The History of American Education
A Great American Experiment

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Education in Colonial America

New England Colonies
- Tradition of government and religious involvement and support.
- Two-track system of education: universal elementary, secondary only for those preparing for positions of leadership in the church or government.
- Elementary education: town schools, dame schools, reading and writing schools, apprentice system, charity schools. Concerned mainly with three Rs. Used material that was religious and authoritarian in nature.
- Secondary education: Latin grammar schools that taught the classical curriculum, and academies and private venture schools that taught subjects useful in trade and commerce.
- Colleges: Harvard (1636), Yale (1701), Brown (1764), Dartmouth (1769).

Mid-Atlantic Colonies
- Pattern of pluralistic, parochial schools, with no government support.
- Somewhat limited elementary education: schools operated primarily by various denominations.
- Colleges: Princeton (1746), Pennsylvania (1753), Columbia (1754), Rutgers (1766).

Southern Colonies
- Educational opportunity determined almost exclusively by social class. Elementary education for other than upper class was provided through apprentice system, endowed free schools, denomination schools, "old field schools", and private venture schools.
- Children of upper class attended exclusive private schools or had private tutors.
- Secondary education was available primarily to children of the wealthy through private schools or tutors, Latin grammar schools, or schooling outside the colonies. A few private venture schools operated in the large cities.
- College: William and Mary (1693).

FIGURE 3.5 Education in Colonial America.

Education During the Later Colonial Period

Impact of the Enlightenment
The Age of the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, that swept the Western world in the 17th century had found its way to the shores of the American colonies by the 18th century. As in Europe, it brought greater concern for independent rationality, an examination of all beliefs, repudiation of supernatural explanations of phenomena,
and a greater questioning of traditional religious dogma. Philosophers, scientists, and scholars of the period believed that observation and scientific inquiry were the avenues to the discovery of the “natural laws” that dictated the orderly operation of the universe. The Enlightenment was a period of rapid expansion of the knowledge base in the natural and physical sciences, mathematics, and engineering: Newton proposed his theory of gravity, Leeuwenhoek identified bacteria, the first inoculation against smallpox was given, and the first suspension and iron bridges were built. It also spawned the invention of the first steam engine, water turbine, power loom, cotton gin, and many other machines and processes that made the Industrial Revolution possible.

Enlightenment philosophers argued that the natural laws that governed nature also imbued man with certain rights that existed in nature before men entered civil society. Their rational examination of all beliefs led them to reject the authority of the church and the absolute rights of monarch. They believed not only in the right of the people to govern themselves but also in their ability to do so. They considered education an instrument of social reform and improvement—a belief shared by not only the Founding Fathers, but all generations of Americans since.

One of the important philosophers of the Enlightenment was the English philosopher John Locke. Locke is best known for his political theories, which served as the basis for the American and French constitutions. However, he also had a profound influence on education. As discussed in chapter 1, Locke is associated with the school of thought called sense realism and favored the inductive and scientific method, which proposes that man learns best through sensory experiences. In Some Thoughts Concerning Education, Locke recommended a curriculum that included, beyond the three Rs, history, geography, ethics, philosophy, science, and conversational foreign languages, especially French. Mathematics was also emphasized, not to make the scholar a mathematician, but to make him a reasonable man. The curriculum Locke recommended anticipated that of the academy described in the next section. As evidenced in the writings of the Founding Fathers on which he had such an influence, Locke believed the goal of education was to create the moral, practical individual who could participate effectively in the governing process.

