

Progressivism, Schools and Schools of Education: An American Romance

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This paper tells a story about progressivism, schools and schools of education in twentieth-century America. Depending on one's position in the politics of education, this story can assume the form of a tragedy or a romance, or perhaps even a comedy. The heart of the tale is the struggle for control of American education in the early twentieth century between two factions of the movement for progressive education. The administrative progressives won this struggle, and they reconstructed the organization and curriculum of American schools in a form that has lasted to the present day. Meanwhile the other group, the pedagogical progressives, who failed miserably in shaping what we do in schools, did at least succeed in shaping how we talk about schools. Professors in schools of education were caught in the middle of this dispute, and they ended up in an awkwardly compromised position. Their hands were busy—preparing teachers to work within the confines of the educational system established by the administrative progressives, and carrying out research to make this system work more efficiently. But their hearts were with the pedagogues. So they became the high priests of pedagogical progressivism, keeping this faith alive within the halls of the education school, and teaching the words of its credo to new generations of educators. Why is it that American education professors have such a longstanding, deeply rooted and widely shared rhetorical commitment to the progressive vision? The answer can be found in the convergence between the history of the education school and the history of the child-centered strand of progressivism during the early twentieth century. Historical circumstances drew them together so strongly that they became inseparable. As a result, progressivism became the ideology of the education professor. Education schools have their own legend about how this happened, which is a stirring tale about a marriage made in heaven, between an ideal that would save education and a stalwart champion that would fight the forces of traditionalism to make this ideal a reality. As is the case with most legends, there is some truth in this account. But here a different story is told. In this story, the union between pedagogical progressivism and the education school is not the result of mutual attraction but of something more enduring: mutual need. It was not a marriage of the strong but a wedding of the weak. Both were losers in their respective arenas: child-centered progressivism lost out in the struggle for control of American schools, and the education school lost out in the struggle for respect in American higher education. They needed each other, with one looking for a safe haven and the other looking for a righteous mission. As a result, education schools came to have a rhetorical commitment to progressivism that is so wide that, within these institutions, it is largely beyond challenge. At the same time, however, this progressive vision never came to dominate the practice of teaching and learning in schools—or even to reach deeply into the practice of teacher educators and researchers within education schools themselves.

Introduction

In this paper, I tell a story about progressivism, schools and schools of education in twentieth-century America.¹ It is a story about success and failure, about love and hate. Depending on one's position in the politics of education, this story can assume the form of tragedy, comedy or romance.

The heart of the tale is the struggle for control of American education in the early twentieth century between two factions of the movement for progressive education. The administrative progressives won this struggle, and they reconstructed the organization and curriculum of American schools in a form that has lasted to the present day. Meanwhile the other group, the pedagogical progressives, who failed miserably in shaping what we do in schools, did at least succeed in shaping how we talk about schools. Professors in schools of education were caught in the middle of this dispute, and they ended up in an awkwardly compromised position. Their hands were busy—preparing teachers to work within the confines of the educational system established by the administrative progressives, and carrying out research to make this system work more efficiently. But their hearts were with the pedagogues. So they became the high priests of pedagogical progressivism, keeping this faith alive within the halls of the education school, and teaching the words of its credo to new generations of educators.

I write about this story both as a historian of American education and as a professor in an American education school. And I write about the subject to this audience because it addresses two of the major themes of the ISCHE25 conference in Sao Paulo. One theme was 'modernity and the processes of school institutionalization'. Think of progressivism as a case in point. The movement for progressive education was the primary force that shaped the modern American system of schooling and which institutionalized this system in a form that has endured to the present day. A second theme was 'the international circulation of pedagogical knowledge and models'. Think of the way progressive ideas of teaching and schooling have become part of the international language of education. My sense is that this case resonates with the experience of educational modernization in a variety of other countries around the globe, but I will leave it up to the readers to supply evidence about how true this is in their own country. My field of expertise is limited to the American case, so I will focus primarily on the first issue.

