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Prussian Volksschulen *through American Eyes: Two Perspectives on Curriculum and Teaching from the 1890s*

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German knowledge of American schools remained very limited throughout most of the nineteenth century. The reverse was true for American scholars during this period, many of whom expressed growing interest in German education through their studies at Germany's renowned universities in Berlin, Jena, Heidelberg, and Göttingen.[1] Although the German university tradition still held the respect of many American educators crossing the Atlantic, an increasing number of American school people turned their attention to German methods of teaching, school structure, teacher education, and the curriculum in elementary and secondary schools.

German schools aroused the curiosity of American educators long before the unification of Germany in 1871. Horace Mann, an American champion of the common school, published in 1846 one of the first assessments of the Prussian school system to appear in the United States. His conclusions reflected the great American idealistic faith in the power of republican government to form free and democratic schools. Mann's faith in American education was strong enough for him to proclaim that Americans "do not desire to copy or study the systems of foreign nations, usually so different from our own; we hope rather that they will study and copy ours."[2]

There were those educators in a succeeding generation who would not share Mann's idealism concerning the ability of American schools to educate a democratic citizenry. Like Mann, these writers saw meaningful possibilities in studying the schools of Germany as a way of opening a new discussion on the reform of American education. However, by the 1890s, some fifty years after the appearance of Mann's *Report,* new and disturbing

1. Dietrich Goldschmidt, "Transatlantic Influences: History of Mutual Interactions between American and German Education," in *Between Elite and Mass Education: Education in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Albany, 1979,) 1–65.
2. Horace Mann, *Report of an Educational Tour in Germany, and Parts of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1846), 7–9, 70–1.

questions were being raised about the form and function of the American school curriculum. The arrival of millions of new immigrants to the shores of the United States, the breakneck pace of urbanization, and the dazzling array of technological changes wrought by such devices as the telephone, the railroad, and the printing of mass circulation newspapers toward the end of the nineteenth century resulted in a social transformation hitherto unwitnessed in American history. These profound changes in American life would ultimately influence the national dialogue on the role of schooling in American society in a world that was already decidedly different from that experienced by Horace Mann and the fledgling common school in an earlier age.[3]

The late nineteenth century witnessed another set of changes on the international scene that, combined with a sense of instability about developments in the United States, urged educators to emulate certain aspects of German schools. The years following the political unification of Germany in 1871 and the establishment of the Second Reich affirmed Germany's growing economic prowess in international markets. Germany's success in world trade drew the attention of American educational reformers, some of whom saw in the German tradition of technical schools and the finely tuned apprenticeship system the foundation for German economic achievement and an attractive model for the besieged American school system.

The National Association of Manufacturers, founded in 1896, established a Standing Committee on Education that worked on a long-term public relations campaign to persuade American educators to emphasize German-inspired technical training. The committee feared that America might fail in its competition with Germany over world markets. Its president, Theodore Search, announced that a newly formed school curriculum was needed to give us "skilled hands and trained minds for the conduct of our industries and our commerce."[4]

That American schools were simply out of touch with the new world of international economic competition and vocationalism was an assumption that motivated the publication of two relatively obscure studies of German schools by Americans during the 1890s. Their perceptions of curriculum and teaching in German public schools were part of an unending debate

3. For an examination of the underlying philosophical conflicts relating to the formation of the American school curriculum since the 1890s, see Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958* (London, 1987), 1–29.

