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# David Samuel Snedden: The Ideology of Social Efficiency

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David Samuel Snedden (1868–1951) was one of America's pioneer educational sociologists and in that capacity served on the faculty of Teachers College, Columbia University, continually from 1916 to 1935. Before that he had been a prominent school teacher in California, a professor of education at Stanford University, and a commissioner of education in Massachusetts. His significance in American education may be found in his ability to delineate most boldly and to articulate most forcefully an ever-present possibility in curriculum making, education for social efficiency.

Social efficiency, as Snedden defines it, is the position in education that calls for the direct teaching of knowledge, attitudes, and skills intended to shape the individual to predetermined social characteristics. Social efficiency presumes to improve society by making its members more vocationally useful and socially responsible. Those who "view with alarm" and blame the schools for not remedying the ills of society frequently look to schools as the means to reform. Not infrequently the schools' most vocal advocates are found in the ranks of the concerned lay public.

Applied to the curriculum, social efficiency usually leads to demands for reorganization of the studies, sometimes for a whole new synthesis of more "practical" subjects. Snedden called upon the traditional subjects to "pass in review" to determine their possible contribution to "the more specific and satisfactory aims of education."<sup>1</sup> Among the hundreds of courses he proposed were "Business Letter Writing," "Friendly Letter Writing," "The Wonders of Synthetic Chemistry," "Man's Warfare with Insects," "Ten Readable Dramas," and "Practical Mathematics."<sup>2</sup>

At different times, variants of this position have appeared under other names. Social efficiency was the outstanding characteristic of the proposals of life adjustment education in the late forties and early

fifties. In another form, emphasizing the selection and teaching with great care the minimum essentials of the organized studies, social efficiency appeared in the Essentialist Platform of William Bagley in 1938. Bagley himself had used the term "social efficiency" as early as 1905.<sup>3</sup> At an even earlier date social efficiency was implicit in Herbartian Frank McMurry's "towers of strength," explained as a little knowledge thoroughly understood which would shape the thoughts that control conduct. The Herbartian reorganization of subject matter around a single center of interest may also have proved useful in stimulating the imagination of the educator for social efficiency. Regardless of the sect, all who take this position tend to reject the notion of pursuing a study simply for the pleasure of learning.

Snedden went a step further than many in the social efficiency tradition by proposing that a concerted effort be made to determine the probable destination of each individual in society and to prescribe a curriculum especially suited to promote his ultimate efficiency. This proposal set Snedden apart from others, like Franklin Bobbitt and W. W. Charters, who were also in the social efficiency camp. Bobbitt's multitude of minute and especially defined aims looked on the surface very much like what Snedden proposed. However, Bobbitt did not differentiate for people of varied destinations.

When Mark Keppell wrote in 1915 that efficiency was the greatest word in the English language, the efficiency movement in America was at its apex.<sup>4</sup> When Snedden first used the word in 1900, he was already using it in a sense different from his contemporary Frederick Taylor. Though social efficiency and business efficiency shared a common ideal, to make people more useful, they sometimes took a collision course. In Massachusetts, Snedden's special normal school program for training a socially efficient rural school teacher was condemned by efficiency experts as economically inefficient. They measured the program in terms of cost per unit of instruction, while Snedden thought in terms of changed individuals. He condemned "factory methods" that were attempting to reduce the cost of education by applying concepts of "quantity production and standardization of parts" to the schools. He said this system was only productive of "herd-like" uniformity which ran counter to the differentiation upon which his social efficiency rested.

Circumstances of life apparently conspired to enable Snedden to make his mark in his chosen field. His professional career was

contemporary with the age of reform in American education. His first principalship came in 1892, the year the Committee of Ten organized. In 1895, the year William T. Harris engaged the Herbartians in the "Great Debate" at Cleveland, Snedden entered Stanford University. His first important statement on the purposes of education came in 1900, only a year after the National Education Association Committee on College Entrance Requirements reported favorably on a school program based on constants and electives. It was a time when the work of the school was under more than the usual scrutiny.

Snedden had been born into an intensely practical environment on the American frontier, in a cabin on the cattle range of Kern County, California, where work was both a way of life and the very means of sustaining life. His childhood and youth were spent doing the work of a ranch hand—herding cattle, mending fences, and setting out feed—hard physical work from which he took great personal satisfaction. He would always hold useful work in highest regard as the end product of the educational process. Indeed, throughout his professional life he always referred to himself as engaged in "educational work," and the word "work" is given a prominent place in much of his writing.

