

## Controversy and Unification: The Passage of the Smith-Hughes Act

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Accepted for Publication July 1985

The movement toward establishing secondary vocational education in this country culminated in the passage of the Smith-Hughes Bill of 1917. The period surrounding the turn of the century brought about tremendous changes for both industry and education. Both industry and agriculture were coping with problems stemming from the explosive technological changes brought about by the industrial revolution. The advent of the interchangeable part had ushered out the need for apprenticeship trained craftsmen who made each and every part of a machine and had ushered in the need for the mechanic who could assemble machines using standardized parts. In addition, the newly forged power of the labor unions began making an impact in industry. Educational philosophers such as John Dewey were changing the concept of formal education from the teacher oriented methods of rote learning to student oriented methods such as problem solving. Both industry and education had to deal with the integration of the tremendous flood of European immigrants into the American society. Against this backdrop, the movement for vocational education began. While it was generally agreed that this form of education was needed, there were points of dispute: (a) What was to be the method of delivery; (b) Who was to administer the programs; and (c) For whom was vocational education intended. Three groups, industry, labor and agriculture, worked vigorously for the passage of the legislation; however, each of these groups had its own conception of the form that the vocational training should take (Venn, 1971). The purpose of this article is to examine the positions of the three groups, the eventual alignment of these positions that allowed passage of the Smith-Hughes Act, and implications for the passage of future legislation.

### Industry

The National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) grew out of the depression of 1893-94. At that time, interest in vocational education began to develop as the businessmen made a broad based analysis of the causes of the depression. As an answer to their financial problems, the association saw the need for expanding into the world market. In his address to the NAM in 1898, NAM President Search emphasized the advantages held by European competition, pointing out that Germany had become the most dynamic trade force in the world through its system of vocational and industrial schools. England, along with other countries, was following Germany's example. To be able to compete in the world arena, Search felt that America would have to improve its workmanship through formal technical training. Search agreed that classical studies were important but added:

It is unfair to great material interests of the land to leave out of account the obvious demands of industry and commerce . . . considerable sums should be diverted from the main educational channels to be put into commercial and technical schools. (Wirth, 1972, p. 25)

In 1905, the NAM organized the Committee on Industrial Education, which, in its first report, outlined the inadequacy of the public school system, noting that 80% of the students dropped out before reaching high school and 97% were lost before graduating from high school. Committee

*Journal of the American Association  
of Teacher Educators in Agriculture*  
Volume 27, Number 1, pp.39-44  
DOI: 10.5032/jaatea.1986.01039

Chairman Anthony Iltner expressed the concern that the schools with their "impractical and boring programs" failed to meet the needs of students. The apprentice system was attacked as having been "broken down as a result of changing industrial conditions and the obstructionist attitudes of the unions." Manual training and technical schools were reported as having failed to reach the vast majority. The report stated: "To authorize and found and organize trade schools in which the youth of our land may be taught the practical and technical knowledge of a trade is the most important issue before the American people today." It was further stated that only through this training "could the cruel effort of the unions to monopolize the opportunity to live be thwarted" (NAM, 1905).

Iltner and his committee were impressed by the German system of training. Iltner said, "in the world race for commercial supremacy, we must copy and improve on the German method of education" (NAM, 1905). The committee also saw this system as a means to control the unions, noting that the German system was free of "union trouble." Professor H. H. Belfield of Chicago argued that if large manufacturing establishments maintained their own schools, they would rid themselves of strikes. He said, "When they shall educate their own workmen, these workmen will be loyal to the company rather than to an outside organization" (Wirth, 1972). In 1917, the NAM took the position that students should not remain in school after the age of fourteen because the "high schools did nothing but train wretched little clerks" (Fisher, 1967). These positions, understandably, agitated the American Federation of Labor which had developed its own theories of vocational education.

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) had surged in strength from 500,000 in 1879 to 2,000,000 in 1902, doubling its membership between 1898 and 1900 and tripling it between 1900 and 1904 (Lorwing, 1933). It was this power increase that alarmed the NAM into taking the position of using industrial education to control the unions. It was the positions of the NAM that prompted the AFL into action on industrial education.