4. "Resolutions Regarding Technical Education," *Proceedings Regarding the Second Annual Convention of the National Association of Manufacturers*, 92–3; Theodore Search, [President's Annual Report]. *Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the National Association of Manufacturers*, 3–32.

concerning the propriety of transferring school practices from one culture to another.[5]

Andrew Draper, Superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of New York, instructed James Russell Parsons, formerly the school commissioner for Rensselaer County in New York from 1885 to 1888, to examine Prussian elementary schools to "enable us to see more clearly the strong points and discern the weak points of our own [school] system."[6] The assignment appeared daunting to Parsons since he was appointed at the same time to Aachen as United States consul and, moreover, arrived without any prior direct experience with Prussian schools.[7] The findings from Parsons's report, *Prussian Schools through American Eyes,* were eventually transmitted to the New York State legislature on January 6, 1891, and by Draper's direction were to "reach all interested in the educational progress of the State."[8]

The second study, appearing in 1892, was commissioned by the Massachusetts board of education, the body formerly headed by Horace Mann. John Tilden Prince (1844–1916), the director of the study, brought to the position a publishing background with Ginn and Company in American curriculum and teaching methods. In the years following his survey on methods of instruction in Prussian schools in 1892, Prince's writings on education addressed a broad range of topics including school administration, reformatory schools for delinquents, and industrial training.[9]

5. The failure of American educators to transfer essential elements of the social studies curriculum from the United States to Germany after the fall of the Third Reich, ostensibly to facilitate the democratization of postwar German schools, is examined in Gregory Wegner, "The Power of Tradition in Education: The Formation of the History Curriculum in the *Gymnasium* of Berlin (U.S. Sector), 1945–1955" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1988).
6. James Parsons, *Prussian Schools Through American Eyes* (Syracuse, 1891), iii.
7. Prussia, in the usage of Parsons's study, will refer to the unified nation of Germany, established as the Second Reich in 1871 and divided into fourteen provinces, including East Prussia and West Prussia. The terms "Germany" and "Prussia" will be used interchangeably in this essay unless they refer to the separate province of Prussia before the unification of 1871.
8. The apparent optimism that accompanied Draper's initiation of *Prussian Schools Through American Eyes* under Parsons's hand was evident in the following introduction:
   To make them of the greatest value to us, foreign school system must be seen through American eyes, and must be described by an intelligent friend of our school system, who is so anxious for its improvement that he is willing to seize upon anything which will improve it, no matter where he may find it, and yet who has the power of discriminating sufficiently to enable him to see not only what is good; but to determine what is practicable and advisable in this country. (See Parsons, *Prussian Schools,* iii.)
9. John Prince, *Course and Methods: A Handbook for Teachers of Primary, Grammar and Ungraded Schools* (Boston, 1886). The book also appeared in four subsequent editions in 1888, 1892, 1895, and 1896. Among his other works completed after the publication of *Methods of Instruction of the Schools of Germany for the Use of American Teachers and Normal Schools* (Boston, 1892) was *Arithmetic by Grades for Inductive Teaching* (Boston, 1893–4), which was eventually expanded into a five-volume series.

The writings of Parsons and Prince, like those of their predecessor, Horace Mann, looked across the Atlantic to assess what German school traditions might enhance American education. The two men, writing during a period of increasing concern about the purposes of schooling in the republic, reflected enthusiastic support for the German school model. Those searching for a penetrating critique of the *Volksschule* would do well to look elsewhere.[10] As the two studies soon reveal, the search for what was admirable in German schools meant that the school traditions and practices of the young American democracy would come under the severest scrutiny.

The strongest similarities between the writings of Parsons and Prince concerned German educational policies they felt to be most appropriate for adoption by American elementary schools. Among the issues the two authors examined were compulsory school attendance, teacher education, centralized school administration, a nationalized curriculum, and manual training. It is the purpose of this essay to examine how Parsons and Prince articulated these five German elementary school traditions for what they believed were necessary elements in a thorough reform of American primary schooling.[11]

THE STRENGTHS OF GERMAN SCHOOLS: A CASE FOR POSSIBLE CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSFER OF SCHOOL PRACTICES

Parsons and Prince strongly supported the German compulsory school attendance laws for children aged six through fourteen but differed on the means of administering such laws. Unlike Parsons, Prince seriously ques-

He also published *A Practical English Grammar for Upper Grades* (Boston, 1910); *School Administration Including the Organization and Supervision of Schools* (Syracuse, New York, 1906); *Report upon Schools for the Deaf and Blind, Reformatory School for Boys and Girls: School for the Feeble-Minded and County Truant Schools* (Boston, 1906); and *Report on Educational Conditions, School Incentives, Time Limits and School Sessions, Industrial Training, Special Classes for Delinquents and Defectives* (Boston, 1907).

