

The Progressive Education Movement: Is It Still a Factor in Today's Schools?

by William Hayes

to purchase this book, visit:

<http://www.amazon.com/Progressive-Education-Movement-Factor-Schools/dp/1578865220>

For more than one hundred years, the United States has been the scene of academic warfare between traditional and professional educators. During most of our nation's history, many Americans have assumed that the primary purpose of school is to pass on to children the information and skills necessary to survive in our society. This traditional view accepts the fact that a teacher's task is to inform children as to what they should know. Officials at the state and local level determine the content of students' education and it is the teacher's job to ensure that the content is taught. Even before the beginning of the twentieth century, John Dewey and others introduced a different model. They believed that students learn best "by doing" not by being passive listeners. For progressive educators, the teacher's role was to be a facilitator of learning in classrooms where students' interest helped to provide appropriate developmental learning experience. This new approach to education has greatly affected our schools during the past century.

More recently, we have seen the emergence in American education of four initiatives that have threatened the continued influence of progressive education. They include the "back to basics movement", mandated state curriculum standards, high stakes testing, and school accountability. Despite these trends, there appears to be several factors that might lead one to conclude that progressive education is remaining a viable approach in the United States. This book considers these factors as well as the past, present, and possible future of the progressive education movement.

Introduction

For some time now, I have accepted the idea that a major theme in the history of education in the United States during the past century has been the ongoing debate between those who consider themselves traditionalists and those who espouse the principles of progressive education. For me, this idea was highlighted in an article which appeared in the *Education Digest* in April 1999. Entitled the “Top 10 Education Events of the 20th Century,” the author, Ben Brodinsky, lists such events as the development of public schools, standardized tests, and the mandating of special education for handicapped children. One of his topics was called “Innovative Thoughts.” In describing this part of our history, he points to the impact of John Dewey in introducing what has been labeled progressive education.¹

Although few would question the impact of progressive education, actually defining the specific objectives and methods advocated by the reform movement is difficult. A respected conservative historian, Diane Ravitch, refers to Herbert M. Kliebard’s view that progressive education “covered such a broad range of different, even contradictory, ideas that it was a meaningless term” in her book, *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform*. In the same paragraph, Ravitch admits that many other educational historians, such as Lawrence A. Cremin, saw a pattern of beliefs that allows one to give meaning to the movement.²

Certainly many writers have attempted to articulate the difference between the traditional approach to education and that which is put forward by the progressives. Unfortunately, such comparisons are often tainted by the prejudices of the author. For instance, a recent attempt at comparing the two philosophies included the following contrasts. In the area related to curriculum, the author writes that with the traditional or classical approach, there is an emphasis on “academic areas with facts, ideas, skills” and that it is “based on research.” In the opposite column outlining progressive ideas on curriculum, it states that progressive education is “often based on unproven theories.” The same source suggests that in mathematics, traditionalists are said to believe in “direct instruction of math concepts” which utilize “drill and skill.” On the other hand, the author charges that progressives favor “interactive and discovery learning” or what is called “fuzzy math,” which rejects memorization. A third example of a somewhat slanted comparison is found in the category called character development, where the progressives are said to believe in “relativism,” while the traditionalists are committed to the goals of “citizenship” and “self-control.”³

Needless to say, the progressives have been guilty of writing their own comparisons which favor their point of view. An illustration of such an approach would be a list of contrasts prepared by Helen Heyl, a former supervisor of the University of the State of New York, who published the following comparisons in an article of the *Journal of Education* in 1932. She wrote that in the traditional school, a child is sent to school and “kept until four o’ clock, after which he explodes into freedom!” She writes about the progressive school that the “child goes to school and cannot get there early enough, he

lingers in shops, lavatories, yards, and libraries until dusk or urgent parents drag him homeward.” In contrasting what students do in school, she suggests that the traditional school students listen, and the progressive school students work. A final example would be her belief that in a traditional school, a “child’s mind is submitted to the grindstone of an educational discipline which dwarfs his capacity to think for himself.” For her, the children who are lucky enough to attend a progressive school are “taught to think, to develop tolerant understanding, to question critically, and to evaluate.”⁴

A 21st century comparison that is perhaps somewhat more neutral is shown below.

