

Historical Background

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EDTC 807: Implementation and Evaluation of Curriculum

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Education systems in the United States and Europe changed dramatically from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century. Schools shifted from small, classical institutions serving limited populations into mass public systems designed to educate diverse learners. Industrialization, immigration, urbanization, and democratic expansion created new expectations for schooling. Reformers debated what knowledge mattered most, how learning occurs, and how curriculum should be organized. Historical curriculum analysis emphasizes that modern schooling developed through competing visions rather than a single reform movement (Kliebard, 2004). Four influential theorists, John Dewey, Franklin Bobbitt, Maria Montessori, and Ralph Tyler illustrate how different educational theories shaped twentieth century curriculum and instruction.

By the late 1800's, social and economic conditions were changing faster than schools. Industrial production required technical and procedural skills, cities expanded, and student populations became more culturally and linguistically diverse. Traditional classical curricula centered on Latin, Greek, and formal recitation did not align with emerging workforce and civic needs. Historical curriculum studies describe this period as a struggle among competing interest groups trying to define the purpose of schooling (Kliebard, 2004). Some reformers promoted academic intellectual training, others emphasized practical job preparation, and others supported child-centered or socially responsive education models. These competing priorities created pressure for systemic reform. Simultaneously, psychology and social science introduced new theories of development and learning, encouraging redesign of instruction and curriculum.

John Dewey was one of the most influential progressive philosophers who advanced a democratic model of education grounded in experience, inquiry, and reflection. Curriculum should grow from meaningful activities connected to real-life situations rather than fixed subject

sequences (Kliebard, 2004). Dewey rejected rote memorization and proposed a pragmatic, constructivist model in which learners build understanding through problem-solving and interaction. From his point of view, schools should function as democratic communities where students practice collaboration, critical thinking, and civic responsibility. Dewey's laboratory school at the University of Chicago demonstrated project-based and experiential learning approaches. His influence contributed to inquiry instruction, discussion-centered classrooms, and experiential curriculum design, marking a shift away from strict recitation models (Kliebard, 2004).

In contrast, Franklin Bobbitt represented the social efficiency movement in curriculum theory. Influenced by scientific management and industrial efficiency models, he viewed education as a system for preparing individuals to perform specific adult roles effectively. He argued that curriculum development should be based on systemic analysis of social and occupational tasks. In this framework, schools should identify the skills required as adults and then design instruction to produce those competencies efficiently.

Bobbitt promoted what became known as scientific curriculum making. Curriculum planning in his model should be expert-driven, objective-based, and measurable (Kliebard, 2004). His method involved task analysis, behavioral objectives, and measurable outcomes. He believed that experts should design curricula using data and social analysis rather than relying on tradition or teacher preference.

Critics argued that this model often reduced teacher autonomy and narrowed learning experiences (Kliebard, 2004). This approach aligned with broader Progressive Era faith in scientific management and administrative expertise. Bobbitt's influence helped institutionalize objective-based planning, vocational differentiation, and efficiency driven curriculum design.

Many later accountability and standards movements echo his emphasis on specification of outcomes and alignment between goals and instruction.

Maria Montessori, working in Europe in the early twentieth century, proposed a developmental, child-centered approach grounded in observation and sensory learning theory. She believed children are naturally motivated and progress through developmental stages. Education should therefore support self-directed activity within a carefully prepared environment (Edwards, 2002). Montessori's education is structured but learner-directed, with specialized materials that isolate cognitive and sensory concepts. Students select tasks, work independently, and develop concentration and mastery, while teachers function primarily as guides and observers.

This approach aligns with developmental vision where learner growth and readiness drive instructional sequencing. Montessori's long-term impact includes prepared learning environments, hands-on instructional materials, differentiated pacing, and early childhood education reform. Her work strengthened developmental and learner-centered curriculum traditions (Edwards, 2002). Many contemporary learner-centered and competency-based models reflect Montessori principles, even outside formally designated Montessori schools.

Ralph Tyler systematized curriculum planning and evaluation during the mid-twentieth century when school systems required clearer design and accountability structures. His framework, often called the Tyler Rationale, defined curriculum development through four guiding questions about objectives, learning experiences, organization, and evaluation. This became a foundational planning model and shifted toward alignment among goals, instruction, and assessment.

Tyler's model drew from behavioral objectives theory and evaluation research. Unlike Bobbitt's purely efficiency-driven model, Tyler allowed objectives to come from learner needs, subject matter, and social demands. However, he insisted that goals should be clearly defined and that instruction and assessment should align with those goals. His work on large-scale evaluation studies, including the Eight-Year Study, demonstrated that alternative curricula could succeed when evaluated systematically.

Historical curriculum scholarship emphasizes that modern education did not emerge from one philosophy but from ongoing conflict among competing visions (Kliebard, 2004). Education has been shaped by different assumptions about knowledge, development, and social purpose. These visions include experiential democratic learning by Dewey, efficiency managed instruction by Bobbitt, developmental child-centered learning by Montessori, and objective-aligned design by Tyler.

Educational reform from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century was driven by industrialization, social change, and expanding public education. Dewey advanced democratic experiential learning, Bobbitt promoted efficiency and task-based curriculum engineering, Montessori emphasized developmental self-direction, and Tyler created systematic curriculum planning and evaluation structures. Together, their ideas shaped the foundation of modern education. Today's schools still reflect this historical blend of balancing student-centered learning, standards and accountability, developmental practice, and efficiency pressures.

References

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