Let me begin with a couple of definitions. An education school, in the American sense of the term, is an academic unit within a university—usually called a school or college or department of education—where faculty members prepare teachers,

¹ This paper is a revised version of an invited lecture delivered at the 25th annual meeting of the International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE) in Sao Paulo, Brazil, 18 July 2003. It draws from material found in my recent book (Labaree, David F. *The Trouble with Ed Schools*. New Haven: CT, 2004): chapter 7) and in an earlier paper (Labaree, David F. "The Ed School's Romance with Progressivism." In *Brookings Papers on Educational Policy, 2004*, edited by Diane Ravitch. Washington, DC, 2004: 89–129.

prepare researchers and carry out educational research. The meaning of progressivism is a much more complicated story. In part, my aim in this paper is to sort through the multiple meanings of progressivism in an effort to figure out the nature of its impact on the language and practice of schooling in the United States.

It is best to start this story in the present time, where the meaning of progressivism is well defined. Today progressivism means pedagogical progressivism. It means basing instruction on the needs, interests and developmental stage of the child; it means teaching students the skills they need in order to learn any subject, instead of focusing on transmitting a particular subject; it means promoting discovery and self-directed learning by the student through active engagement; it means having students work on projects that express student purposes and that integrate the disciplines around socially relevant themes; and it means promoting values of community, cooperation, tolerance, justice and democratic equality. In the shorthand of educational jargon, this adds up to ‘child-centered instruction’, ‘discovery learning’ and ‘learning how to learn’. And in the current language of American education schools there is a single label that captures this entire approach to education: constructivism.

As Lawrence Cremin has pointed out, by the 1950s this particular progressive approach to education had become the dominant language of American education.² Within the community of professional educators—by which I mean classroom teachers and the education professors who train them—pedagogical progressivism provides the words we use to talk about teaching and learning in schools. And within education schools, progressivism is the ruling ideology. It is hard to find anyone in an American education school who does not talk the talk and espouse the principles of the progressive creed.

This situation worries a number of educational reformers. After all, progressivism runs directly counter to the main thrust of educational reform efforts in the US in the early twenty-first century. Reform is moving in the direction of establishing rigorous academic frameworks for the school curriculum, setting performance standards for students, and using high stakes testing to motivate students to learn the curriculum and teachers to teach it. Education schools and their pedagogically progressive ideals stand in strong opposition to all of these reform efforts. To today’s reformers, therefore, education schools look less like the solution than the problem.³

But these reformers should not be so worried—for two reasons. First, this form of progressivism has had an enormous impact on educational rhetoric but very little impact on educational practice. This is the conclusion reached by historians of pedagogy, such as Larry Cuban and Arthur Zilversmit, and by contemporary scholars of

² Cremin, Lawrence A. *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1976–1957*. New York, 1961: 328.

³ Hirsch Jr., E. D. *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them*. New York, 1996; Public Agenda. *Different Drummers: How Teachers of Teachers View Public Education*. New York, 1997; Ravitch, Diane. *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*. New York, 2000.

teaching practice, such as John Goodlad and David Cohen.⁴ Instruction in American schools is overwhelmingly teacher-centered; classroom management is the teacher's top priority; traditional school subjects dominate the curriculum; textbooks and teacher talk are the primary means of delivering this curriculum; learning consists of recalling what texts and teachers say; and tests measure how much of this students have learned. What signs there are of student-centered instruction and discovery learning tend to be superficial or short-lived. We talk progressive but we rarely teach that way. In short, traditional methods of teaching and learning are in control of American education. The pedagogical progressives lost.

The other reason that reformers should not worry about contemporary progressivism is that its primary advocates are lodged in education schools, and nobody takes these institutions seriously. Our colleagues in the university think of us as being academically weak and narrowly vocational. They see us not as peers in the world of higher education but as an embarrassment that should not really be part of a university at all. To them we look less like a school of medicine than a school of cosmetology. The most prestigious universities often try to limit the education school's ability to grant degrees or even eliminate it altogether. There is not enough space here for me to explain the historical roots of the education school's lowly status in the US but the conclusion is clear: we rank at the very bottom.⁵ As a result of this, we have zero credibility in making pronouncements about education. We are solidly in the progressive camp ideologically, but we have no ability to promote progressive practices in the schools. In fact, we do not even practice progressivism in our own work, as seen in the way we carry out research and the way we train teachers.⁶

Why is it that American education professors have such a longstanding, deeply rooted and widely shared rhetorical commitment to the progressive vision? The answer can be found in the convergence between the history of the education school and the history of the child-centered strand of progressivism during the early twentieth century. Historical circumstances drew them together so strongly that they became inseparable. As a result, progressivism became the ideology of the education professor.