#### Labor

In 1903, the American Federation of Labor appointed its first committee on education which passed a resolution stating: "The subject of manual training and technical education to be given by trade unions is of such general character that the convention would not very well recommend any plan or policy that would apply equally to all unions . . ." (Wirth, 1972, p. 53). Dissension within the union delayed a firm stand on the type of training that was needed. In 1906, a resolution was passed to study the subjects of apprenticeships, the career lines of graduates of the trade schools, manual training programs and schools of technology. In 1908, Samuel Gompers appointed a commission of 15 headed by mineworkers leader John Mitchel to investigate approaches to industrial education in the U.S. and abroad. In a resolution passed at the 1908 convention, the committee concluded:

There are two groups with opposite methods, and seeking antagonistic ends, now advocating industrial education to the United States.

. . . One of these groups is largely composed of the non-union employers of the country who advance industrial education as a special privilege under conditions that educate the student or apprentice to non-union sympathies and prepare him as a skilled worker for scab labor, thus using the children of the workers against the interests of their organized fathers and brothers. . . . This group also favors the training of the student or apprentice for skill in only one industrial process, thus

making the graduate a skilled worker in only a very limited sense and rendering him nearly helpless if lack of employment comes in his single subdivision of a craft . . .

The other group is composed of great educators, enlightened representatives of organized labor and persons engaged in genuine social service who advocate industrial education as a common right open to all children on equal terms to be provided by general taxation and kept under the control of the whole people with a method or system of education that will make the apprentice or graduate a skilled craftsman in all the branches of the trade. (Wirth, 1972, p. 54)

The 1910 report of the committee was concerned with developing educational recommendations that would protect the interests of the unions. Their position became clear in opposing the type of short-term private trade schools that were supported by the NAM. Mitchell's committee took the position that the technical training should be done by the public schools. The committee saw the separate industry-run trade schools as a means of keeping the "working class" in its place. Upward social and economic mobility could be attained through schools that were controlled by the public and could not be attained through schools controlled by industry. The official position of the AFL was as follows:

We favor the establishment of schools in connection with the public school system, at which pupils between the ages of 14 and 16 may be taught the principles of the trades, not necessarily in separate buildings, but in separate schools adapted to this particular education, and by competent and trained teachers. The course of instruction in such a school should be English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, elementary mechanics and drawing. . . . This will serve to prepare the pupil for the more advanced subjects, and in addition, to disclose his capacity for a specific vocation. . . .

Any technical education of the worker in trade and industry, being a public necessity, it should not be a private, but a public function, conducted by the public and the expense involved at public cost. (AFL, 1919, p. 210)

#### Agriculture

Parallel to the push by the industrialist and organized labor for a system of vocational training, the agricultural groups were also seeking a reform of the educational system. The agriculturalists had been active longer than either of the other two groups in support of education. Farm organizations such as the National Grange were organized for social and educational purposes. As far back as 1874, the Grange had expressed interest in the teaching of "practical agriculture, domestic science, and all the arts that adorn the home" (Cremin, 1961, p. 42). In 1876, a committee was organized to report each year on educational matters and to direct the attention of the state Granges to these matters.

Agricultural Publications such as Wallace's Farmer and Hoard's Dairyman began to editorialize about the need for agricultural education. Wallace wrote in 1908, "it is hard for many a middle-aged farmer to get a clear idea of what is meant by protein, carbohydrate, nitrogen-free extract, etc. Now, these terms are no harder than many which the pupils learn and which are of no earthly use to them in their every day lives" (Cremin, 1961, p. 44). Hoard contended that since the future of farming lay with the educating of youngsters, teachers would have to be trained in agriculture (Cremin, 1961, p. 45). The Farmers Union, organized in 1902,

joined the Grange and the agricultural publications in the push for agricultural education.

