those educators who lived through the Progressive Era? Cremin, for example, situates the genesis of progressive education in the years immediately following the Civil War. Like him, most educational historians view progressive education as an outgrowth of America’s Progressive Era. From this perspective, the movement comes to fruition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, beginning with Frances Parker’s school in Quincy, Massachusetts, continuing through Dewey’s laboratory school at the University of Chicago, and followed by developments at the Gary, Lincoln, Winnetka, and Dalton schools. Progressive education seems, then, to have been codified into an ideology before the formation of the PEA. In fact, we found the work from the period 1890–1920, as seen in the diverse practices of Dewey, Ellwood Cubberley, William Wirt, Marietta Johnson, Caroline Pratt, and Margaret Naumburg, differ strikingly from that of the 1930s and the Eight-Year Study. And when progressive education is viewed at the secondary rather than the elementary school level, a new assortment of issues comes to the forefront and a different group of educators as well.

Eight-Year Study Progressives

From all of this, we now come to see a distinctive middle ground where certain progressive educators of the 1930s stood. They were neither administrative nor pedagogical progressives nor would they be grouped as child, society, or subject-centered educators. The descriptors “scientific methodist, social meliorist, and social reconstructionist” also seemed inappropriate. This distinct group, “situated between the extremes,”

has come to symbolize for us a theoretical practicality and a dynamic, reasoned balance among a constantly evolving set of educational claims. The intensive process of inquiry and continuous school experimentation required “a middle way” if these educators were to respond effectively to the changing demands of schooling. Such a position is not often recognized in accounts of the period. The work of Keliher, Eugene Smith, Thayer, Alberty, Lavone Hanna, Boyd Bode, Margaret Willis, and others has been somewhat overlooked, due, we suspect, to a tendency to bifurcate the “progressive movement” into firm ideological stances and to engage in the sort of “either-or” binary thinking that Dewey so consistently and vigorously challenged.

Ralph Tyler, a self-proclaimed progressive who is often dismissed as not fitting easily into the various configurations, captures aspects of this group. When attempting to describe the way in which educational decision making ought to occur, Tyler found that he needed to differentiate a range of legitimate and competing educational interests. He characterized these as “sources” of aims and included the disciplines (subject matter), the individual “needs” of learners, understood quite broadly, and studies of society. These three areas—subject matter, the individual, and society—were considered as having equal claims on education, even though Tyler most certainly recognized that educators frequently emphasize one source over another as each is “screened” through philosophical and psychological orientations. Tyler’s famous curriculum rationale, maturing through his work with the Eight-Year Study, reflected this desire for appropriate balance.²⁸

Attempting to transcend those three sources, Eight-Year Study progressives brought these competing claims into intense and intimate conversation so that each deepened the meaning of the others. For example, representing a synthesis of values, “needs” came to be thought of as both personal and social in nature and not merely as expressions of individual desire or of an insistent societal demand. In contrast, other progressives embraced an ideological clarity produced by extending the extremes, that is, Kilpatrick refined a conception of personal interests as fruitful educational experiences, Counts urged the role of social activism for improving schools, and Cubberley nurtured an administrative efficiency to extend the reach of public education. These progressives became better known in part because of their extreme and easily characterized positions. Overlooked were those educators associated with the Eight-Year Study who set out to achieve a reasoned balance of interests while continuing to seek new understandings about the relationships among the subject matter, the individual, and society.

Eight-Year Study progressives embraced an experimental spirit—a process of inquiry—and their bond also became a common set of ideas

found in how they positioned themselves in relationship to the three categories identified by Tyler and to other established lines of progressive thought. They held a democratic social vision, albeit evolving, along with a deep appreciation for the power of the academic disciplines and for knowledge as a tool for solving fundamental human problems and enriching human life. Coupled with this, they adopted school experimentation as a way of understanding learning and human development that recognized the unpredictability of outcomes and the centrality of intellectual adventure and exploration. Attending to youth's schooling simultaneously meant thinking carefully about the individual and social implications of student needs and how the disciplines might serve as guides for teachers to design potentially educative environments. Conversely, the means for achieving desired social aims were considered and judged in terms of how they would impact educational communities and shape the quality of students' educational experiences. Aims and means were tightly linked—they could not discuss one without also considering the other—and theory and practice were brought into intimate relationship, what we refer to as theoretical practicality (or middle-range theorizing) leading to intelligent problem solving.