Education schools have their own legend about how this happened, which is a stirring tale about a marriage made in heaven, between an ideal that would save education

⁴ Cuban, Larry. *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890–1980*. New York, 1993; Zilversmit, Arthur. *Changing Schools: Progressive Education Theory and Practice, 1930–1960*. Chicago, 1993; Goodlad, John. *A Place Called School*. New York, 1984; Cohen, David K. "A Revolution in One Classroom: The Case of Mrs. Oublier." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 12 (1990): 311–329.

⁵ Clifford, Geraldine Joncich, and James W. Guthrie. *Ed School: A Brief for Professional Education*. Chicago, 1988; Labaree, *The Trouble with Ed Schools*.

⁶ Lagemann, Ellen Condliffe. *An Elusive Science: The Troubling History of Educational Research*. Chicago, 2000; Kennedy, Mary M. "Choosing a Goal for Professional Education." In *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, edited by W. Robert Houston. New York, 1990; Floden, Robert E. "Research on Effects of Teaching: a Continuing Model for Research on Teaching." In *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, edited by Virginia Richardson. Washington, DC, 2001: 3–16.

and a stalwart champion that would fight the forces of traditionalism to make this ideal a reality. As is the case with most legends, there is some truth in this account. But here I want to tell a different story. In this story, the union between pedagogical progressivism and the education school is not the result of mutual attraction but of something more enduring: mutual need. It was not a marriage of the strong but a wedding of the weak. Both were losers in their respective arenas: child-centered progressivism lost out in the struggle for control of American schools, and the education school lost out in the struggle for respect in American higher education. They needed each other, with one looking for a safe haven and the other looking for a righteous mission. As a result, education schools came to have a rhetorical commitment to this form of progressivism which is so wide that, within these institutions, it is largely beyond challenge. At the same time, however, this progressive vision never came to dominate the practice of teaching and learning in schools—or even to reach deeply into the practice of teacher educators and researchers within education schools themselves.

A Short History of Progressivism in American Education

In order to examine the roots of the education school's commitment to a particular form of progressivism, we first need to explore briefly the history of the progressive education movement in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Only then can we understand the way that the institution and the ideology fell into each other's arms.

The first thing we need to acknowledge about the history of the progressive education movement in the United States is that it was not a single entity but instead a cluster of overlapping and competing tendencies. All of the historians of this movement are agreed on this point. These historians have used a variety of schemes for sorting out the various tendencies within the movement. David Tyack talks about administrative and pedagogical progressives;⁷ Robert Church and Michael Sedlak use the terms conservative and liberal progressives;⁸ Kliebard defines three groupings, which he calls social efficiency, child development and social reconstruction.⁹ I will use the administrative and pedagogical labels, which seem to have the most currency,¹⁰ with the understanding that the conservative and social efficiency groups fit more or less within the administrative category and the liberal and social reconstructionist groups fit roughly within the pedagogical, with child development straddling the two.

The second thing we need to recognize about the history of this movement is that the administrative progressives trounced their pedagogical counterparts. Ellen Lagemann explains this with admirable precision: 'I have often argued to students, only in part to be perverse, that one cannot understand the history of education in

⁷ Tyack, David. *The One Best System*. Cambridge, 1974.

⁸ Church, Robert L., and Michael W. Sedlak. *Education in the United States*. New York, 1976.

⁹ Kliebard, Herbert. *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958*. Boston, 1986.

¹⁰ See for example: Rury, John L. *Education and Social Change: Themes in the History of American Education*. Mahwah, NJ, 2002.

the United States during the twentieth century unless one realizes that Edward L. Thorndike won and John Dewey lost.’¹¹

What this means for our purposes is that the pedagogical progressives had the most impact on educational rhetoric, whereas the administrative progressives had the most impact on the structure and practice of education in schools. A sign of the intellectual influence exerted by the pedagogical group is that their language has come to define what we now call progressivism. And this language has become the orthodox way for teachers and teacher educators to talk about classroom instruction. At the same time, however, it was the administrative progressives who were most effective in putting their reforms to work in the daily life of schools.

In the remainder of the paper I seek to define these two competing visions of progressivism, explain how Thorndike won, and explain why the education school chose to keep faith with Dewey.