Traditional Philosophy	Contemporary Progressivism
Textbooks and workbooks dominate; teaching and learning largely contained to classroom.	Varied instructional materials; teaching and learning include community resources.
Whole-group learning, fixed schedules, and uniform time periods.	Whole, small, and individualized groups, flexible schedules, and adjustable time periods.
Emphasis on uniformity of classroom experiences and instructional situations.	Emphasis on variability of classroom experiences and instructional situations.
Curriculum is prescribed; little room for electives.	Mix of liberal arts, practical, and vocational subjects.
Excellence and high standards; special consideration for high achievers.	Equality and flexible standards; special consideration of low achievers. ⁵

In attempting to define the view of progressive educators, perhaps the single most important document can be found in a publication of the Progressive Education Association in 1918. Among the principles included in this historic document were the following.

I. *Freedom to develop naturally*

The conduct of the people should be governed by himself according to the social needs of his community, rather than by arbitrary laws. Full opportunity for initiative and self-expression should be provided...

II. *Interest, the motive of all work*

Interest should be satisfied and developed through: (1) direct and indirect contact with the world and its activities, and the use of the experiences thus gained; (2) application of knowledge gained, and correlation between different subjects; (3) the consciousness of achievement.

III. *The teacher a guide, not a taskmaster*

...Progressive teachers will encourage the use of all the senses, training the pupils in both observation and judgment, and, instead of hearing recitations only, will spend most of the time teaching how to use various sources of information, including life activities as well as books, how to reason about the information thus acquired, and how to express forcefully and logically the conclusions reached.

IV. *Scientific study of pupil development*

School records should not be confined to the marks given by the teachers to show the advancement of the pupils in the study of subject, but should also include both objective and subjective reports on those physical, mental, moral, and social characteristics which affect both school and adult life and which can be influenced by the school and the home. Such records should be used as a guide for the treatment of each pupil...

V. *The Progressive School a leader in educational movements*

The Progressive School...should be a laboratory where new ideas, if worthy, meet encouragement; where tradition alone does not rule but the best of the past is leavened with the discoveries of today, and the result is freely added to the sum of educational knowledge.⁶

Even given the difficulties involved in pinpointing the differences between traditionalists and progressives, one cannot deny the fact that the competition between these two camps has been a prominent theme in the history of education in the United States, beginning even before the 20th century. In alluding to this ongoing struggle, David J. Ferrero has written in an article published in *Educational Leadership* that:

In fact, education's fiercest and most intractable conflicts have stemmed from differences in philosophy. Take the 100 Years' War between 'progressives' and 'traditionalists.' To oversimplify an already oversimplified dichotomy, progressives incline toward pedagogical approaches that start with student interest and emphasize hands-on engagement with the physical and social environments, whereas traditionalists tend to start with pre-existing canons of inquiry and knowledge and emphasize ideas and concepts mediated through words and symbols.⁷

The purpose of this book is to first trace the events in what Ferrero labels “the 100 Years’ War.” Such an effort will include discussions about the origin of the progressive education movement as well as considering how the ideas of the progressives have influenced education during the various eras of the 20th century. In choosing the title *The Rise and Fall of Progressive Education*, I have hypothesized that certain events, especially during the past quarter century, may result in the final decline in this country of the progressive ideas and methods which emerged in the beginning of the 20th century. The trends include the “back to basics” movement, curriculum standards, high-stakes testing, and accountability, which have resulted in part from the *A Nation at Risk* report and other studies made during the 1980’s. There is no question that these documents have influenced the direction of education. Perhaps even more important is the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2002. It would seem that the traditionalists are very much in control during this first decade of the 21st century and those today who are willing to admit that they are either liberals in politics or progressive educators seem to be an endangered species. Even as I begin this project, I am less and less certain that given the waxing and waning of the theories of progressive education in the past, that to refer to the “fall” of progressive education might not be accurate. With that caution in mind, let us begin our journey through the progressive education movement.

Chapter One

The Rise of Progressive Education

The ideas associated with the progressive education movement did not suddenly emerge. In every historic era there have been individuals who have thought of teaching and learning in ways other than that which were accepted in the conventional wisdom of their time. One could write a book just about people who supported alternative ways of teaching. Perhaps the first well-known individual who evolved his own style was Socrates. As reported by his star pupil, Plato, Socrates did not even think of himself as a teacher. He believed that true understanding was developed in a pupil by using a question method that allowed students to find their own truth. Using this method, “the teacher persuades the student to think by questioning him about his beliefs, by setting before him other beliefs and forcing him to probe the workings of his mind. In this way, the student accepts the truth, but only because it is true for him.”⁸ There are many other examples of individuals who have sought alternative ways to teach. Jesus relied heavily on the use of memorable parables to help his listeners to understand his lessons.

