emphasize pedagogy; and, finally, the return of teacher training to the control of the larger university. Professional schools and departments of education had an important role as repositories of wisdom on the methods and techniques of pedagogy, Bestor granted; but it was the university as a whole that needed to determine and provide the proper education of a teacher.

It is interesting to note that in a little over half a century, Bestor had come full circle from the early progressives. Whereas Joseph Mayer Rice in the nineties had called upon the public to reform the schools by creating a new class of professionals who would manage education according to scientific principles, Bestor was now calling upon that same public to undo the damage of the professionals by returning the schools to the arts and science professors. And whereas Rice had railed against the narrowness and formalism of the curriculum, Bestor was now contending that the schools, in attempting to do everything, had ended up forsaking their own distinctive function: intellectual training. Thus swung the pendulum of reform.

For many reasons, Bestor's arguments found considerable support among the intelligentsia. The academic community, long critical of goings-on in the department of education, was quite ready to blame the educationists for the crisis in the schools, particularly as the tensions of popularization began to affect the colleges. So, too, were the editors of Life and U.S. News & World Report. And so too, was the public.

8 A Council for Basic Education was founded in 1956 to advance the view that "schools exist to provide the essential skills of language, numbers, and orderly thought, and to transmit in a reasoned pattern the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic heritage of civilized man." The Main Job of the Schools (Washington, n.d.). Arthur Bestor and Mortimer Smith were among the first directors. For the Council's evolving position and progress see its periodical, the CBE Bulletin.

The surprising thing about the progressive response to the assault of the fifties is not that the movement collapsed, but that it collapsed so readily. True, the Progressive Education Association had never been able to recoup its fortunes after the war, and slid steadily downhill after 1947. True, too, the phrase progressive education had itself fallen into disfavor among professionals, though progressive ideas continued to command wide assent. But even so, one is shocked by the rapidity of the deeper problem in education was "to dig out educationist's debris and rediscover learning's true nature." U.S. News & World Report published lengthy interviews with Bestor on November 30, 1956, June 7, 1957, and January 24, 1958, around the themes "We Are Less Educated Than Fifty Years Ago" and "What Went Wrong with U.S. Schools?"

An anthology of the soul-searching is Kermit Lansner, ed.: Second-Rate Brains (Garden City, 1958).

See the "Crisis in Education" series in Life for March 24, 31, April 7, 14, and 21, 1958; the principal editorial contended that the
decline. Why this abrupt and rather dismal end of a movement that had for more than a half-century commanded the loyalty of influential segments of the American public? A number of reasons suggest themselves.

First, distortion. As frequently happens with social movements, success brought schism in the ranks. The pluralism of the nineties became the bitter ideological fragmentation of the thirties and forties. Faction developed, and within the factions cults, cliques, and fanatics. The movement became strife-ridden, given to bandwagon behavior, dominated by the feuding of minorities. The strife made headlines, and within these headlines lay the seeds of many a cartoon version of progressive education.

Second, there was the negativism inherent in this and all social reform movements. Like many protesters against injustice, the early progressives knew better what they were against than what they were for. And when one gets a true picture of the inequities of American schools during the half-century before World War I, he realizes they had much to be against; the physical and pedagogical conditions in many schools were indescribably bad, an effrontery to the mildest humanitarian sentiments. Yet, granted this, a protest is not a program. Shibboleths like “the whole child” or “creative self-expression” stirred the faithful to action and served as powerful battering rams against the old order, but in classroom practice they were not very good guides to positive action. At least the generation that invented them had an idea of what they meant. The generation that followed adopted them as a collection of ready-made clichés—clichés which were not very helpful when the public began to raise questions about the schools. Third, what the progressives did prescribe made inordinate demands on the teacher’s time and ability. “Integrated studies” required familiarity with a fantastic range of knowledge and teaching materials; while the commitment to build upon student needs and interests demanded extraordinary feats of pedagogical ingenuity. In the hands of first-rate instructors, the innovations worked wonders; in the hands of too many average teachers, however, they led to chaos. Like the proverbial little girl with the curl right in the middle of her forehead, progressive education done well was very good indeed; done badly, it was abominable—worse, perhaps, than the formalism it had sought to supplant.

Fourth, and this too is a common phenomenon of social reform, the movement became a victim of its own success. Much of what it preached was simply incorporated into the schools at large. Once the schools did change, however, progressives too often found themselves wedded to specific programs, unable to formulate next steps. Like some liberals who continued to fight for the right of labor to organize long after the Wagner Act had done its work, many progressives continued to fight against stationary desks in schools where movable desks were already in use. For some young people in the post-World War II generation the ideas of the progressives became inert—in Whitehead’s sense of “right thinking” that no longer moves to action. Dewey in the very last essay he ever published on education likened these progressive ideas gone stale to mustard plasters taken out of the medicine cabinet and applied externally as the need arose. Other young people of this same generation simply developed different preoccupations, different concerns, different rallying points. The old war cries, whatever their validity or lack of it, rang a bit hollow; they no longer generated enthusiasm. Like any legacy from a prior generation, they were too easily and too carelessly hollow; rarely perhaps were they lovingly invested in something new. In the end, the result was intellectual bankruptcy.