10. Douglas Skopp, "The Elementary School Teachers in Revolt: Reform Proposals for Germany's *Volksschulen* in 1848 and 1849," *History of Education Quarterly* 22 (Fall 1982): 341–1.

11. Similar to the Massachusetts report published by John Prince, James Parsons's work, *Prussian Schools Through American Eyes,* relied upon a small collection of official school sources for statistical information and other factual data on school structure, curriculum, teaching, and a variety of other German school traditions. Parsons drew heavily from Giebe's *Verordnungen betreffend das gesammte Volksschulwesen in Preussen* (1882, 1884, and 1887 editions) and *Preussische Statistik 101.* Prince also relied on these two sources but also used Kockle's *Lehrplan fuer die einfachen Volksschulen des Koenigreiches Sachsen, Dresden* (1890); A. Richter, *Paedagogischer Jahresbericht* (1899); and R. Goetz, *Gesetz ueber die Gymnasium, Realschulen und Seminare* (Leipzig, 1877). Abridged versions of the concluding chapter from Prince's study can be found in *Atlantic Monthly* 66 (September 1890): 413–19 and *Educational Review* 2 (October 1891): 231–7.

tioned whether America could "adopt the same rigorous policy of coercion which Germany enforces with her strong military spirit and her complete state police system." The New Englander stood behind compulsory attendance laws primarily because they safeguarded the republic against "the dangers of an ignorant citizenship" and "the evils of illiteracy."[12] The call for uniformity in school attendance laws and the forty-week school year based on the Prussian model were at the heart of Parsons's reform plan for American schools. Without this change in elementary education, Parsons insisted, American pupils "could not compete with the children of the average school district in Prussia."[13]

The prospects for reforming American education appeared even bleaker when Parsons and Prince addressed the daunting challenge of reforming teacher education. On this issue, above all others, the two men expressed the strongest agreement. Using figures gathered from the U.S. Commissioner of Education from 1886 to 1887, Prince estimated that as many as three-fourths of all teachers in America entered their work "without the slightest theoretical knowledge of the science or art of teaching." Since only about 25 percent of teaching candidates completed normal school studies, Prince castigated the American public for its toleration of widespread mediocrity among an "army of novices." This regrettable group, he wrote, caused an enormous waste of money and brought irreparable injury to children through their "experiments and mistakes" in the classroom.[14]

These two reformers left no doubt in the minds of their readers which Western nation provided the best model for the professionalization of American teachers. Parsons and Prince dutifully recorded the rigorous German tradition of the three-year normal school for prospective elementary teachers. Once having passed the first teacher examination, the candidate practiced as an assistant teacher for at least two years under the direction

12. Parsons, *Prussian Schools,* 2–4; Prince, *Methods of Instruction,* 226.
13. Parsons, *Prussian Schools,* 3–4.
14. Prince, *Methods of Instruction,* 219–20. Note also that at about this time, Joseph Mayer Rice, a former medical doctor, became one of the first persons to enter the arena of educational reform through investigative journalism. After studying pedagogy in German universities in 1888, Rice returned to the United States, where he eventually visited schools in over thirty American cities. What he witnessed in these extensive classroom observations led to a scathing attack on the American school system in a series of articles published in *The Forum* (1892–3). Rice directed his strongest condemnations against the inadequate state of teachers preparation, the unqualified people sitting on school boards, and school superintendents who were out of touch with the realities of school life – some of the same themes sounded by Parsons and Prince. His writings drew enraged reactions from school administrators and teachers. See Joseph Rice, "The Public School Systems of Chicago and St. Paul," *The Forum* 15 (1893): 200–15; Rice, *The Public School System of the United States* (New York, 1893), 12–58.