Locke’s political philosophy, in keeping with his respect for the lessons of science, proposed that there were inherent laws of nature and that associated with these natural laws man had certain natural rights. These natural rights came from God or nature, not from rulers or governments. Among these rights, according to Locke, were those espoused in the Declaration of Independence—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

A century later, another philosopher who is best remembered for his political theories, but who also had a profound effect on educational theory, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, continued to advance the natural law argument. Rousseau is associated with an educational movement called naturalism. Its emphasis on freedom and the individual has had a significant influence on educational theory and practice. His book Social Contract had a major influence on the thinking of those involved in both the French and American revolutions.
Impact of Social and Economic Changes on Education

At the same time that the philosophy of the Enlightenment was sweeping the colonies, the population of the colonies was increasing rapidly and its economy outgrowing its localized base of farming and fishing. Transportation and communication improved, trade and commerce increased, and cities and towns flourished. The application of the concept of natural laws to economics and capitalism (e.g., the ownership of property and the profit motive) was associated with the emergence of a new mercantile gentry and a growing middle class.

The growth in trade and commerce placed new demands on education. For example, the ship owners of New England needed navigators to chart courses for their ships, surveyors were needed to lay out the lands of the expanding frontier, and bookkeepers and scribes were needed to keep the accounts and records of ever larger businesses and agricultural enterprises. At the same time, the budding city life supported by increased affluence and leisure time created demands for the “arts of polite society” (Cohen, 1974a, p. xvii).

The classical curriculum of the Latin grammar school was not prepared to meet these needs. As a result, during the first half of the 18th century numerous private venture schools, the so-called “English schools,” sprang up in the larger towns, teaching subjects useful in trade and commerce (as well as the classical languages for those who wanted them). The newspapers of the time were filled with advertisements for these schools. One such advertisement, appearing in 1723, read as follows:

There is a school in New York, in the Broad Street, near the Exchange, where Mr. John Walton, late of Yale College, Teacheth Reading, Writing, Arithmetick, whole Numbers and Fractions, Vulgar and Decimal, The Mariners Art, Plain and Mercators Way; Also Geometry, Surveying, the Latin Tongue, the Greek and Hebrew Grammers, Ethics, Rhetorick, Logick, Natural Philosophy and Metaphysicks, all or any of them for a Reasonable Price. The School from the first of October till the first of March will be tended in the Evening. If any Gentlemen in the Country are disposed to send their Sons to the said School, if they apply themselves to the Master he will immediately procure suitable Entertainment for them, very Cheap. Also if any Young Gentlemen of the City will please to come in the Evening and make some Tryal of the Liberal Arts, they may have the opportunity of Learning the same things which are commonly Taught in Colledges. (American Weekly Mercury, cited in Cabot, 1934, p. 83)

The private venture schools were operated by ministers, teachers, enterprising tradesmen or craftsmen, or dames who set up their own shops and charged what the traffic would bear to whomever could afford to pay for it (Kraushaar, 1976). Day schools, evening schools, early morning schools, even correspondence schools offered group or tutorial instruction (Cohen, 1974a). Girls were allowed to attend the English schools but often had to attend in separate classes. The private venture or English schools served an important role in the transfer of vocational education from the family and apprenticeships to the school (Cohen, 1974a).
Rise of the Academy

Although the private venture or English schools played an important role as providers of education in colonial America, their role was not permanent. Rather, they served as a transition between the grammar school and the academy. Academies as educational institutions in the colonies began to emerge in the mid-18th century. One of the earliest and strongest supporters of the academy was Benjamin Franklin. Franklin believed that "the rigid classical curriculum had degenerated into a shibboleth of the learned class and that the grammar school, whose chief beneficiaries were the ministry, the scholar, and the gentleman, was an anachronism" (Kraushaar, 1976, p. 19).

Franklin was strongly influenced by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, particularly that of John Locke, and was a proponent of a practical education to prepare the skilled craftsmen, businessmen, and farmers needed in the colonies. In his 1747 Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania, Franklin laid out the plan for an academy in which English rather than Latin was to be the medium of instruction. This break with tradition was important because it proposed, in effect, that vernacular English could be the language of the educated person. Also breaking with tradition, Franklin made no provision for religious instruction other than for a course in the history of religion. He proposed that students be taught "those Things that are likely to be most useful and most ornamental. Regard being had to the several Professions which they are intended."