For the purpose of this project, it would be helpful to consider the individuals who most affected the thinking of the leaders of the American progressive education movement. A person who greatly impacted our nation’s political beliefs was also interested in education. John Locke was an Englishman who lived primarily in the 17th century whose thoughts about government and democracy significantly affected the thinking of Thomas Jefferson and other leaders of the American Revolution. In the field of education, Locke believed that “truth and knowledge” ... “arise out of observation and experience rather than from manipulation of accepted or given ideas.”⁹ Locke was

thinking about education during his lifetime in a way that was adopted by the progressive educational leaders. Both Locke and these leaders believed that it was the role of the schools and of teachers to do more than pass on knowledge to their students. Locke was perhaps one of the first to suggest that concrete experiences were needed if students were to truly learn. Beyond this, he clearly saw that these experiences should be tailored to the individual needs and capacities of students. In this regard, he was extremely sensitive to the “innate differences between individuals.” He wrote about the level of “energy, practice, and repetition children happily put into play, and therefore suggested dice and play-things with letters on them to teach children the alphabet.”¹⁰ This too was a foreshadowing of progressive thinking.

Perhaps even of greater influence than Locke was the work of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his famous book, *Emile*, published first in 1762, he argues against an education based on subordination to a teacher and memorization. Rousseau claims that students learn best when they have concrete experiences and discover truth for themselves. Because he believed that children are born inherently “good,” he was supportive of allowing more freedom and a “more permissive form of instruction.”¹¹ He went so far as to suggest that “book knowledge would only corrupt children.”¹² Rousseau’s views certainly affected the thinking of American educators including both Horace Mann and John Dewey.¹³

Another European, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), had beliefs similar to Rousseau. This closeness is symbolized by the fact that he kept a copy of *Emile* by his bedside throughout his adult life. Pestalozzi complemented Rousseau’s thinking by using the emerging social science of psychology to further the idea of developing a new way to

educate children. Although he did not consider himself an educator and wrote very little about teaching and learning, Pestalozzi is described by some as the “father of modern educational science.” Called “object teaching” he advocated “inducing learning through direct experience with objects.” Along with Herbart and Frobel, his work was instrumental in the establishment of the early progressive schools in America by Francis W. Parker and John Dewey.¹⁴ Pestalozzi believed that “the natural instincts of the child should provide the motives for learning rather than external prodding and compulsion...the teacher’s task is one of adapting instruction to the individual child accordingly as his nature unfolds in the various stages of natural development.”¹⁵

Leaving the European forebears of the progressive education movement, we turn now to the events and personalities in the United States which have influenced the movement. It should be noted that the first schools in colonial America would be characterized as being extremely traditional. The teacher’s task was to tell and to drill. Discipline was often extremely harsh and corporal punishment was the primary method for maintaining discipline. Children were asked to memorize large sections of a limited number of books which often included the Bible. The young men whose parents could afford the tuition to the private secondary schools would be expected to learn by rote, Greek, and Latin. It was to this practice that one of our earliest educational innovators reacted. Early in his career, Benjamin Franklin wrote a plan for a school in Philadelphia which would bear his name. He wanted to establish a school which emphasized English rather than Latin. The curriculum would tend toward practical subjects designed to prepare children for careers in business and professions other than the clergy.¹⁶

The notion of schools giving students a “useful” education was one that resonated with many progressive educators. Franklin has written that, “it would be well if [students] could be taught every Thing that is useful, every Thing that is ornamental: But Art is long, and their Time is short. It is therefore Propos’d that they learn Things that are likely to be most useful and most ornamental.”¹⁷ The Franklin Academy, which was established in 1751, offered classes in mathematics, astronomy, athletics, navigation, dramatics, and bookkeeping. Students had some choice as to what they would learn. In addition, the school accepted both boys and girls and would become a model for the 6,000 private academies founded in the 19th century. These institutions, which required that most parents pay tuition, were the forerunners of the public high schools, which evolved at the end of the century.¹⁸