Table 1. *Course of study for the German normal school*

Classes	Years		
	One	Two	Three
Pedagogics	2	2	3
Religion	4	4	2
Language	5	5	2
History	2	2	2
Arithmetic	3	3	1
Geometry	2	2	1
Natural history	4	4	2
Geography	2	2	1
Drawing	2	2	1
Writing	2	1	0
Gymnastics	2	2	2
Music	5	5	3
Foreign languages	3	3	2
	38	37	22

Source: James Parsons, *Prussian Schools Through American Eyes* (Boston, 1891), 56.

of a master teacher.[15] Only then did the candidate take his second and final examination.

The teacher education curriculum for the German normal school included a broad array of courses (see Table 1). Parsons reprinted the official syllabi for all normal school courses, which showed that, in contrast to their American counterparts, the German candidates competing for teaching positions in the *Volksschule* took more courses and spent more time in the normal school. American teachers in rural areas often prepared for their careers without normal school training, and those few who had such training usually attended for a year at most.[16] Inspired by German educational tradition, Parsons and Prince called for higher admissions standards for candidates entering the American normal school, and for a three-year program and graduation for all elementary teachers.[17]

15. Parsons, *Prussian Schools,* 5, 55–63; Prince, *Methods of Instruction,* 35–43.
16. Andrew Gulliford, *Country School Legacy* (Washington, D.C., 1982), 92–106.
17. Parsons, *Prussian Schools,* 52–6; Prince, *Methods of Instruction,* 220–1. Some of Prince's assumptions about the relative independence of the German school teacher were not wholly accurate. In an especially idealistic portrait of the Prussian school master meant to highlight the weaknesses of the American teaching profession, Prince praised the pedagogues of the Second Reich for their ability to virtually shape public opinion on matters of educational policy through the press and their political influence with the government. The German teacher, he said, "does not take his cue from anybody," especially "fledgling members of school boards," in the initiation of school reform (229). Prince failed to recognize that it was the *Gymnasium* teacher, not the *Volksschullehrer,* who even

Just how far American educators should go in imitating the curriculum of the German normal school was an entirely different and exceedingly complicated matter left unaddressed by Parsons and Prince.[18] Moreover, Prince took the position that public school teaching in America could not be called a profession in its present state unless standards were raised to the level of the German model. Again, neither Prince nor Parsons commented on the cultural transformations necessary in American society to realize these changes. Unlike Parsons, Prince even advocated the use of state force if there was an unwillingness in America to reach teaching standards as high as those in Germany.[19]

As before, the representative of the Massachusetts board of education was much more adamant than Parsons in his insistence that Germany alone provided the best model for the reform of American school administration and teaching. The criticism and direction of teaching methods, he wrote, must follow the German tradition of professionalism under a set of uniform standards administered under the auspices of the state. In remaining consistent with his earlier approaches, Prince declined to specify in detail what these standards should be other than abolishing the popular election of school superintendents.[20]

The push for centralization extended to the formation of the elementary school curriculum. After denouncing the power and independence of America's local school boards to determine textbook selection and the direction for courses of study, Parsons and Prince countered with a Prussian-style bureaucratic model designed to secure a nationalized curriculum.[21] The course of study defined for the *Volksschule* provided that desired conformity (see Table 2).

The two Americans praised the German curriculum in manual training for the middle and advanced classes and the continuation schools in voca-

came close to approximating this idealization. The German elementary school teacher did not enjoy the relatively high status given the teachers of the elite *Gymansia,* who exercised much of their influence through their professional associations. See Konrad Jarausch, "The Crisis of German Professions, 1918–1933," *Journal of Contemporary History* 20 (1985): 379–8.