We are not suggesting that these educators held no firm stances. Their beliefs were constantly evolving as they situated their work within specific settings and reexamined the implications of their positions. Their central values were clear as actions adapted to circumstances and demands. Eugene Smith extended the point when he stated that "truly progressive" education must continually be tested by two questions: "Does it keep itself fitted to present day requirements, changing as necessary with changing living conditions and changing needs? Does it keep apace with investigation and discovery in the educational field?"²⁹ These progressives neither compromised nor conceded their beliefs, nor did they adopt an ecumenical stance as a way to resolve dilemmas, a point of criticism sometimes directed against Tyler. Rather, they sought a reasoned and productive balance, a middle way, evolving and changing with their experimental and implementative research.

By the nature of its design and intent, the Eight-Year Study appealed to educators with this somewhat atypical and now overlooked orientation. They were theorists deeply concerned about practice as a way of enriching theory. Yet they were also administrators and teachers, involved in the daily workings of schools, who viewed theory as a means for thinking more clearly and productively about practice. The first orientation, the *practical theorist*, is well represented by Boyd H. Bode, whose central concern became how democracy through public education could be realized as a way of life. Eugene Smith nicely embodies the second orientation, the *theoretical practitioner*: one who was deeply

concerned with scientific and experimental research as a way to better schooling. V. T. Thayer depicts even further both perspectives combined in the career of one individual. As the accompanying vignettes illustrate, Thayer, along with Bode, Smith, and many others, had a deep commitment to school experimentation as an open-ended but also increasingly more sensitive, thoughtful, intelligent, and socially responsive practice. All were progressives, but none saw themselves as sitting comfortably within progressivism nor even within the PEA. Bode and Thayer gladly criticized the better-known leaders—Cubberley, Snedden, Kilpatrick, Parkhurst, Washburne, Thorndike, and Counts—as they later did one another.³⁰ Thayer may well have seen himself as much a secular humanist as a progressive, and Smith seemed more active in the ACE and Educational Records Bureau than in the PEA (even as its former president). In fact, many of these Eight-Year Study progressives were consistent and outspoken critics of some so-called progressive tendencies, particularly those that underplayed the value of disciplinary knowledge or the “mindless celebration” of individual student needs.

The 1930s: A Lost Generation of Youth

The situation for youth in the early 1930s was desperate. As the Great Depression deepened, young people found themselves unable to obtain employment and increasingly dependent on their parents for ever longer periods of support. In an American Council on Education study, Homer Rainey and his colleagues found that employment opportunities for young people had simply vanished. In 1936, an estimated 4 million youth between the ages of sixteen to twenty-four (the then-defined ages of adolescence) were enrolled in school, a larger than ever proportion, while 5 million were unemployed and seeking jobs. More adolescents remained in school longer, yet these students encountered a curriculum out of touch with their experience. The needs of the 1930s’ high school pupil, Rainey concluded, could not be met with the same curriculum determined for “the selected body of students enrolled in secondary school and institutions of higher education in 1900.”³¹ The high school curriculum was outdated, and his conclusion was widely shared. Following a three-month cross-country trip of the United States, Maxine Davis referred to American youth as a “lost generation” and used harsh words to describe America’s secondary schools: “They are, on the whole, concerned with preparing [youth] to enter college, although they know that for all but a few hundred thousand . . . boys and girls in the secondary schools, the last three years of high school are all the education they will ever have.”³² She also lamented the general disconnection of the schools from the wider problems of young people and, perhaps engaging in

hyperbole, expressed concern that the schools no longer represented democratic institutions.

School faculties faced their own crises. As teachers were obliged to assume ever greater social responsibilities, expectations were changing. At the same time, education budgets were dramatically cut, building programs delayed, and teaching staffs reduced. Yet as McGill and Matthews observed, “The years of economic crisis have been accompanied by a disposition to examine critically the kind of education that is being offered youth and to adapt it to new and changing needs.”³³ To many educators, the traditional high school (college preparation) program seemed not only outdated but also ineffective. Of those few young people who continued to college, not many stayed. Within a group of twenty-five research universities, almost half of the students who entered in 1931 and 1932 withdrew permanently before graduating, and one-third of these withdrew during their first year.³⁴ As many high schools continued to embrace a traditional college preparatory program, numerous students were ill prepared for either employment or further study.