The father of the public school movement in the United States, Horace Mann, was in many ways a traditional educator, but for the time in which he lived in the middle of the 19th century, he had some rather progressive ideas. For instance, Mann believed that positive experiences were the best motivation for learning. In his second report to the Board of Education of Massachusetts, he wrote that:

Children, who spend six months in learning the alphabet, will, on the playground in a single half day or moonlight evening, learn the intricacies of a game or sport,-where to stand, when to run, what to say, how to count, and what are the laws and the ethics of the game; -the whole requiring more intellectual effort that would suffice to learn half a dozen alphabets...the process of learning words and letters is toilsome and progress will be slow, unless a motive is inspired before instruction is attempted.¹⁹

In the same document he suggested that teachers must have:

Knowledge of methods and processes. These are indefinitely various...he who is apt to teach is acquainted, not only with common methods for common minds but with peculiar methods for pupils of peculiar dispositions and temperaments; and he is acquainted with the principles of all methods, whereby he can vary his plan, according to any differences of circumstances.²⁰

Another indication of Mann's views on teaching can be learned by the instructional method he would use late in his life as a teacher at Antioch College. A former pupil, Henry Clay Badger, kept a diary during his years as a student at Antioch. He wrote that Mann would assign "special lessons" to individual students, giving each "some question to pursue at leisure and upon which to prepare a paper to be read to the whole class."²¹ For this student at least, what was exciting about Mann's teaching was "the impetus with which his mind smote our minds." He "kindled a heat of enthusiasm."²² Undoubtedly this important educational pioneer demonstrated in his own teaching that the instructor's role was more than passing on information to his students. The fact is that he, like the progressives, believed that "rote learning of names and rules was neither effective nor desirable."²³

Along with Mann, there were others who reacted against traditional teaching during his lifetime. Experimental schools could be found in isolated areas even during the 19th century, but as a nation, the major movement to change schools did not emerge until the last decade of the 1800's. It would truly gather momentum as a part of what historians have called the Progressive Movement at the beginning of the 20th century.

In his book *The Good Years*, Walter Lord describes the sense of optimism that could be found in the United States as the nation began the 20th century. He entitled his book “The Good Years” because, “whatever the trouble, people were sure they could fix it.” A New York Times editorial published on December 31, 1899, claimed that “we step upon the threshold of 1900 which leads to a new century,...facing a still brighter dawn of civilization.” From their pulpits clergy also were extremely positive about the new century. One clergy was quoted in the newspaper as saying that the “laws are becoming more just, values more humane; music is becoming sweeter and books wiser.”²⁴

The progressive education movement can be seen as part of a larger movement dominated by white middle class Americans. The entire era beginning in 1901 until our entrance into World War I in 1917 has been labeled the progressive period. For many historians, this era of reform began when Theodore Roosevelt ascended to the presidency after the assassination of William McKinley. The reform causes which were part of the movement were varied, and included such efforts as the regulation of big business, governmental reform, women’s suffrage, and temperance. The progressives were not revolutionaries, but rather people who were interested in fixing specific problems and improving upon the status quo. Many individuals who might have been conservatives at other times were actively engaged in changing the system.

Stimulated by a group of writers who have been labeled “muckrakers” and led by progressive presidents including Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, laws were passed on the state and federal level which were meant to bring about progress in solving specific problems. Businesses were regulated by such legislation as the Meat Inspection Act, the Pure Food and Drug Act, and the Clayton Antitrust Law. A number of western

states began the movement towards women's suffrage which would be completed with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. New democratic initiatives such as recall votes and referendums were introduced in a number of states. Progress was also made in regulating child labor and working conditions for adults.

Throughout the United States, attitudes shifted and the laissez faire philosophy that dominated national life throughout the 19th century seemed to be eclipsed by an openness to change. The stirrings of change were present in the 1890's as writers pointed out defects in our system, many of these issues emerged because we had moved from being a primarily agricultural nation to one that was becoming increasingly industrial. The Populist movement during the 19th century, even though it occurred mainly in rural areas, did raise issues that middle class Americans in the urban and suburban communities felt should be addressed. Because of the widespread support of the more affluent and influential citizens, progressives were able to accomplish goals that were impossible for the Populists. It is also true that the reforms that occurred during the period before World War I were not nearly as far-reaching as those proposed by the Populists. Some historians have argued that progressivism also had a conservative strain which kept change from being overly dramatic. For example, there was little support for opening the system for wider participation by racial minorities.²⁵