In 1908, President Roosevelt organized "The Commission on Country Life" for the purpose of gathering information and formulating ideas for alleviating rural distress. A questionnaire was given to over a half a million farmers and rural spokesmen across the nation. Among other things, the people were asked, "Are the schools in your neighborhood training boys and girls satisfactorily for farm life?" The answers were an almost unanimous "no." The Commission concluded, "Everywhere there is a demand that education have relation to living, that the schools should express the daily life, and that in rural districts they should educate by means of agricultural and country life subjects" (Cremin, 1961, p. 83). Although the report had no direct bearing on legislation, it inspired many writings and much attention to the agriculturalists. There was, however, contention among the agriculturalists as to what form the education was to take. One group wanted the thrust to be through extension offices located in each county. This structure was to provide the link for disseminating information from the university to the local farmers. Another group insisted that the education and dissemination be conducted through the public high schools.

In 1910, along with the other groups, the Grange and the Association of American Agricultural Colleges and Experimental Stations intensified their efforts for passage of vocational education legislation. Without a unified effort, the legislation failed.

#### NSPIE

These three divergent groups were brought together under the auspices of the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education (NSPIE). The NSPIE was organized in 1907 following a meeting in New York City of Charles R. Richards, professor of manual training at the Teacher's College in New York, and James P. Haney, director of art and manual training in New York City and 13 other men at the Engineers' Club. As a result of their discussion, an organizational meeting was held in which 250 industrialists, labor leaders, educators and social workers were called to organize a society to unify the diverse groups that were seeking to advance industrial education. The NSPIE leaders recognized that the groups had no "substantial agreement as to the practical form which the new education should take." Their purpose was to "study the range of possibilities, to seek areas of agreement on concrete proposals, to act as a clearing house of information and to educate the public" (Cremin, 1961, p. 80).

By 1910, the society had succeeded in uniting the forces. Although differences still existed, compromises and trade offs were accomplished under the guidance of Charles Prosser. For example, when it became clear that legislation could not be passed that would provide for both industrial and agricultural training in the high schools and the establishment of an agricultural extension service, an agreement was reached that the group would support the Smith-Lever bill of 1914 which sponsored agricultural extension. In return, the bill sponsor, Senator Hoke Smith of Georgia, promised to introduce a resolution to authorize President Wilson to appoint a committee to examine the need for federal support to aid vocational education. This committee, called the "Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education," was instrumental in working out compromises that led to the adoption of the Smith-Hughes Act (Nystrom, 1973, p. 14). Industrial groups compromised in that the training was to take place through the public school system. Labor groups compromised in that they accepted the provision in the act that allowed separate boards of

education to govern vocational education. In return, labor was guaranteed representation on that board.

The force that provided the final momentum for enactment of vocational education legislation was the war in Europe. In 1916, as the United States was on the brink of entering the war, the Senate sponsor of the Smith Hughes Act, Hoke Smith, said in his speech to the senate in support of vocational education, "We well might present the fact that even in the case of war, more men and women would be required at home to prepare the instruments of war and to prepare the food and clothing for the soldier than those who would be required to be in the front. They should be prepared for their duties in war and peace. (Congressional Records, 1916)

In a report to the house in favor of his bill, Representative Dudley Hughes of Georgia stated, "The American people have hardly begun the work of providing for the practical education of these millions of wage workers. In this whole country, there are fewer trade schools than are to be found in the little German kingdom of Bavaria with a population not much greater than that of New York City" (House Report, 1916). Two months after the Smith-Hughes Act was passed, the United States entered World War I.

The system of secondary vocational education developed through the authorization of the Smith-Hughes legislation has endured basically intact. Subsequent legislation has been aimed at supplementation rather than wholesale change in the system and methods of delivery. The legislation was many years in the making but through the process of evolution and compromise among the diverse groups, a solid foundation of secondary vocational education was laid.

If one examines the points of dispute among the three groups mentioned in the introduction, (a) What was to be the method of delivery; (b) Who was to administer the programs; and (c) For whom was vocational education intended, the realization becomes apparent, but these are issues that are discussed and debated among educators, policy makers and legislators in our modern society. Given the present political/economic climate, the vocational education profession is open to scrutiny as posed by these three questions. Indeed, over the last two years, how many answers to these questions have been offered from all branches of society, and what effect would the various proposed answers have on the future of vocational education? As always, these questions will be answered in terms of legislation passed or rejected by Congress. The form of that legislation will, like that of the Smith-Hughes Act, depend on the cooperation and compromise of those groups with a vested interest in vocational education.

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