18. One readily notes, for example, the important place of religious instruction in the first and second years of study, with the weekly number of course hours (four) exceeded only by those devoted to natural history, music, and language. The church–state relationship reflected in the German historical tradition of schooling and public finance was of an entirely different nature in the United States, where strict separation of church and state remained a centerpiece of American constitutional tradition. Religion as a school subject for future pedagogues was therefore alien territory for the American educational establishment.
19. Prince, *Methods of Instruction,* 220–1.
20. Prince, *Methods of Instruction,* 226–7.
21. Part of John Prince's critique of American schools has a contemporary ring. The local school board, wrote Prince, "is made up of men who can, it may be, run a farm or factory, but who have no special fitness to direct teachers in respect to subjects of study." See *Methods of Instruction,* 223.

Table 2. *Course of study for the Volkschule*

Course	Lowest class	Middle class	Advanced class
Religion	4	5	5
Language	11	10	8
Arithmetic	4	4	4
Geometry	0	0	1
Drawing	0	1	2
Realien (geography, history, natural science)	0	6	6
Music	1	2	2
Gymnastics (manual training)	0	2	2
	20	30	30

Note: The lowest class included the first two years, the middle class the following three, and the highest class the remaining years. Children first entering school had to receive six months of practice in reading and writing the German script. See source note, 32.
Source: James Parsons, *Prussian Schools Through American Eyes* (Syracuse, 1891), 32.

tional education. Prince was particularly taken with the manual training traditions established in Leipzig and Berlin. Parsons extended his purview to include industrial training courses for girls. He noted that the courses were practical, thorough, and inexpensive. The young charges learned "only plain household work" fitting them for domestic life. Parsons recommended that a similar course be introduced in New York elementary schools.[22]

Other age-old German curricular traditions caught the attention of the observers. One of these concerned the practice of promoting love of the fatherland through music, geography, history, and language. Prince remained cautious on this issue, fearing that the traditional Prussian cultural relationships between the individual, the state, and the military would be disastrous if transferred to the fledgling American democracy. This, however, contradicted his earlier advocacy of force in raising the standards of teacher education.[23] Instead, Prince asked for exemplary teaching methods in the teaching of arithmetic and geography. He admired the German emphasis on the use of illustrative lessons and mental arithmetic in teaching primary mathematics. He was even more enthusiastic about the pedagogical features of geography instruction, even though he admitted that geography, like history, too often centered on things German, to the exclusion of a

22. Prince, *Methods of Instruction,* 59–67; Parsons, *Prussian Schools,* 18, 36.
23. Prince, *Methods of Instruction,* 221.

world view.[24] Nonetheless, Prince insisted that American geography instructors apply some of the eternal principles of good teaching:

1. The teacher had a definite plan and followed it.
2. There was a constant association of ideas.
3. Pupils made inferences from known causes.
4. The teacher relied on constant repetition in classroom lessons.
5. Pupils expressed themselves fully and accurately.
6. The teacher exhibited great patience with pupils.[25]

Most of these teaching methods were part of the teaching tradition established in the Herbartian schools, which Prince also observed. Just how much of the Herbartian curricular philosophy could be successfully integrated into American schools was an issue on which Prince remained silent. The vast majority of German and American elementary schools in the 1890s still used the dominant method of recitation, a method that neither Prince nor Parsons openly criticized.[26]

Parsons, in sharp contrast to Prince, assigned a vigorous role to patriotism in breathing new life into the school curriculum. He cited the long German school tradition of teaching patriotic songs to "awaken love toward the Fatherland" in music classes, geography, and history. The latter two subjects were apparently devoid of meaning in the minds of many American pupils, and there was no subject in our public schools "so imperfectly taught," Parsons insisted, as U.S. history. By contrast, he continued:

> In Prussian schools the utmost pains are taken to foster the spirit of patriotism. The law requires that a likeness of the Emperor be placed in each school-room. Courses of study improve every opportunity to call attention to the importance of cultivating a national spirit. From the cradle, the Prussian child learns the national songs.[27]

CONCLUSION

The reports of John Prince and James Parsons represent a curious legacy. The powerful and growing economic influence of Germany during the late nineteenth century provided the pretext and justification for Massachusetts and New York to commission the ambitious projects studying Prussian elementary teachers and their curriculum.