From this statement of principle Franklin went on to detail what should be the specific subject matter of the academy:

All should be taught "to write a fair hand" and "something of drawing"; arithmetic, accounts, geometry, and astronomy; English grammar out of Tillotson, Addison, Pope, Sidney, Trenchard, and Gordon; the writing of essays and letters; rhetoric, history, geography, and ethics; natural history and gardening; and the history of commerce and principles of mechanics. Instruction should include visits to neighboring farms, opportunities for natural observations, experiments with scientific apparatus, and physical exercise. And the whole should be suffused with a quest for benignity of mind, which Franklin saw as the foundation of good breeding and a spirit of service, which he regarded as "the great aim and end of all learning." (Cremin, 1970, p. 7)

For Your Reflection and Analysis

Would Franklin consider today's service learning requirements to fulfill this "great aim"?

In 1751, with the support of several wealthy Philadelphians, Franklin's academy opened. Very soon it became clear that Franklin's vision for the school was not to be realized. Although he had believed that Latin and Greek were useless for all but a very limited number of pursuits, he had included them in the curriculum for those who might want them. However, the person hired to head the academy, the Anglican minister, Reverend William Smith, was an avowed classicist who favored the classical masters over the English masters. For example, the Latin master was paid £200 per year to
teach 20 students, whereas the English master was paid £100 to teach 40 students. And, while the Latin master was given £100 to spend on books and maps, the English master was given nothing (Blinderman, 1976). As time passed, Franklin’s academy gave less emphasis to the practical studies and came to more closely resemble the Latin grammar school. In 1753 it was rechartered as the College, Academy, and Charitable School of Philadelphia.

Although Franklin’s academy did not survive as he intended, others, such as Phillips Andover Academy founded in 1778, did. As will be discussed in chapter 4, from its beginnings in New England, the academy movement spread west and south and became the primary provider of secondary education prior to the Civil War.

Expansion of Higher Education

Until 1747 there were only three colleges in the colonies—Harvard, Yale, and William and Mary. Then, the Great Awakening of religious fervor that swept the colonies in the mid-18th century brought with it an increased sectarianism that resulted in every religious sect wanting to establish its own college. By the beginning of the Revolutionary War nearly every major Christian sect had established its own institution of higher education: the New-Side Presbyterians founded Princeton; Dutch Reformed revivalists founded Rutgers; Baptist revivalists founded Brown; and the Anglicans and Presbyterians cooperated in the founding of Kings College (Columbia) and the College of Pennsylvania (Boorstin, 1958). In 1769 Dartmouth College was established by a Congregational minister, Eleazer Wheelock, as a college for Native Americans. According to its charter, Dartmouth was to educate the “youth of the Indian tribes in this land in reading, writing, and all parts of learning which shall appear necessary and expedient for civilizing and Christianizing the Children of gajens, as well as in all liberal arts and sciences.” On a per capita basis the nine colonial colleges represented a much greater dispersion of higher education than was to be found in England, where higher education was reserved for the privileged few (Cohen, 1974a).

In the period from 1717 to 1747 about 1,400 people graduated from the colonial colleges; in the next 30 years more than twice that number graduated. About half of these had matriculated from the newly founded colleges. However, even though each new college had been founded by a particular denomination, and the president was a member of that denomination, few places had enough college-bound youth of a particular denomination to compose an entire student body. The student bodies of these colleges, therefore, were interdenominational (Boorstin, 1958).