The situation in Europe was increasingly frightening as well. The growing appeal of fascism, with its glorification of youth, horrified PEA Commission members. The German Youth Movement gave new meaning to the social importance and political potential of adolescents. Eight-Year Study staff—most notably Bruno Bettelheim, Fritz Redl, Peter Blos, Erik Erikson, and Walter Langer—had fled Austria and Germany for refuge in the United States. They arrived with firsthand knowledge of the growing tensions in Europe. Many other PEA members were not hopeful about the future. America was at risk, and democracy was threatened as fewer young people found meaningful connections with the wider society.³⁵

The Aikin Commission members recognized the changing role of youth and worried about the future of the secondary school in American society. They were disturbed that so many students were placed in unresponsive college preparatory programs and had such little hope for the future. Secondary education had to change. Yet school administrators were wisely reluctant to jeopardize any student’s chance for admission to college, no matter how remote, by altering the traditional curriculum. In the late 1920s, of the 17 percent of high school students who went on to college, 94 percent were accepted solely by their school record and teacher recommendations. Aikin noted, “Under these conditions not many schools were willing to depart very far from the conventional high school curriculum. They could not take chances on having their candidates rejected by the colleges.”³⁶ Thus the educational needs of a very small portion of the adolescent population determined the curriculum for nearly all. While standardized college admissions testing

became more popular during the 1930s and lessened somewhat the hold of a rigid college preparatory curriculum on the secondary school, little actually changed, especially in small schools. Burton Fowler stated that in the early 1940s, 60 percent of students were enrolled in high schools with fewer than 200 students that closely followed what college admission standards dictated: "The requirements for admission to Cornell, Michigan, Wellesley, or Yale become the basis of the secondary curriculum in most of the high schools sending one or more pupils to these colleges."³⁷ Realizing that life was especially precarious and insecure for young people in the early 1930s, educators wondered and worried about the mission of secondary education in a faltering domestic economy and an increasingly uncertain world. This was the context for secondary schooling; these were the problems for American education.

Conclusions

Today's educators come to the Eight-Year Study with varying impressions derived from published accounts of educational progressivism, descriptions of the Progressive Education Association, and interpretations and distortions of the project. One impression must remain, however, since there is no adequate way to convey fully the frustration and fear that many educators felt as the Great Depression deepened. Democracy was in jeopardy, and Americans' most basic beliefs about education were shaken. The secondary school population was changing rapidly, and high school faculties were forced to address issues that would undermine the established political and academic goals of education. New and pressing responsibilities for secondary school education were being identified, and loosely confederated groups of progressive educators—members of the PEA, American Council on Education, Educational Records Bureau, and other organizations—were searching for ways to adequately respond. So emerged the Aikin Commission on the Relation of School and College at the beginning of a twelve-year odyssey in school experimentation.

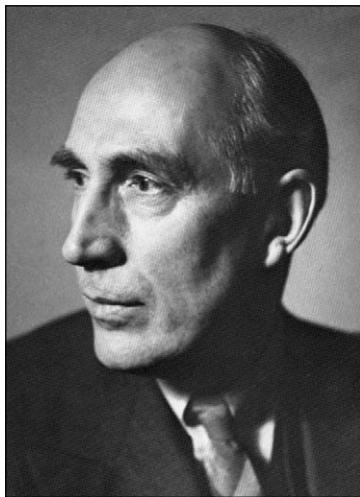
To understand the Eight-Year Study is to become familiar with a much different conception of school experimentation, one forgotten with the passing decades of "process-product" designs and federal incursion into educational policy making and school practice. Eight-Year Study leaders pioneered a new approach to research: an *implementative study*, the first of its kind in the United States.³⁸ As such, it differed from the common "status study" (a survey to document current practices), the "deliberative study" (a gathering of data to support normative recommendations for educational change), and the pilot-demonstration project, which so many assume the Eight-Year Study represented.

Implementative studies tested no formal hypotheses, upheld no specific models to be implemented and evaluated, and established no set of predefined outcomes. Rather, the Thirty School Study embraced a robust and determined *faith* in experimentation as an “exploratory process” to include gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data for the sole purpose of improving educational practice. As an example of what William Caspars describes as a process of “open ended . . . ethical deliberation,” the Study sought not to “prove” hypotheses with today’s conventions of validity and reliability but instead to implement and test the best thinking of seasoned educators.³⁹ In what was then viewed as the “method of intelligence,” this type of study addressed complex and indeterminate problems with an ethical commitment to make schooling better for young people and, we would add, more educative for teachers. Without the burden of reliability, school experimentation focused primarily (if not exclusively) on determining the validity of certain practices as these studies became site specific. John Goodlad has argued that outstanding programs come from working intelligently on local, not national, problems.⁴⁰ Arising from these local studies, a faith in school experimentation was formed among teachers and Commission staff. Demonstrating the nature of an implementative study as such, the Eight-Year Study becomes even more important for educators today.