Fifth, there was the impact of the more general swing toward conservatism in postwar political and social thought. If progressive education arose as part of Progressivism writ large, it should not be surprising that a reaction to it came as a phase of
Conservatism writ large.* When the reaction did come, too many educators thought they would be progressives in education and conservatives in everything else. The combination, of course, is not entirely impossible, though it may well be intellectually untenable. John Dewey addressed himself to the point in Characters and Events. "Let us admit the case of the conservative," he wrote; "if we once start thinking no one can guarantee what will be the outcome, except that many objects, ends and institutions will be surely doomed. Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril, and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place." Dewey's comment, by the way, makes incomparably clear what he thought was progressive about good education, and gives the lie to a good deal of nonsense about his philosophy being anti-intellectual.

Sixth, there was the price the movement paid for its own professionalization; for given the political realities of American education, no program can survive that ceases assiduously to cultivate lay support. Progressives were undoubtedly right in contending that teachers needed to be better educated and better paid, and that professionalization would ultimately serve these ends. And they were right, too, in assuming that once teachers had been converted to their cause, half the battle would be won. But they committed a supreme political blunder during the thirties when they allowed the movement itself to become professionalized; for in the process the political coalition of businessmen, trade unionists, farmers, and intellectuals that had supported them in their early efforts was simply permitted to crumble. The resultant lack of nonprofessional support during the fifties was a crucial factor in the high vulnerability of the movement to widespread criticism of its policies and procedures.

Seventh, and most important, progressive education collapsed because it failed to keep pace with the continuing transformation of American society. The ultimate enemy of the con-

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8 Harold F. Clark and Harold S. Sloan: Classrooms in the Factories (Rutherford, N.J., 1958). Martin S. Dworkin has written perceptively...
Whereas the central thrust of progressivism had been expansionist—it revolved against formalism and sought to extend the functions of the school—the central effort of the fifties was rather to define more precisely the school’s responsibilities, to delineate those things that the school needed to do because if the school did not do them they would not get done. It was this problem more than any, perhaps, that stood at the heart of the argument over educational priorities that dominated the citizens’ conferences of the decade.6

Granted this, however, and granted the collapse of progressive education as an organized movement, there remained a timelessness about many of the problems the progressives raised and the solutions they proposed. John Dewey once wrote in the Preface to Schools of To-Morrow: “This is not a text book of education, nor yet an exposition of a new method of school teaching, aimed to show the weary teacher or the discontented parent how education should be carried on. We have tried to show what actually happens when schools start to put into practice, each in its own way, some of the theories that have been pointed to as the soundest and best ever since Plato, to be then laid politely away as precious portions of our ‘intellectual heritage.’”

However much progressive education had become the conventional wisdom of the fifties, there were still slum schools that could take profitable lessons from Jacob Riis, rural schools that had much to learn from the Country Life Commission, and colleges that had yet to discover that the natural curiosity of the young could be a magnificent propellant to learning. Glaring educational inequalities along race and class lines cried out for alleviation, and the vision of a democracy of culture retained a nobility all its own—Lyman Bryson restated it brilliantly in The Next America (1953), a book that never received the attention it deserved.1 As knowledge proliferated, the need to humanize it only intensified;2 while the awesome imminence of atomic war merely dramatized the difference between knowledge and intelligence.3 Finally, the rapid transformation of the so-called underdeveloped nations lent new meaning and new urgency to Jane Addams’s caveat that “unless all men and all classes contribute to a good, we cannot even be sure that it is worth having”—the point was compellingly made in C. P. Snow’s widely read lecture, The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution (1959).

The Progressive Education Association had died, and progressive education itself needed drastic reappraisal. Yet the transformation they had wrought in the schools was in many ways as irreversible as the larger industrial transformation of which it had been part.4 And for all the talk about pedagogical breakthroughs and crash programs, the authentic progressive vision remained strangely pertinent to the problems of midcentury America.5 Perhaps it only awaited the reformulation and resurrection that would ultimately derive from a larger resurgence of reform in American life and thought.


2 I am using the term as James Harvey Robinson used it in The Humanizing of Knowledge (New York, 1923) to indicate the need to reorder, restate, and reanalyze new knowledge so that the average person can understand it.


4 That this is so is indicated by the general direction of James Bryant Conant’s proposals in The American High School Today (New York, 1959) and by the philosophical orientation—or lack of it—in most of the programs reported by Arthur D. Morse in Schools of Tomorrow—Today (Garden City, 1960).

5 Despite the sharpness of the assault on progressive education, public opinion polls revealed a good deal of latent public support for the progressive program. See National Education Association: Public Opinion Polls on American Education (Washington, 1958); and Richard F. Carter: Voters and Their Schools (Stanford, 1960).