The curriculum of many of the colleges of this era began to reflect the growing secularism of the society. In 1722 Harvard established its first professorship in the secular subjects of mathematics and natural philosophy. By 1760 the scientific subjects accounted for 20% of the curriculum. Another sign of the growing secularism was the change in graduates’ careers. Although theology remained the most popular career, an increasing number of graduates were turning to law, medicine, trade, and commerce as the New England colleges became centers of independence, stimulation, and social usefulness (Cohen, 1974b).
The Colonial Schoolmaster

In colonial America teachers ranged from the widows or housewives in dame schools to college-educated masters in the grammar schools. Most teachers were men who were not intending to make teaching a career. Often they were young men who taught for only a short time before studying for the ministry or were established clergy men needing to supplement their income. Unfortunately, then as now, some individuals taught because they either were not admitted to or had failed at their chosen professions. Given the strong relationship between church and education, more often than not teachers were chosen more for their religious orthodoxy than their educational qualifications. The criteria for the licensing of teachers outlined in the Massachusetts Act of 1654 clearly demonstrate that religious, not professional, qualification was the primary consideration in the hiring of a teacher.

Forasmuch as it greatly concerns the welfare of this countrie that the youth thereof be educated, not only in good literature, but sound doctrine, this Court doth therefore commend it to the serious consideration and special care of the Overseers of the collledge and the selectmen in the several townes, not to admit or suffer any such to be constipewed in the office or place of teaching, educating, or instructing of youth or child in the collledge or schools that have manifested themselves unsound in the faith or scandalous in their lives, and not giving due satisfaction according to the rules of Christ.

For Your Reflection and Analysis

Should teachers today be held to a higher standard of moral conduct than other members of the community?

Colonial teachers at the secondary level were often viewed as assistant pastors and in addition to their teaching duties were expected to perform various duties related to the functioning of the church, including such things as ringing the bell for worship, leading the choir, leading prayers, or filling in for the pastor in his absence. Typical of the teaching duties expected of the grammar school master were those detailed by the town of Dorchester in 1645 and presented in Figure 3.6.

It was not uncommon in colonial America to find teachers who were indentured servants—persons who had sold their services for a period of years in exchange for passage to the New World. Many of these indentured servant teachers, especially during the 18th century, were Irish schoolmasters. Indeed, a large number of nonindentured Irish schoolmasters came to the colonies after the passage in Ireland of the Laws for the Suppression of Popery, commonly known as the Penal Laws. The Penal Laws of 1695 forbade any Catholic from teaching school upon penalty of fine or imprisonment. Many of the Irish teachers were graduates of prestigious Trinity College in Dublin. They were generally the younger sons of well-to-do families who, unable to obtain suitable employment at home, “sought the congenial employment of teaching for which there was a demand in the various American communities” (Houston, cited in O’Brien, 1917, p. 54). In some colonies, especially Pennsylvania and New York, the provision of education was almost totally dependent on the immigrant Irish schoolmasters (O’Brien, 1917).
"First. That the schoolmaster shall diligently attend his school and do his utmost endeavor for benefiting his scholars according to his best discretion.

"Second. That from the beginning of the first month until the end of the seventh, he shall every day begin to teach at seven of the clock in the morning and dismiss his school at five in the afternoon. And for the other five months, that is, from the beginning of the eighth to the end of the twelfth month he shall every day begin at eight of the clock in the morning and end at four in the afternoon.

"Thirdly. Every day in the year the usual time of dismissing at noon shall be at eleven and to begin again at one, except that

"Fourthly. Every second day in the week he shall call his scholars together between twelve and one of the clock to examine them what they have learned on the sabbath day preceding, at which time he shall take notice of any misdemeanor or outrage that any of his scholars shall have committed on the sabbath to the end that at some convenient time due admonition and correction may be administered.

"Fifthly. He shall equally and impartially receive and instruct such as shall be sent and committed to him for that end whether their parents be poor or rich, not refusing any who have right and interest in the school.

"Sixthly. Such as shall be committed to him he shall diligently instruct, as they shall be able to learn, both in humane learning and good literature, and likewise in point of good manners and dutiful behaviour towards all, especially their superiors as they shall have occasion to be in their presence whether by meeting them in the street or otherwise.