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Vignette

V. T. Thayer (1886–1979): A Middle Position of Integrity without Compromise



V. T. Thayer, photograph, ca. 1940, Ohio State University Photo Archives

[Progressive education] prepares for a changing future without dogmatism or rigidity. It conceives of the school as perpetuating in American life the open road and new opportunities for fulfillment which constitute our richest inheritance from the American frontier. (V. T. Thayer, 1944)¹

Among those who prepared for a changing future without dogmatism or rigidity, V. T. Thayer embodies the work of the Eight-Year Study. Thayer was, in the language of the time, “a schoolman” and much more: a philosopher, humanist, and social critic. He served as director of the Ethical Culture Schools, chair of the PEA’s Commission on Secondary School Curriculum, and administrator of various elementary and secondary schools. In these roles he does not fit easily into today’s common conceptions of the progressive education movement. He did not follow the well-defined practices of Ellwood Cubberley and the administrative progressives of the early twentieth century but instead developed the idea of “functional democratic administration.” While believing in the importance

of student needs and life adjustment, he would have bristled at a “child-centered progressive” label, since so much of his professional writing centered on the importance of building a democratic society and the value of a strong general education curriculum. Thayer engaged in school experimentation; however, he would not have considered himself a scientific progressive. In *The Passing of the Recitation*, for example, he criticized Thorndike’s psychological research and its underlying assumptions about learning.² Neither was he a social reconstructionist, even though he wrote for *The Social Frontier*, contributed to *The Educational Frontier*, and worked with school faculties to lessen common social-economic class distinctions. Although trained as a philosopher, Thayer was first and foremost an educator who observed classrooms, met with parents and students, raised funds, designed curricula, and coordinated the administrative offices of an active school while also living the life of a serious scholar who published essays on Locke, Kant, James, and Dewey and spent his summers teaching at universities across the country. A philosopher who chose to enter the field of education, an academic who accepted a school administrator’s post, and a school administrator who gladly taught secondary school students—Thayer was certainly a progressive educator who remains unique among the conventional classifications.

I

If truth is not absolute, if experience is in continuous reconstruction, if the secondary school should reorganize curricula in response to the needs of youth balanced with societal expectations, then how does one direct a school? “With kindness, sincerity, and integrity” is the response of many of those who worked with Thayer as they have described his character and administrative demeanor.³ The Fieldston School, a participant in the Eight-Year Study and one of the educational programs of the Society for Ethical Culture, was his laboratory—a school built on the values of the Ethical Culture Movement while upholding progressive beliefs about preparing students for an uncertain future.

Cultural, religious, and progressive education ideologies combined as Thayer sought to experiment with a program that would integrate vocational, individual, and societal needs in a democratic community. A reserved, affable man possessing an air of great dignity and steeled determination, these same values permeated his career.⁴ Thayer’s beliefs would never harden into dogma, in accordance with the tenets of the Ethical Culture movement: “sharing a quest for meanings, ever-evolving, ever-changing.”⁵ At times, however, Thayer’s open-ended, self-critical views put him at odds with Felix Adler, the founder of the

Ethical Culture Society and a neo-Kantian idealist who strongly objected to Deweyan pragmatism and humanism. Thayer, commonly linked to Dewey, would often be accused of not adhering faithfully to Adler's beliefs. Yet, despite his differences, he successfully guided the Fieldston School for over twenty years and honored its values without compromise.

II

I do not wish to give the impression that there were no happy periods in my childhood. There were rainy days when I could retreat with a book and the comfortable insurance that there was no outside work to interfere with the pleasures of reading. Even today, at 89 [in 1971], the sound of an early morning rain brings with it feelings of relief and anticipation! (V. T. Thayer, 1971)⁶

Vivian Trow Thayer was raised in rural Wisconsin by his father and stepmother. Ill health as well as a loss of religious faith caused Thayer's father to leave the ministry where, as a farmer and rural mail carrier, the family always faced poverty, a condition that profoundly influenced Thayer's sensitivity to others' life struggles. While the family lineage was distinguished (being direct descendants from Miles Standish), Thayer was not prepped for admission to Harvard College as were his later Fieldston colleagues. His secondary school experience and start-stop university education were funded by working at various jobs, from sanitarium attendant to restaurant manager. After two years at the University of Wisconsin, he could not afford to continue his studies and during an extended interlude took a position as principal of a rural elementary school in Wisconsin. While Thayer notes, "No one could have been less prepared in the way of training and experience than was I," he still found administration enjoyable while never faltering from his goal of finishing undergraduate and doctoral studies in philosophy.⁷