Snedden's own education was along traditional lines. From a one-room California schoolhouse, he entered St. Vincent's College in Los Angeles, whose program was based upon a six-year classical course, four years of preparatory work and two years on the collegiate level. With hard work and good ability he completed the program in three years. However, his most significant educational experience seems to have resulted from a program of self-education embarked upon a few years later as a young educator in Santa Paula, California. There he devoted most of his free time to studying the complete works of Herbert Spencer. This experience appears to have forever alienated him from the classical tradition.

When he felt a need for two more years of undergraduate work and the customary four-year bachelor's degree, he turned to Stanford University, where he heard the doctrine of social control set forth by Professor Edward A. Ross of the department of political economy. Though Snedden was nominally a student in the department of education, it was Ross who left the deepest impression upon him and gave him the perspective with which to explore Spencer's query, "What knowledge is of most worth?" Later he pursued the doctorate at

Columbia University under the direction of Edward T. Devine, the nation's foremost social worker. From him Snedden gained a greater insight into social ills, and the subject of Snedden's dissertation, the juvenile reform school, seemed to provide him with the ideal prototype of education for social efficiency.

In later years Snedden's pronouncements on education were criticized because he seemed to be concerned only with maintenance of the status quo. He was criticized for having a limited view of the amount of upward social mobility possible for the individual, except within certain carefully prescribed bounds. (The rigid structuring of society he predicted, first by 1960, then by 1980, was not the main feature of his program for the schools, though it was a probable consequence.)

In a paper given in 1922 before the New Hampshire academy of science, G. L. Cave, a state school trustee, leveled an attack against what he believed to be the assumptions of the modern school. He said the end result was only "education for the life of today." He called the movement "Sneddenism" after its most "ardent proponent" and charged it was reducing the school program to "thin, denatured, intellectual food." He especially attacked Snedden's distinction between hard, systematic chemistry and informational chemistry or courses in general science. "Unskilled minds," Cave said, were being "crammed with knowledge of facts and processes" when "trained brains" were needed, and they alone would find a useful place in society.<sup>5</sup>

"Sneddenism" as a viewpoint in education was a far more comprehensive system than that identified by Cave. "Sneddenism," as a scheme of education, was based upon "differentiation" of program according to the probable destination of the pupil and "flexibility" of course offering to meet differentiated needs. For Snedden, individualization of the program meant placing the student into a "case group" of like destination. Membership in a given case group depended upon three variables: (1) environmental background, (2) ability, and (3) economic opportunity. He argued that only those students with optimum amounts of all three variables should be given education for those callings requiring a long and expensive period of schooling.

Educational arrangements for the optimum group little concerned Snedden, except as they provided a backdrop for the reorganization

he sought to effect. When pressed, he conceded there were students for whom the traditional studies had proved useful as prevocational studies; and he pointed to the professional schools of law, medicine, and engineering as examples of "real vocational education" provided to serve this group. He argued that for the others, for the "rank and file," similar specialized schooling should be made available to prepare them in vocations appropriate to their own place in society.

Snedden considered the intellectually able person as part of the rank and file because it did not seem likely the intellectual would have the opportunity for upward mobility except in some vocation that required only a short period of training. Snedden expressed a concern that this individual be adequately trained in a marketable, useful skill, so as to provide him with a measure of independence and security in a competitive market, and be given adequate cultural and social resources to make him a good citizen happy in his station. Snedden believed schooling in college preparatory courses was useless to the intellectual because he had no immediate prospect of financing a college education. When the intellectual left school, Snedden argued, he would be as unprepared to earn a living as the intellectually uninterested pupil who was "driven out" of school by the same content.