"Seventhly. Every sixth day in the week at two of the clock in the afternoon he shall catechise his scholars in the principles of Christian religion, either in some Catechism which the wardens shall provide and present, or in defect thereof in some other.

"Eighthly. And because all man's endeavors without the blessing of God needs be fruitless and unsuccessful, therefore it is a chief part of the schoolmaster's religious care to commend his scholars and his labors amongst them unto God by prayer morning and evening, taking care that his scholars do reverently attend during the same.

"Ninthly. And because the rod of correction is an ordinance of God necessary sometimes to be dispensed unto children, but such as may easily be abused by overmuch severity and rigor on one hand; or by overmuch indulgence and lenity on the other, it is therefore ordered and agreed that the schoolmaster for the time being shall have full power to administer correction to all or any of his scholars without respect of persons, according as the nature and quality of the offence shall require." The rule further requires that the parents "shall not hinder the master therein" but if aggrieved they can complain to the wardens "who shall hear and impartially decide between them."

FIGURE 3.6  Duties of a Schoolmaster, 1645
Colonial teachers received no formal training. Perhaps the closest to any teacher preparation was that received by those individuals who entered teaching after serving as apprentices to schoolmasters. The first book on pedagogy printed in America was written by Christopher Dock, an 18th-century German schoolmaster in Pennsylvania. In School-Management/Schuleleitung, a selection from which serves as a Primary Source Reading for this chapter, Dock admonished schoolmasters to use corporal punishment only as a last resort and asserted that it was better to bring a child to do something out of love than the fear of punishment. He advised the use of group praise or rebuke to motivate or punish. He also advised that teachers recognize pupils’ individual differences, including religious differences.

Teacher Licensing and Pay

The hiring and licensing of teachers in New England was deemed to be the responsibility of the selectmen of a town, often with the assistance of the minister. The role of the minister was made clearer and stronger in 1701 by an act of the Massachusetts General Court (the colonial legislature), which required that every grammar school master “be approved by the ministers of the town, and the ministers of the two next adjacent towns, or any two of them, by certificate under their hand” (Acts and Resolutions, 1701, p. 470). The law sought not only to ensure that those most able to judge the qualifications of the grammar school master to teach Latin and Greek were involved in the selection of the master, but also to prevent favoritism by requiring the signature of at least one out-of-town minister (Cole, 1956).

The act of 1701 applied only to the licensing of grammar school masters. Less than a dozen years later, in 1712, the Massachusetts General Court gave the selectmen of each town the authority to license elementary teachers: “no person or persons shall or may presume to set up or keep a school for the teaching or instructing of children or youth in reading, writing, or any other science, but such as are of sober and good conversation, and have the allowance and approbation of the selectmen of the town in which any school is to be kept” (Acts and Resolutions, 1712, p. 681–682). Typically, the selectmen would involve the minister in the selection of the schoolmaster. Thus, by 1712 the system of licensing schoolmasters had been established: The legislature established general qualifications that were applied at the local level. This was in keeping with the general philosophy of local control that characterized the educational systems of the New England colonies (Cole, 1956) and that came to characterize education in all 50 states.

In the Mid-Atlantic colonies teachers were certified by the royal proprietor, the royal governor, or the religious group who employed them (e.g., the SPG). In New Netherlands the governor, acting under the authority of the Dutch West India Company, certified teachers. In the South, where the Church of England was the established church, as in England, teachers were certified by the Bishop of London.
The pay given the colonial schoolmaster was often not in hard currency, but in room and board. Schoolmasters often moved from the home of the parents of one student to that of another, a practice referred to as "boarding round." Teachers were also paid in whatever kind of product or produce might be available to parents. According to some accounts, in one school in Salem, "one scholar was always seated at the windows to study and also to hail passers-by and endeavor to sell to them the accumulations of corn, vegetables, etc., which had been given in payment to the teacher" (Gilmok, 1969, p. 18).