Upon completing his doctorate in 1922, Thayer faced a difficult choice between an assistant professorship of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin and the principalship of the Ethical Culture High School in New York City: "The decision turned upon a choice between philosophy and education as a career, and between [university] teaching and [school] administration. A choice, as my subsequent career demonstrates, I found difficult to peg down once and for all!"⁸ Intrigued by the philosophy of the Society for Ethical Culture, founded in 1876, Thayer became specifically interested in its focus on ethical relationships, social reform, and socialized individualism. A nondenominational, humanistic movement growing out of American Reform Judaism and representing a type of Progressive Era, settlement house organization, the

Society held no theological creed but instead provided venues for individuals to formulate their own metaphysical beliefs “in the worth and dignity of each person and the commitment to help create a better world.”⁹ Adler called for “deeds not creeds,”¹⁰ and the Society’s activities were varied—establishing settlement houses, Workingman’s Schools, and free kindergarten for the children of laboring men and women, as well as establishing the forerunner organization of the ACLU and supporting the creation of the NAACP.

Thayer would find the Society’s philosophy more appealing than the actual educational program, although the Ethical Culture schools embraced many then-innovative educational practices, including homogeneous grouping, democratic student activities, and an integrated curriculum of common life activities. “Particularly fruitful, did it seem to me, was [Adler’s] concept of democracy and of democratic education. . . . Indeed, without its metaphysical assumptions, it gave a concreteness to what was often vague and undefined in John Dewey.”¹¹ After only two years of service, however, Thayer left in 1924 for Ohio State University to work with Boyd Bode, his former University of Wisconsin philosophy teacher, who was building an education faculty that would bring meaning to the phrase “democracy as a way of life.” He did not leave on bad terms; during his absence he researched and wrote his first two major works, *The Passing of the Recitation* and *Supervision in the Secondary School*, with many references to practices from the Ethical Culture Schools.¹² During this time, Adler arranged to build a new campus in the Bronx, the Fieldston School, as a middle and secondary school program distinct from the Ethical Culture school facility located in midtown Manhattan. Although leaders at Ohio State were planning their own laboratory school and hoped Thayer would remain, Adler had raised sufficient funds by 1927 to begin construction. Thayer accepted the director’s position, and the school opened in 1928.

III

The Fieldston Plan, a pioneering venture in both secondary school administration and curricular organization, closely resembled Thayer’s own writings. First conceived in 1927 and then with support from the General Education Board from 1933 to 1938 to develop curriculum materials, the program grew out of Adler’s belief that vocation would be the most effective means for learning culture. Thayer thought the “implications of this concept of ‘living through the radiations’ of our unique interests and abilities for education were not only clear, but revolutionary.”¹³ The intent was not to train students for employment or to use occupations for narrow specialization but to serve as a link to

balance interests with what Adler called the “needs of civilization” for cultural studies. Vocation (whether art or business) enabled the thematic organization of culture which, in turn, permitted development of an integrated, “fused” core curriculum for the study of civilizations: “History, science, literature are to be windows through which light will stream in to illumine the vocation, and the vocation will be an opening through which [to] . . . look out intelligently on the world at large.”¹⁴ Thayer adopted the term *orientation* as a way of integrating students’ interests with a dramatically changing society.

Thayer questioned whether determining adolescent needs could be entrusted entirely to the students, especially since teachers were to guide them toward achieving unity and purpose in their lives. Unlike laissez-faire, child-centered programs, he envisioned the school as an interpretive agency where teachers would assist students “to weave unity and purpose” into their lives “in socially desirable directions.”¹⁵ If educators were to take their responsibility seriously, they would require more information not only about individual students but about the nature of adolescence. To this end Thayer organized the Fieldston School’s Department of Guidance, led by Caroline Zachry, to initiate new forms of adolescent study and ultimately to become an experimental research center for the Commission on the Secondary School.

Under Thayer’s leadership the Fieldston School also explored the role of community service in the education of students. As an expression of functional democratic administration, school governance was restructured to include expanded student, faculty, parent, and alumni participation in decision making and the further education of all members of the learning community. The intellectual development of teachers and administrators and even of parents became an important component of reform; in fact, Thayer and his coauthor, Harold Alberty, concluded their *Supervision in the Secondary School* with a chapter on the growth of teachers.