In the field of education, intellectuals and middle class professionals were open to reading the books of John Dewey and others, even if most people were not necessarily ready to radically alter the schools. While there have always been parents willing to entrust their children to experimental schools that utilize new teaching methods, the number of such families has always been small. Historians have not agreed on the reason

for the openness to new educational theories during the years before World War I. “Cubberley’s interpretation of the educational changes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was that education changed simply to solve social and economic problems. Within this framework, the school is seen as a mere captive to social conditions.” Primarily what was happening was that the United States was changing from an agricultural society to one dominated by industry and big business. In a later study, historian Merle Curti “contends that the majority of educational changes that occurred at the time were designed to serve the interests of the owners of industrial enterprises. For instance, he argues that vocational education and manual training were attempts to control and counteract radicalism among American workers.” Lawrence Cremin is more idealistic as he suggested that educational progressivism is truly “a many-sided effort to use the schools to improve the lives of individuals.”²⁶

Undoubtedly all of the forces that stimulated the larger progressive movement were also at work in the field of education. There were certainly conditions in our schools that were ripe for change. With few exceptions, the public school systems at the end of the century were very traditional. Most teachers considered their primary role to be as information givers. As in other fields, there was perhaps a need to alter education to better fit the realities of 20th century life. Whether or not this is true, there were enough Americans open to new ideas that the innovations suggested by progressive educators would be given serious consideration. To begin our study of the meaning and impact of progressive education, we now turn to the individual who is most closely associated with the movement.

Notes

-
1. Ben Brodinsky, "Top 10 Education Events of the 20th Century," *Education Digest*, Volume 64 No. 8, April 1999, 4-7.
 2. Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform*, (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 54.
 3. "The Ongoing 'Education Wars,'" *CEO* at www.ceopa.org/EducationWars.html (accessed 8 July, 2005), 3.
 4. David Tyack, Robert Lowe, and Elisabeth Hansot, *Public Schools in Hard Times*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 151.
 5. Allan C. Ornstein, *Teaching and Schooling in America*, (Boston: Pearson Education Group, Inc., 2003) 315.
 6. Margaret Patricia Meyer, *The Development of Education in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Prentice Hall, Inc, 1949), 71-72.
 7. David J. Ferrero, "Pathways to Reform: Start with Values," *Educational Leadership*, Volume 62 No. 5 February 2005, 10.
1. Editor George F. Kneller, *Foundations of Education*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1967), 124.
 2. R. Freeman Butts and Lawrence A. Cremin, *A History of Education in American Culture*, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1953), 55.
 3. Richard Aldrich, "John Locke," *Prospects*, Volume 24 no. 1/2 , 1994, 61-76.
 4. Joel Spring, *The American School: 1642-1990*, (New York: Longman, 1990), 132.
 5. Frederick Mayer, *American Ideas and Education*, (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc., 1964), 154.
 6. Mayer, *American Ideas and Education*, 155.

-
7. Butts and Cremin, *A History of Education in American Culture*, 437-38.
 8. Butts and Cremin, *A History of Education in American Culture*, 380
 9. Myra Pollack Sadker and David Miller Sadker, *Teachers, Schools, and Society*, 6th Edition, (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 310.
 10. Spring, *The American School: 1642-1985*, 19-20.
 11. Sadker and Sadker, *Teachers, Schools, and Society*, 6th Edition, 310.
 12. Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Republic and the School*, (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1957), 38-39.
 13. Motivational Quotes for Teachers,” at <http://www.pitt.edu/~poole/ARCHIVE#.HTML>, (accessed 14 March 2005), 2.
 14. Louise Hall Tharpe, *Until Victory: Horace Mann and Mary Peabody*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953), 279-80.
 15. Tharpe, *Until Victory: Horace Mann and Mary Peabody*, 279-80.
 16. Robert Badolato, The Educational Theory of Horace Mann,” at www.newfoundations.com/GALLERY/Mann.html, (accessed 27 September 2004), 2.
 17. Walter Lord, *The Good Years*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishing, 1960), 213.
 18. Foster Rhea Dullis, *The United States Since 1865*, (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1971), 178-81.
 19. Spring, *The American School: 1642-1985*, 152-53.