Education of Minorities in Colonial America

As previously noted, the first Blacks came to the American colonies in 1619, not as slaves, but as indentured servants. However, the demand for cheap labor for the southern plantations soon brought an extension of the African slave trade to the colonies. For the same price that an English or Irish servant could be bought for 7 years, an African slave could be bought for life (Bennett, 1976). Acting in a way that would change American history, in the 1660s Virginia and Maryland enacted legislation that made all bonded slaves, as well as the children of all female slaves, slaves for life. By the beginning of the Revolutionary War half a million Blacks lived in the colonies, most as southern slaves.

What education was provided to most Blacks, free or slave, was provided by missionary or charitable organizations, although a limited number of slave owners did provide minimal literacy training to their slaves so they could read the Bible or better attend to their owners' affairs. The missionary group that showed the greatest interest in the education of both Blacks and Native Americans was the SPG. The SPG was active in establishing schools for Black children in larger towns such as New York and Philadelphia, where concentrations of slaves could be found. They also ventured into Puritan New England and were, in fact, encouraged by such prominent Puritans as Cotton Mather, who for a short period himself operated a charity school for Blacks and Native Americans.

The SPG was also very active in the southern colonies. The SPG sought to ensure the slave owners that they could allow slaves to become Christians and literate without letting them be free. In one unique endeavor the SPG purchased two slaves and trained them to serve as teachers in a school in Charleston, South Carolina. The school was apparently well attended, although probably more by free Blacks than slaves as had been originally intended. In 1740, following a slave rebellion, South Carolina made teaching a slave to write a crime. Georgia followed suit in 1770. In 1800 South Carolina expanded the prohibition against educating slaves to slave meetings "for purposes of mental instruction." The fear that education contributed to slave unrest led slave owners in other states to curtail any educational activities for or by slaves. Nevertheless, some religious groups, slave owners, and slaves continued in their efforts. And, although there is no real way to determine how many slaves were literate, it has been estimated that despite the obstacles 5% of the slave population was literate in 1860 on the eve of the Civil War (King, 1995).

Many of the denominational and philanthropic groups that were involved in the education of Blacks were also involved in efforts to bring education to the Native
Americans. As noted previously, a few schools were established in the larger towns by the SPG, Quakers, Moravians, and other denominations. Yet their activities were undertaken in near total ignorance and disregard for tribal methods of education. The schools engaged in both "deculturation and enculturation of an absolute kind. They generally accepted Indian potential for "uplift," but sought the utter extirpation of the tribal culture and the inculcation of English ideas of religion and "civility," down to the smallest details of appearance and behavior" (Coleman, 1993, p. 37).

Another approach, one that continued into the 20th century, was to separate the "civilized" or would-be civilized Indians from the tribe. In 1651 John Eliot, the "Apostle to the Indians," established the first of the so-called "praying towns" where converted Native Americans lived like the English, were subject to English laws, attended church and school, and were discouraged from the practice of traditional Native American customs and habits. Eliot learned the Algonquian language from an Indian servant and translated the New Testament into Algonquian. In 1664 Eliot published the complete Bible in Algonquian—the first Bible printed in the American colonies.

Although some Native Americans did settle in the praying towns, attend denominational schools, and even attend such colleges as Harvard and Dartmouth, many did so because they saw it as a way of survival. Most Native Americans were not
convinced of the superiority or even equality of the education offered by the colonial schools and were unwilling to pay the price to receive it, that is, to convert to Christianity and to give up their Native American customs and traditions. Nonetheless, and despite its limited success, the colonial approach to Native American education continued in modified form into the 20th century. Missionaries, subsidized by private and public funds, continued to carry both Christianity and "civilization" to the Indians. Reading, writing, arithmetic, and religious catechism remained at the heart of their efforts, and parents continued to be asked to give their children over to boarding schools to be educated and civilized. To the English colonists, and later to the Anglo Americans, the school became the tool for assimilation of the Native American.