Snedden was especially dubious that the largest segment of society, a group he sometimes estimated at 80 per cent of the population, could find any intrinsic value in the traditionally organized studies. He doubted their ability to acquire abstract knowledge; he believed that to impose it on them was only to hasten their departure from the schools. To hold them, he proposed a program of practical studies for which they could find direct and immediate value. He would reorganize the studies and, where necessary, the educational arrangements themselves. In working his reorganization, Snedden tried to relate the education of each "case group" to specific aims determined by working back from what "good judges" considered to be the desirable practice of above-average members of the group in society. Once the specific and concrete objectives had been identified, he proposed to draw out of the established subjects the elements that could be considered useful for the specific purpose in view. In this way he hoped to produce, in the next generation of workmen and citizens, the best of those skills, traits, and beliefs necessary to success. G. L. Cave identified this reorganization with the term "Sneddenism" in his opposition to education based upon "life for today."

Aims based upon life activities were not the unique contribution of David Snedden. Spencer had stated them in 1859. Others had found them useful, too, most notably Clarence D. Kingsley in the "Seven Cardinal Principles Report" of his Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education and Franklin Bobbitt in his own work in curriculum planning. Snedden disagreed with both men insofar as they had not made provision for differentiation according to class or group, but this was not the issue that concerned Cave. Perhaps Cave was merely reacting to the steady stream of publicity that flowed from Snedden's pen, or perhaps he recalled seeing Snedden's four kinds of education in the book *Administration of Public Education*, which was widely distributed.

Often regarded primarily as a vocational educator, Snedden considered that area only part of the larger field of educational sociology. Vocational education was interesting to him primarily as it contributed to total social efficiency. In this larger approach Snedden liked to compare the teaching profession to the medical profession. Snedden felt schooling would have to be prescriptive in order to correct a fault or failing or to give a necessary skill or appreciation. Even when he spoke of opportunity for the individual, it was in terms of prescription to fit a case group or to fit a predetermined standard of civic behavior or physical efficiency.

Snedden's own educational background, under Ross and Devine, emphasized social economy as the context within which to view the problems related to the improvement of society. The use of the term "social economy" roughly paralleled that of "political economy" as the frame of reference for economic problems; the latter was the field of specialization from which Ross and Devine first considered those social implications of the economic system that became "social economy." Snedden called this approach "applied sociology," an applied science drawing its content from many sources as did the applied sciences of medicine, engineering, and agriculture. Finally he settled on the term "educational sociology" and was among the first to use it. His understanding of educational sociology, however, remained that of one concerned with prescribing to ameliorate the ills of the social economy; this concept was directly related to his earlier study of the education provided by the juvenile reform school.

Snedden identified four social utilities with the needs of the social economy; these utilities were synonymous with his four kinds of

education: (1) physical, (2) vocational, (3) social-civic-moral, and (4) cultural. Unlike the seven aims of the "Seven Cardinal Principles Report" of 1918, the utilities were not aims in themselves, but areas from which specific aims might be developed. Put into practice, the multitude of specific aims would be expected to create the socially efficient individual, a person exhibiting vocational efficiency, physical efficiency, efficiency in his civic responsibility and social relations and in the kind of personal culture appropriate to him.

In the details of organizing schooling for social efficiency, Snedden relied heavily on the idea of a six-year high school as the agency to provide a differentiated program of general education necessary to produce physical, cultural, and social "utilities." Children under the age of twelve were expected to receive education in the common learnings, and he was little concerned with schooling for them. He believed the basic skills were always best taught in the home, if it was an "advantaged" home. Beginning with the junior high school years, however, the school was expected to provide "general education" for "good civism," "personal culture," and "health conservation," according to the particular needs of the pupil's particular case group. Vocational education, he insisted, must be left until after the student terminated his general education, either by graduation or by dropping out of the school of general education.<sup>6</sup>

Snedden could not consider the "dropout" with alarm when viewed within the framework of his "case groups." He considered the termination of formal education at an earlier date natural for some case groups. Differentiation would have provided these pupils with meaningful general education. Once "real" vocational education was begun, after the student left the school of general education—whether at age sixteen to enter a vocational school or later to enter a university school of medicine or engineering—Snedden's other three utilities must yield to the vocational and thereafter be relegated to after-hours pursuits. "Real vocational education," as he conceived it, was expected to be a full-time occupation approximating the hours and conditions of the working day and leading to the production of the marketable product. To Snedden, social efficiency meant fitting the individual for all areas of life as his place in society might decree.

