Horace Mann and the Common School Movement

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Abstract

Horace Mann is considered the founder of the Common School Movement in the 1800’s and is credited for being one of the first educators to advocate for the inclusive education of all learners. This paper will explore how Horace Mann’s vision for common schools was accepted by policymakers, families of varying socioeconomic statuses, and addressed the needs of various subgroups of children. It will also address some of the opposing views in comparison to the Common School Movement which include the expansion of charter schools, religious conflicts, clashes between the wealthy and poor, and disagreements with alternative pathways for obtaining teacher certification in today’s society. Lastly, it will include an overview of the philosophical principles, core values, and overall success of Horace Mann’s school in today’s society and explore the age old question: Where does Horace Mann’s vision for common schools fit in today’s society?

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Horace Mann is commonly referred to as the “Father of the Common School Movement”, which was the dominant vision for public schools in the 1800’s and continues to be the foundation of today’s public school system (Dott, 2010; Peterson, 2010). Mann envisioned a “common school that would unit all citizens- of varied religions, ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic levels, and professions- into one community, educated in the values of a basically white Protestant society” (Berkman, 2009). Copeland (2009) describes “Common” as “multiple aspects of his vision: a common set of knowledge, a common opportunity and experience for children and families, and, ultimately, a country bound by common values, stronger even than religious ties” (p. 263).

**Free Education for All**

In order to provide equal opportunities for all children, Mann advocated that public school education should be free of charge, so poor children could attend (Peterson 2010). Therefore, the school system would be funded with tax money and standards would be set forth and enforced by the state (Mondale & Patton, 2010). As a result, children who were previously denied entry to school because of their family’s inability to pay for their education no longer encountered these challenges. This replaced the previous system in which was inequitable, had no state supervision, schooling varied from town to town, and were supported by local taxes and fees charged to parents (Mondale & Patton, 2010).

Mann’s structure for public school’s replaced the previous efforts, or lack of efforts, of Thomas Jefferson who limited certain groups of children from obtaining an
education. Jefferson was not in favor of girls obtaining an education beyond three years of schooling, nor did he imagine girls reaching a certain level of education stimulation simply because he wanted to ensure they were wise enough to make good wives and mother’s (Mondale & Patton, 2001). Furthermore, he did not offer any children of slaves an education, nor did he foresee their potential for citizenship (Brick, 2005).

Although Mann advocated for equal education, he was not impressed with the condition of the school system he inherited in Massachusetts. After visiting about one thousand schools over a course of six years, Mann did not find the conditions of the educational facilities to be conductive to educating children. Most schools lacked adequate lighting and heat, some were almost falling part, and there was evidence of mice infestation in some school buildings (Mondale & Patton, 2010). In addition, most schools lacked the instructional resources to provide children with the basics of education. The absence of blackboards, lack of comfortable seating, and lack of standardized textbooks limited the teacher’s ability to provide a quality education to children (Mondale & Patton, 2010).

**European Influence**

In order to strengthen his vision for education, Mann visited various European countries and conducted research on the systems in place that were deemed effective and produced positive results (Pulliam & Patten, 2013). At his own expense, he visited schools in England, Scotland, France, Germany, Prussia, Belgium, and Holland, but found particular interest in the Prussian due to their reputation providing academic excellence in their school system (Brickman, 2010). One of Mann’s most influential observations was the emphasis placed on the professional preparation of teachers,
teaching methods employed, and general attitude and demeanor of the Prussian teacher (Brickman, 2010).

Mann also noted how the Prussians were using a public schools as a platform to unify the German people (Peterson, 2010). Peterson (2010) also contested that “Mann saw the effectiveness of centralized institutions, a state-directed curriculum, statistical information, and professional cadres were being mobilized to create a unified national spirit, a common language, and an identity thought would transcend parochial loyalties” (p. 27). This philosophical view and the positive impression he gained on education in Prussia peaked his interest because of the lack of resources available at schools in Massachusetts and he viewed this as the foundation for beginning to establish a focus for building the Common School System (Pulliam & Patten, 2013).

As a result of his trips to European countries, Mann quickly began to implement structures in place to improve the unhealthy and dwindling school system he sought out to improve. In 1852, a Protestant dominant education was introduced in Massachusetts and teachers began to receive formal training at normal schools (Peterson, 2010). He also began to improve schools by recommending chairs with backs, a bell, a blackboard, and standardized textbooks, all of which served as the beginning stage of reforming education (Mondale & Patton, 2001). According to Mondale & Patton (2001), “Mann became one of the most influential writers of his time by publishing his victories which include creating state bureaus of education, strengthening teacher training, and providing free tax-supported education for many children in the northern states” (p.31).