Competing Visions: Pedagogical vs. Administrative Progressivism

There were a number of prominent leaders among the pedagogical progressives—including Francis Parker, G. Stanley Hall, William Kilpatrick, George Counts, Harold Rugg and Boyd Bode. But, of course, John Dewey was the godfather of this movement. He was not particularly happy to be in this position. During his lifetime, he frequently complained about the misuse of his ideas by many of the pedagogical progressives, and he would not be happy about many of the things that contemporary education professors espouse in his name. But, for better or for worse, most of the central ideas of the current progressive creed can be traced to his writing.

Perhaps the best way to characterize the central thrust of the pedagogical progressive view of education is to follow the lead of E. D. Hirsch and point to its essential romanticism. Hirsch sees two romantic beliefs in particular lying at the heart of educational progressivism: ‘First, Romanticism believed that human nature is innately good, and should therefore be encouraged to take its natural course, unspoiled by the artificial impositions of social prejudice and convention. Second, Romanticism concluded that the child is neither a scaled-down, ignorant version of the adult nor a formless piece of clay in need of molding, rather, the child is a special being in its own right with unique, trustworthy—indeed holy—impulses that should be allowed to develop and run their course’.¹²

Closely linked to these beliefs is ‘the idea that civilization has a corrupting rather than a benign, uplifting, virtue-enhancing effect on the young child’.¹³ From this perspective, traditional education is not just an ineffective method of instruction but one that is misdirected and damaging, by seeking to impose a fixed body of knowledge on the child at the will of the teacher. The romantic alternative is a naturalistic

¹¹ Lagemann, Ellen Condliffe. “The Plural Worlds of Educational Research.” *History of Education Quarterly*, 29 (1989): 185.

¹² Hirsch, *The Schools We Need*: 74.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 75.

pedagogy (which arises from the needs, interests and capacities of the child and responds to the will of the child) and a skill-based curriculum (which focuses on providing the child with the learning skills that can be used to acquire whatever knowledge he or she desires).

Two important components of the naturalism inherent in progressive pedagogy, according to Hirsch, are developmentalism and holistic learning. If learning is natural, then teaching needs to adapt itself to the natural developmental capacities of the learner, which requires a careful effort to provide particular subject matters and skills only when they are appropriate for the student's stage of development. 'Developmentally appropriate' practices and curricula are central to this progressive vision. The second key extension of the naturalistic approach to teaching is the idea that learning is most natural when it takes place in holistic form, where multiple domains of skill and knowledge are integrated into thematic units and projects instead of being taught as separate subjects. Thus we have the progressive passion for interdisciplinary studies, thematic units and the project method.

What held the pedagogical progressives together was a common romantic vision, but the vision that held the administrative progressives together was strictly utilitarian. And whereas the former focused on teaching and learning in the classroom, the latter focused on governance and on the structure and purpose of the curriculum. In addition to Thorndike, high-visibility members of this group in the first half of the twentieth century included David Snedden, Ross Finney, Edward Ross, Leonard Ayres, Charles Ellwood, Charles Judd, Ellwood P. Cubberley, Charles Peters, W. W. Charters, John Bobbitt, Charles Prosser and, in conjunction with the pedagogical progressives, G. Stanley Hall.

The organizing principle of the diverse reform efforts that arose from this group was social efficiency.¹⁴ In one sense, this meant restructuring the governance and organization of schooling in order to make it run more efficiently, in line with business management practices. In another sense, social efficiency meant reorganizing education in order to make it more efficient in meeting the needs of economy and society, by preparing students to play effective adult roles in work, family and community. This utilitarian vision was strikingly different from the romantic perspective of the pedagogical progressives, who wanted school to focus on the learning needs and experiences of students, in the present rather than the future, as children rather than as apprentice adults. It led to the administrative progressives' most distinctive contribution to American education: scientific curriculum making. This notion of curriculum was grounded in the principle of differentiation. It started with the developmental differences in students at different points in their social and intellectual growth, as spelled out in the work of psychologists such as Hall, and with the differences in intellectual ability of students at the same age, as measured by the apparently objective methods of the new IQ testing movement. The idea, then, was to match these differences in the abilities of individual students with the different mental requirements of

¹⁴ This discussion of administrative progressivism draws heavily on: Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*.

the vast array of occupational roles required by a complex industrial society. And the curriculum approach that linked these two came from the enormously influential learning theory of the psychologist Edward Thorndike.