In attempting to provide differentiation of course offerings for each case group, Snedden hit upon a style and vocabulary of his own, but in practice he borrowed from vocational job analysis. His reorganiza-



tion of studies was in "lotments" of work devoted to preparation for particular kinds of efficiency expressed in terms of "clock-hours" rather than semester credits. The individual elements of learning that went into any lotment of work were designated as "peths," and the lotments themselves were to be organized into "strands" of life activities roughly parallel to the "utilities." The lotments related school work to the life of the present. Snedden suggested lotments in "Friendly Letter Writing," "Bedmaking," "Stenographers' Spelling," and "Make-up Penmanship," reminiscent of the courses "Blueprint Reading for Plumbers" and "Applied Design for Granite Workers" suggested by Charles Prosser, Deputy Commissioner of Education under Snedden, for the vocational schools of Massachusetts.

In deciding upon the methods of teaching and the level of achievement required, Snedden's program divided the studies into "consumer" and "producer" subjects, designations probably borrowed from the report of the Douglas Commission of 1906. As he used these terms, the producer subjects were intended to be hard work while consumer subjects were supposed to teach attitudes or "appreciations" and would be self-defeating unless taught as "high-grade play." When Snedden argued for a longer period of compulsory education, it was to extend this period of differentiated general education, especially to provide more training for efficient citizenship and the efficient use of leisure time. His concern was with the use of school time for preparation in total social efficiency rather than with the mere extension of schooling in itself.

In the early thirties, Snedden became even more prescriptive in his demand for an educational program to produce social efficiency. He offered as his ideal planned society the mythical Province of Zond, a place where each person was specifically trained for his particular niche in life and found satisfaction and security there. In moving America toward this ideal he envisioned a department of domestic police having as its function to force people to the kind of education predetermined for their special needs.

Confronted with the difficulties involved in relating his doctrines of social efficiency to the democratic idea, Snedden found helpful an argument based on an analogy to an athletic team. His society would be "team like," with each member trained for the place he fit best. Every team, he reasoned, has its leaders and its followers. It was as

important to the success of the team that the followers be trained in their roles as it was for the leaders to be trained to carry out theirs. He contrasted this with “herd-like” practices, which he said resulted when all were given the same education and were expected to assume the same degree of responsibility in society. He contended this latter procedure was far more undemocratic because it denied opportunity to those for whom the single kind of education was not well suited. They were the “rank and file,” the largest percentage of society.

Snedden seems always to have refused to consider the opportunity for social mobility afforded by the principle of free election and wide opportunity for choice. When he was forced to react to this possibility, he expressed doubt that students, parents, or teachers could render a wise choice. His view of the purpose of the science of education was to make these kinds of decisions for groups of people.

When pressed to make a choice between social efficiency and democracy, Snedden maintained that efficiency must prevail. This position was quite consistent with his view that the schools, as the only institution of society in the control of the government, should be consciously used for purposes of social control and should represent the majority view in society. This total devotion to the ideals of efficiency proved a source of alienation from others who also related their own aims to life activities.

John Dewey was among the first to see the conclusion to which Snedden was pushing himself, that democracy must ultimately yield to efficiency. Dewey came to this conclusion twenty years before Snedden came to acknowledge the full extent of it himself. In 1914, reacting to Snedden’s separate system of administration for vocational schools, Dewey had warned that setting them apart from schools of general education would only foster class education. Ultimately Snedden acknowledged Dewey’s efforts to unify cultural and manual arts as an important contribution to more liberal schooling but quite outside what he considered appropriate preparation for vocational education.

Snedden’s differences with Dewey and other “progressives” of the twenties were of the same fundamental kind and continued through the years of his professional career. Most of the time Snedden wrote of the contributions of this group as being romantic, idealistic, or utopian. In another form of defense he categorized Dewey as an authority on method “with the understanding he was almost constant-

ly writing about children four to nine years of age.”<sup>7</sup> This argument seemed calculated to dismiss the significance of primary education and might explain, in part, his apparent inconsistency in urging delayed admission to school while emphasizing the importance of the school as an agency of social control. According to Snedden, only a small percentage of children four to six years of age required schooling to supplant inferior homes. Children from fairly wholesome and normal homes, especially those “of superior intellectual heredity,” would be withheld from school attendance altogether until the age of nine or ten. He claimed that for at least 60 per cent of American children, early schooling represented only overstimulation and unnecessary regimentation. This claim gave him the opportunity to charge that “progressive” educators lacked the necessary confidence in the “growth-fostering powers” of various types of homes.<sup>8</sup>