**Mann’s Affiliation with the Whig Party.** As a member of the Whig Party, Mann aimed to create socially and religiously motivated public schools and believed that
common schools could prevent social ills from manifesting into greater problems (Groen, 2008). Mann was instrumental in gaining support for common schools through political affiliations in during the formative years of the movement (Groen, 2008). After being appointed secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education, he “entered office with religious fervor and saw his duty as given by God” (Groen, 2008, p.253). This later influenced his decisions on how religion, morality, and community affiliations would have on public schools (Warren, 2001; Groen, 2008).

**Mann’s View on Morality in Education.** Horace Mann was a strong advocate of using education to improve society and humanity and stressed the importance of teaching children to have strong values and morals (Warren, 2001; Brick, 2005). According to Brick (2005), “Mann was more concerned with environmental conditions in the formation of right behavior and believed that moral development and individual responsibility must be taught in schools” (p.170). Mann’s concept of equal educational opportunities emphasized two major goals, social harmony and maximum development of opportunity, and believed it was the job of educators and schools to teach these values within the school day (Brick, 2005). In a nutshell, he believed it was the duty of the school to teach morals, build character, and prepare students to have a positive influence on society (Baines, 2006).

**Teacher Training and Alternative Certification Pathways.** Ever since Mann visited European schools and favored the teacher training practices, he strived to implement rigorous teacher certification requirements and training for teachers at normal schools. Since his reign, states have created their own teacher education requirements for teachers, some more rigorous than others. For example, in order to obtain New York
State certification in Childhood Education in grades one through six, a candidate must meet the following requirements: (a) complete a bachelor’s degree in childhood education from an institution registered with the New York State Education Department; (b) pass the Academic Literacy Skills Test (ALST); (c) pass the Educating All Students Test (EAS); and (d) pass the Content Specialty Test (CST) in Multi-Subjects (New York State Education Department, 2015). In addition, prospective teachers must complete the six hour Dignity for ALL Student Act training course which covers topics such as harassment, bullying, discrimination, and ways of preventing these critical issues that problematic in some of today’s schools (New York State Education Department, 2015).

Over the past 30 or 40 years, colleges and The New York State Education Department have developed and promoted alternative pathways for obtaining teacher education certification, which is moving away from the high standards set forth by Mann (Peterson, 2010; Dotts, 2010). Organizations like Teach for America, Teacher Corps, and more recently The New York City Teaching Fellows are accepting candidates who have advanced degrees in fields other than education and no teaching experience (Pulliam & Patten, 2013). These “teachers” are provided with a few classes in theory and hands on experience working with children as they continue to meet their certification requirements (Copeland, 2009). The New York City Teaching Fellows Program in particular requires candidates to complete an intense summer session where they are enrolled in two education courses and complete in-services training in a New York City Public School alongside a certified teacher (New York City Teaching Fellows, 2015).

Although alternative teacher education programs have some success, opponents argue that teachers from alternative teacher education programs are contributing to the
hiring freeze in New York City and stripping away job opportunities from highly qualified candidates who have completed teacher education requirements for professional certification in their license area. As a result, graduates of traditional teacher education programs have difficulty finding job placement, have to accept jobs in other related fields until job opportunities are made available, have to pursue careers other than education, or have to pursue additional education in order to become certified in an area that does not have a hiring freeze such as special education, math, or science.

There is also some debate over teachers entering the profession through alternate pathways and their ability to live up to Mann’s original vision of educating “ALL” children (Brickman, 2005). With the increasing immigrant population, rising poverty level, increase in special education referrals of minority children, and increasing diversity in the school system, teachers of traditional teacher education programs find it challenging to effectively meet the needs of students and show academic growth as assessed by the Common Core Standards (CCLS) and New York State Common Core aligned reading and math exams. Therefore, who’s to say that teachers entering the profession through alternative programs are fully equipped with the tools, strategies, methodology, pedagogy, knowledge of curriculum, needed to address the needs of the rapidly changing student population?