24. Prince, *Methods of Instruction*, 132–8.
25. Prince, *Methods of Instruction*, 139.
26. Prince, *Methods of Instruction*, 183–204.
27. Parsons, *Prussian Schools*, 19.

Collectively, the reports had just as much to say about what was wrong with American schools as what was right and admirable about Prussian schools. On the equally important problem of the weaknesses of German elementary schools, Parsons and Prince were much less concerned. Beyond castigating Prussian school authorities for requiring pupils to study the written and printed characters of the German script and for dark and overcrowded classrooms, Parsons said little else about the potential drawbacks of the German elementary school.[28] For Prince, a serious philosophical problem rooted in German culture remained unresolved. He concluded that Prussian schoolmasters imposed exceedingly harsh discipline through the severest means. In reforming this excess, he suggested that German educators could learn wisdom from American pedagogy, although he did not mention what educational thinkers could be tapped for this purpose. This could only happen, Prince added, when conditions no longer compelled Germans to train their children for war. The Massachusetts native, one will recall, was also the person who advocated the stern use of state force if American teacher education institutions refused to adopt standards at least as high as those in Prussia. Given his uncompromising aspiration, he was to be bitterly disappointed.[29]

On one level, a derivative of the German school legacy was to find fulfillment. Support for the German model of industrial education and vocational instruction would grow among circles of American educators and businesspeople, leading to the passage of the landmark Smith–Hughes Act in 1917. Several subsequent American studies of Prussian schools affirmed the serious consideration given by Americans to the German model of industrial education and apprenticeship programs.[30] The Smith–Hughes Act, which legitimized vocational education in American public schools with federal funds, drew from the spirit of Prussian traditions in industrial training so highly praised by John Prince and James Parsons. By the time the sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd completed their notable study on schooling in *Middletown* in 1929, vocational education had become a central part of the American school curriculum.[31]

By its very nature, the cultural rootedness of schooling calls into question

28. Parsons, *Prussian Schools,* 13–15, 26–7.
29. Prince, *Methods of Instruction,* 236–7.
30. T. W. Gosling, "Annual Report for 1915–1916 of the Superintendent of Schools of Cincinnati," 248–9; U.S. Bureau of Education, "Industrial Schools in Germany," *The Pedagogical Seminary* 19 (1912): 112–15; L. R. Klemm, *Public Education in Germany and in the United States* (Boston, 1911), 106–9;
31. Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York, 1929), 46–58.

the advisability of transferring elements from one nation to another. During the years leading up to World War I, John Dewey sounded a note of caution among his contemporaries concerning the German model of vocational education. He insisted that German education be viewed within its unique historical context. Education in Germany became closely associated with the ideal of the national state, a relationship addressed generations before through the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, and Fichte. Subsequently, the social aim of education for "human welfare and progress," central to Dewey's ideal in school and society, was never realized in Germany because of the political subordination of the individual to the state and a heightened nationalism.[32]

The dilemma of emulating school traditions from abroad for the purposes of national advancement was not unique to the generation of Parsons and Prince. In a subsequent period of history, the German–American interaction over school reform resurfaced in an order reversed from the focus of studies completed by the two writers. Events following the fall of the Third Reich in 1945 revealed that Dewey's apprehension over the transference of school practices from one nation to another still remained unheeded when American educators came to Germany with ideas on reforming German schools with a democratic idealism once inspired by Horace Mann.

32. John Dewey, "A Policy of Industrial Education," *New Republic* 1 (1916): 11–12.