According to Thorndike, skills learned in one kind of learning task did not carry over very well to other kinds of tasks. This was in direct opposition to nineteenth-century faculty psychology. It also contradicted the psychological theory of the pedagogical progressives, who put primary emphasis on students' learning to learn and saw subject matter as a secondary concern, valuable mostly as a medium for skill acquisition rather than as the substantive focus of learning.¹⁵ Thorndike's view had enormous consequences for the curriculum. It meant that a core curriculum, concentrated in a few academic disciplines, made no sense for schools, especially at the secondary level where students were getting closer to their adult roles. Instead you needed a vastly expanded array of curriculum options, differentiated both by student abilities and by projected future occupation and focused on the specific knowledge and skills that the student can handle and that the job requires. From this perspective, then, all education was vocational.

The administrative progressives were enormously successful in putting through their agenda in two areas in particular: governance and curriculum. In governance, they succeeded in consolidating small school districts into larger units, centralizing control of schools in the district in the hands of a small elite school board that was buffered from politics, and in lodging daily management of the schools in a bureaucracy staffed with professional administrators.

They put together their ideas on curriculum in a highly influential report published in 1918—The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education—and they managed to put most of them into practice in the schools.¹⁶ One measure of this was their success in transforming traditional disciplinary subjects (such as math, science, history and English) into a form that was less narrowly academic and more broadly aligned with the diffuse social-efficiency aims of Cardinal Principles. The most successful change along these lines was the reconstruction of history as social studies, but other successes included the invention and dissemination of general math and general science. Other signs of the impact of the social efficiency agenda were the sharp decline in classical languages and the more moderate but still significant drop in modern language enrollments.¹⁷

But the biggest impact was in the shift toward a curriculum that was vocational in purpose and differentiated in structure. As David Angus and Jeffrey Mirel show in

¹⁵ There are striking similarities between the faculty psychology that supported learning of traditional academic subjects and the skill-oriented learning theory of the pedagogical progressives—which is ironic, since faculty psychology was the grounding for the classical curriculum that the pedagogical and administrative progressives so strongly opposed.

¹⁶ Commission on Reorganization of Secondary Education. "Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education." *Bulletin* no. 35, US Department of Interior, Bureau of Education, 1918.

¹⁷ Krug, Edward A. *The American High School, 1880–1920*. Madison, WI, 1964; Id., *The American High School, 1920–1941*. Madison, WI, 1972.

their study of American high school course enrollments in the twentieth century, most courses that students were taking in the 1930s were still nominally in traditional academic subjects rather than the new vocational, health and home economics areas.¹⁸ But these academic courses themselves had already undergone transformation into a social efficiency form, such as social studies and general science, and the purpose of the whole curriculum was now increasingly recast as an effort to prepare students for their vocational roles as workers and homemakers, whatever the particular course title. Most important of all, Angus and Mirel found that the curriculum was increasingly being expanded to provide a wide array of academic and non-academic courses at multiple ability levels, which were intended to meet the needs of students with widely differing occupational trajectories and academic skills. This differentiation of the curriculum, with accompanying segregation of studies by gender and social class, was the most striking and enduring consequence of the social efficiency agenda for schools.

Not all of this was seen as bad news by the pedagogical progressives. The two forms of progressivism, for all their differences, had several key elements in common that allowed them to join forces on occasion or at least tolerate each other. One was a shared belief in developmentalism, which led them to call for education that was adapted to the capacities of students at particular stages of intellectual and social growth, although they took off from this basic position in different directions. The administrative progressives combined developmental differences with same-age differences in ability to provide the rationale for a radically differentiated curriculum, whereas the pedagogical progressives used developmentalism as a basis for opposing a standardized curriculum and supporting a learning process shaped by individual student interest and initiative. The strongest bond between the two strands of progressivism, however, was their common dissatisfaction with, and often active hostility toward, the traditional academic curriculum. In this attack on discipline-based school subjects, the two stood together, although the grounds for their attacks were quite different. Administrative progressives saw academic subjects as an impediment to the acquisition of the useful knowledge needed to play adult social and economic roles, but the pedagogical progressives saw these subjects as an imposition of adult structures of knowledge that would impede student interest and deter self-directed learning.