**Religious Conflict.** Horace Mann stressed the importance of teaching religious values and morals, so the curriculum in the common schools Protestant based (Copeland, 2009; Peterson, 2010). This quickly led to opposition by Calvinists and other groups of people who did not share the same religious views. According to Pulliam an Patten (2013), “Calvinists fought Mann’s proposals to have schools teach what was common to
Protestant Creeds, the Bible read without comment, and teachers exemplifying Christianity by their lives. The Calvinists called Mann’s proposals godless skepticism that would lead youth to infidelity” (p. 278). Followers of the Calvinist Doctrine disagreed with Mann’s creation of schools being locally controlled and church dominated because the textbooks utilized did not reflect their beliefs and forced Protestant beliefs onto all children (Peterson, 2010).

The 1840’s also experienced an influx of European immigrants who were mostly poverty-stricken Irish Catholics hungry for educational opportunities (Mondale & Patton, 2001). As they entered the school system,

Irish Catholic children were being expected to attend schools where the King James Bible was read, where Protestant hymns were being sung, where prayers were being recited, but most importantly where textbooks and the entire slant of the teaching was very much anti-Irish and very much anti-Catholic (Mondale & Patton, 2001, pp. 31-32).

As a result of forcing opposing religious views on newly arrived immigrants, many families refused to send their children to public schools, which left children roaming the streets, entering the workforce at a younger age, and growing up lacking the education to become a functional member of society (Copeland, 2009; Groen, 2008). Furthermore, religious leaders like Bishop Hughes began debates advocating for Protestant civic leaders and the New York Public School Society to allocate funds to develop Catholic schools (Mondale & Patton, 2001).

**The Debate of Common Schools and School Choice.** One of the more controversial arguments against Mann’s vision for common schools is the ability to
educate all children, regardless of race, socio-economic status, and religious belief within the public school system from the perspective of middle-class families. According to Baines (2006), “Many parents did not want a level playing field; they did not want their children to go to school with children who look different or might have different beliefs; and they did not want the identities of their children threatened or amalgamated into a melting pot” (p. 271). Therefore, parents began to withdraw their children from public school and enroll them in private school at their own expense, thus creating a separation of class (Chieppo & Gass, 2009).

As school choice gained popularity among parents who felt public school did not meet their children’s educational needs, Mann began to recognize parent’s right to seek alternative education (Spradling, 2009). Catholic schools became a more suitable choice for the influx of European immigrants and for families who refused to send their children to public schools because of the Protestant dominant circular (Mondale & Patton, 2001). Parents and children were able to maintain their culture and beliefs knowing that God is a present and active in their creation and daily lives.

Since the early 1990’s, parents have extended their school choice and are taking advantage of independent and charters schools. Some parents favor the competition and innovation charter schools have the freedom to bring to the classroom. These families also gravitate to charter schools because some outperform their public school counterparts and typically have extended school days and an extended school year. For example, Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) in New York City is a middle school that educates a predominantly underprivileged population and has been successful at closing the achievement gap experienced by struggling students (Copeland, 2009). However,
they have greater autonomy in how money is spent and are able to recruit highly qualified teachers and pay them above the average pay scale (Copeland, 2009). In addition, charter schools are credited for developing a strong mission-based school culture, having curricular autonomy, and making strong decisions that lead to greater success than public schools (Spradling, 2009).

There is evidence of Horace Mann’s original vision at KIPP middle school in Harlem and other charter schools across the country. Most of the charter schools are located in communities with high poverty levels and a high minority population which establishes a diverse student population (Copeland, 2009). Therefore, the demographics in aligned to Mann’s idea of educating all children to reach a common level of academic success. Charter schools are also portrayed in varying communities as being schools that promote high, not just a common, level of academic achievement for all learners like Mann did in the 1800’s (Copeland, 2009).

**Horace Mann’s School in the Twentieth Century.** Mann’s educational philosophy has also been alive and thriving at the Horace Mann School in New York City for over seventy years. According to the school’s mission statement:

Horace Mann School prepares a diverse community of students to lead great and giving lives. We strive to maintain a safe, secure, and caring environment in which mutual respect, mature behavior, and the life of the mind can thrive. We recognize and celebrate individual achievement and contributions to the common good. (Horace Mann School, 2015)

In addition, the school emphasizes core principles such as: The Life of Mind, mature behavior, mutual respect, a secure and healthful environment, and a balance
between individual achievement and a caring community. These five values all have a connection to moral education being key in producing productive members of the community, which Mann also promoted (Brick, 2005).

Horace Mann's philosophy and dedication to establishing public schools in the 1800's is still thriving in today's society. Although Catholic, independent, private, and charter schools are becoming increasingly more popular, public school education remains the form of education in The United States. It is going to be interesting seeing where his philosophical views fit into education and society as the twentieth century progresses.
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