IV

In 1933, Thayer (along with Dewey) was one of thirty-four signers of the *Humanist Manifesto*, a highly controversial document that helped articulate a (secular) humanism within a context of scientific, philosophical, and ethical thought. Adler, who was extremely ill at the time, was not informed of Thayer’s signing for fear that he would become so upset he would die as a result. The *Manifesto*’s fifth proposition, “Religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method,” represented beliefs held by Thayer, the only professional educator asked to sign the document. These views would, in

time, lead him to become extensively involved in discussions over religion, public education, and academic freedom.¹⁶ By the mid-1940s Thayer found himself heavily embroiled in the religion in public education debate, required by his membership on the Academic Freedom Committee of the ACLU. During this period he also published *American Education Under Fire* and *Religion in Public Education*.¹⁷ In 1948 he wrote, “The sap of enthusiasm for my position in the schools [has] been running thin for some time,” and he resigned as director of the Ethical Culture Schools.¹⁸ To say that Thayer retired, however, would be misleading. While he severed his institutional ties with the Ethical Culture Schools, he continued to address the role of public schooling in a democracy and published *Religion in Public Education*, *The Attack upon the American Secular School*, *Public Education and Its Critics*, *The Role of the School in American Society*, and *The Challenge of the Present to Public Education*.¹⁹ His faith in public schools and progressive education never faltered.

V

When Thayer considered why the influence of the Eight-Year Study was not greater, he lamented the tendency among many champions of progressivism to oversimplify “complex processes” and to be more “against something than *for* something.”²⁰ Thayer’s career represented working *for something* and for building educational programs. And this is where understanding his work becomes especially difficult, since many of his ideas were developed in practice and not fully described in print. At the time, “speaking” to the professional community was done in ways other than conference lectures and articles and often involved the then-common practice of school visitation. Thayer would host hundreds of visitors each year to the Fieldston School. Similarly, when Alberty was director at the Ohio State University School, that facility averaged 15,000 visits annually from educators who wished to see rather than to be told how important social and educational issues were addressed.²¹ For these Eight-Year Study progressives, there seemed to be little point merely to talk about problems when their laboratory school settings provided venues to demonstrate solutions to the educational and social challenges of the day.

Although perceived differently, race, class, and gender inequalities were among Thayer’s challenges. These issues were embedded within the wider concern of extending democratic values and combating totalitarianism, misguided capitalism, and political corruption. Despite charges to the contrary, Thayer and other Eight-Year Study progressives were not blind to issues of race, class, and gender. Student evaluation at both Thayer’s and Alberty’s schools included a social problems test

that consisted of scenarios about race equality (representing considerable classroom discussion), and the Thayer Commission's film and radio projects' curriculum materials both confronted students with issues of race (including lynching) and social inequity.²² Thayer's 1956 lecture, presented when he was a faculty member at Fisk University, stressed both race and diversity issues, and racial inequality was behind his call for the faculty and students "at Fisk to respond courageously to the call of the new frontier." Yet the title of the speech was "Today's Challenge to Education."²³

Class issues as well seem missing among those Aikin Commission schools that catered to the economic and intellectual elite. Yet one of the more remarkable efforts to increase student social sensitivity and appreciation of democratic values was undertaken by Thayer and the Commission on Secondary School Curriculum at the 1938 Hudson Guild Farm Camp. Aware of the privileged backgrounds of those many students attending Aikin Commission schools and concerned about their limited experience, students from the Fieldston, Lincoln, and George Schools attended a two month, summer "service learning" camp intended to heighten awareness and sensitivity to social class differences. Advertised as "working together with different groups of people" to "understand more profoundly the meaning of Democracy as a way of life," the adolescents participated in a variety of activities, including farming and construction projects with local residents and numerous visits to textile, mining, and industrial centers where they witnessed the economic struggles of their fellow citizens.²⁴ The program was described in terms of social adjustment and communal responsibility when in fact students were observing graphic examples in social class inequalities.

Thayer was acutely aware of the destructive tendency to resolve serious issues into either-or stances, into binaries, and for those positions to harden so that whatever truth initially resided within them was lost. Issues of race, class, and gender were understood by him and others as specific instances of a more general problem of how to fully extend the democratic values of social and economic participation. For his part, Thayer continued to adopt a middle position: while recognizing the centrality of schooling as a way to preserve America's democratic traditions, he argued for a curriculum that was responsive to changing social conditions and individual needs while simultaneously valuing academic content as a means to increase human control over an uncertain and unpredictable future.