However the main thrust of the social efficiency curriculum, with its emphasis on vocational training and differentiated outcomes, was diametrically opposite to the core principles of the pedagogical progressives. It mandated exactly the kind of top-down curriculum that the latter abhorred, imposed on students in order to serve society's need for particular skills and knowledge, and forcing them spend their time in schools becoming socialized for the adult social roles they will play. This puts priority on learning particular subject matter instead of learning to learn; it elevates the interests of society and of school administrators over the interests of students; it

¹⁸ Angus, David L., and Jeffrey E. Mirel. *The Failed Promise of the American High School, 1890–1995*. New York, 1999.

makes the classroom a preparation for adulthood rather than an exploration of childhood; and, in the name of these social benefits, it risks extinguishing the child's engagement in learning and curiosity about the world. It was, in short, exactly the kind of curriculum that Dewey deplored, 'externally presented material, conceived and generated in standpoints and attitudes remote from the child, and developed in motives alien to him'.¹⁹

Not only did the social efficiency curriculum threaten the kind of natural learning process treasured by the pedagogical progressives, but it also threatened the values of social justice and egalitarian community that were central to their beliefs. This curriculum was radical in its challenge to traditional notions of academic education, but it was profoundly conservative in its embrace of the existing social order and in its eagerness to prepare students for predetermined positions within that order.²⁰ It introduced tracking and ability grouping into American schools; it introduced ability testing and guidance as ways of sorting students into the appropriate classes; and it institutionalized the educational reproduction of social inequality by creating a system in which educational differences followed from and in turn reinforced differences in class, gender and race.

While the administrative progressives enjoyed considerable and enduring success in implementing their program, pedagogical progressives did not. In general, the inroads they made on practice were small and fleeting. Zilversmit summarized his study of school districts in the Chicago area in a way that paralleled the view expressed by Dewey himself looking back on the progressive movement from the perspective of the 1950s. Zilversmit put it this way: 'The ultimate failure was that so much of progressivism's apparent success was rhetorical. While some schools and individual teachers had heeded Dewey's call for a more child-centered school, most had given only lip service to these ideas while continuing older practices.'²¹ Schools that adopted progressive teaching with any depth and seriousness were few, and these efforts usually did not last. Private progressive schools popped up, flourished for a while, and then typically reverted to the norm when the founder died or moved on. Public school systems that took the plunge likewise slipped back to a more traditional academic curriculum over time.

Explaining Why the Administrative Progressives Won

Why did the administrative progressives have a larger impact on schools than their pedagogical counterparts?

First, their reform message appealed to people in power. Business and political leaders were attracted to a mode of educational reform that promised to eliminate

¹⁹ Dewey, John. "The Child and the Curriculum." In *The School and Society and the Child and the Curriculum*. Chicago, 1902/1990: 205.

²⁰ Cremin, *The Transformation of the School*; Church and Sedlak, *Education in the United States*; Ravitch, *Left Back*; Rury, *Education and Social Change*.

²¹ Zilversmit, *Changing Schools*: 168.

waste, to organize and manage schools more efficiently, to tailor instruction to the needs of employers, to Americanize the children of immigrants, and to provide students with the skills and attitudes they would need to perform and to accept their future roles in society. For people who could make these reforms happen, this was the right message at the right time.

Second, the utilitarian quality of the administrative progressive agenda made it easier to sell than the romantic vision of their pedagogical counterparts. They were offering a way to make schools work better in serving society's needs, whereas the pedagogical progressives were offering a way to make learning more natural, more intrinsically engaging, more authentic. In a contest between utility and romance, utility is usually going to win: it promises to give us something we need rather than merely something we might like.

Third, the administrative progressives argued that their agenda stood on the authority of science. The pedagogical progressives also drew on science in making their claims (for example, Dewey published a book in 1929 called *The Sources of a Science of Education*)²² but they had a harder time demonstrating the empirical effectiveness of such diffuse notions as child-centered instruction and the project method. Meanwhile the social efficiency leaders adeptly deployed data from a flood of tests and statistics and school surveys to 'prove' the value of their reforms.

Fourth, as Lagemann points out, Dewey lost the battle for the schools in part because he retired early from the field.²³ His direct involvement in schools lasted only eight years, from the founding of the Laboratory School in 1896 until the time he left Chicago and entered the philosophy department at Columbia in 1904. After that, his work on education was spun out of memory and woven into theory, giving it an abstract and academic air, and these qualities became an enduring legacy for the pedagogical progressives. In contrast, the administrative progressives were deeply involved in the schools as administrators, policymakers, curriculum developers and educational researchers. Empirically grounded, personally engaged and resolutely practical, they enjoyed enormous credibility in promoting their reform agenda. Under these circumstances, it should be no surprise that Dewey's main effect was on educational rhetoric while Thorndike's main effect was on educational practice.