Boyd Bode and Gordon Hullfish both attacked the dualism Snedden had created in identifying producer and consumer education. Hullfish said Snedden missed the real significance of the meaning of democracy and of democratic education by failing to see that the mind is a unity. For Hullfish the blacksmith who had also experienced cultural education would understand “the full social context of his work,” while he believed Snedden’s blacksmith would merely be efficient or, as Hullfish said, “skilled.”<sup>9</sup> Bode criticized Snedden for the “notion” that ideals could be “evoked from a process of environmental fact finding.” He concluded Snedden expected “sociology to work miracles” and he questioned the scientific quality of such procedures.<sup>10</sup>

Criticism of Snedden’s doctrines from within the ranks of the educational sociologists was directed both against his theory of educational sociology as an “empirical science”—his preoccupation with life activities objectives—and against the class distinctions his objectives seemed likely to produce. But perhaps more than anything else he was engaged in a kind of inquiry that claimed little of their time and interest. His efforts in reply were couched in terms of “telic” evolution, but the inconsistency of planning improvement based upon mere maintenance of present status never seems to have troubled him.

Addressing the related question of the school’s role in social change, not unlike that concerned with the teaching of the social studies which had precipitated his argument with Percy Davidson,

Snedden presented the school as an institution of the majority, obligated to reinforce majority views. He conceded the school might cause its graduates to become aware of problems and might provide them with an attitude receptive to change, but he never explained how he intended to accomplish this with an educational program based on maintenance of the status quo. He made quite clear, however, that it was not the business of the schools to bring about social change.<sup>11</sup>

Initially Snedden was influenced by the manual training movement and the social reform movements of the first decade of the twentieth century. As vocational education gained popularity, he renounced his earlier allegiance to manual training and took up the new cause as a refinement of the old. The professional climate from which he rose to maturity in his career was one determined to heal the ills of society by means that were direct, immediate, prescriptive, and practical. "Efficiency" was the ideal of this age in business, in government, and in the orderly function of society.

In a field he helped to define, Snedden became the spokesman of the most thorough form of social efficiency. His proposals, put forward as "concrete" solutions likely to withstand the tests of time or as projections of what the future must surely hold in store, had the appeal of offering surety in an area where it was not commonly found. However, possibly his own story of upward social mobility, based on hard work and keen intellect in the best tradition of the "American dream," is more eloquent in its message than his own proposals of education for social efficiency.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Snedden, David S., "History as an Instrument in the Social Education of Children," *Journal of Pedagogy*, Vol. XIX, June 1906, p. 259.

<sup>2</sup>Snedden, David S., *American High Schools and Vocational School in 1960*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1931, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup>Bagley, William. *The Educative Process*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup>Keppel, Mark, "Trustees I Have Met," *Journal of Education*, July 15, 1915, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup>Cave, G. L., "Education for the Life of Today," *School and Society*, Vol. XVI, September 9, 1922, pp. 282-284, 288.

<sup>6</sup>Snedden, David S., "The Relationship of Vocational and General Education," *National Education Association: Addresses and Proceedings*, Vol. 62, 1924, p. 1004.

<sup>7</sup>Snedden, David S., *Toward Better Educations: Some Critical Sociological Examinations*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1931, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup>Snedden, David S., "The Culture of John Doe," *Teachers College Record*, Vol. XXXII, April 1931, pp. 619-627; "Objectives in School Education: How Shall Their Foundations Be

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Distinguished?" *Educational Review*, Vol. LXVII, May 1924, pp. 239–246; "Shall We Keep the Children Out of School?" *New Republic*, Vol. 61, December 4, 1929, pp. 40–42.

<sup>9</sup>Hullfish, H. Gordon, "Looking Backward with David Snedden," *Educational Review*, Vol. LXVII, February 1924, pp. 61–69.

<sup>10</sup>Bode, Boyd H., "Why Educational Objectives?" *School and Society*, Vol. XIX, May 10, 1924, pp. 531–539.

<sup>11</sup>Snedden, David S., "Education and Social Change," *School and Society*, Vol. XL, September 8, 1934, pp. 311–314.