Finally, the administrative progressives' focus on the management of schools and the structure of the curriculum gave them an important power advantage over the pedagogical progressives, who focused on teachers and their practice in the classroom. Teachers were in a weak position to effect change in the face of opponents who were school administrators and educational policymakers. This was especially true when the latter had managed to define the administrative and curriculum structures within which teachers had to function. Even teachers who really wanted to carry out child-centered instruction in their classrooms found themselves confined within a bureaucratic school system which mandated a differentiated and vocationally oriented curriculum that was not conducive to this kind of teaching. Under these

²² Dewey, John. *The Sources of a Science of Education*. New York, 1929.

²³ Lagemann, "The Plural Worlds of Educational Research".

circumstances, it is no surprise that teachers were more likely to adopt some rhetoric from pedagogical progressivism and to inject some token activity and movement into their classrooms than they were to implement the full Deweyan agenda.

Pedagogical Progressivism and the Education School

So how did the triumph of the administrative progressives affect education schools? As Michael Katz has argued, academic units focused on education started out with a critical stance toward their subject, but by the 1930s they had evolved into a strictly functional role supporting the existing system of schooling.²⁴ By this time, schools were organized according to the principles of administrative progressivism. They were professionally managed organizations devoted to the production of socially efficient educational outcomes. They sorted students by academic ability and future job prospects and then provided a stratified curriculum designed to meet these highly divergent needs. The job of education schools was to prepare teachers and administrators who could operate efficiently within this model of schooling, and to carry out research that would make the system run more smoothly.

It was a job, to be sure, but it was not much of a mission. It presented the education professor as a functionary, a cog in the new social-efficiency education machine, but this left the professor with nothing to profess. Administrative progressivism promised a cold and scientific kind of educational efficiency. This was cause enough for some professors; many of the administrative progressives were themselves education professors, particularly those in programs such as administration, educational psychology and testing. Yet for most of the faculty, especially those involved in curriculum and instruction and teacher education, this was not the kind of cause that made them want to jump out of bed in the morning and race into work.

With their roles thus downscaled and deskilled, it is easy to understand why the success of administrative progressivism reinforced the education faculty's attraction to pedagogical progressivism. The latter was a vision of education that could really get an education professor's blood pumping. Pedagogical progressivism proposed to do a lot more than just make schools efficient. It called for turning education upside down, by having the purposes and interests of the student drive the curriculum rather than forcing the curriculum onto the student. It offered a way to free schools from artificial constraints and rigid disciplines and unleash the student's natural impulse to learn. It proposed to recreate the classroom as a model democratic community of learners, which could become a way to reduce injustice and enhance democratic equality in the larger society.

Pedagogical progressivism, therefore, may have lost the fight to shape practice in schools and even in education schools; but the vision was still alive, and in the education school it found an ideological safe haven. It offered most education professors the mission they needed in order to infuse meaning into their newly redefined work

²⁴ Katz, Michael B. "From Theory to Survey in Graduate Schools of Education." *Journal of Higher Education* 36 (1966): 325-334.

as teacher educators and functionaries in the educational machine. They did their teaching and research within the structure defined by Thorndike but their hearts and minds belonged to Dewey. Not for nothing has Dewey's picture been found on the wall in so many education school offices for so many years.

This rhetorical entrenchment of pedagogical progressivism within the education school posed no serious threat to the accomplishments of the administrative progressives. Early on, the two groups in the progressive movement had in effect divided the territory between themselves, with one taking the ground and the other taking the air: the administrative progressives focused on organization and the pedagogues on rhetoric. As Lagemann suggests, it probably all started when Dewey left the lab school for the philosophy department. The control of the administrative progressives over organization, curriculum and practice in schools was so secure that they could afford to have faculty members in education schools spouting the creed of child-centered instruction. The professors could teach the language of Dewey to teacher candidates, employ it in decorating their scholarship and talk it up in their workshops in schools. Teachers too could come to talk the talk of pedagogical progressivism but, like the professors, they also had to work within the differentiated and vocationally oriented structure of schooling created by the administrative progressives, so the consequences for this structure were minimal.

The persistence of a harmlessly rhetorical form of pedagogical progressivism within the education school also proved useful to the newly established administrative progressive order in schools by providing it with much-needed ideological cover. Social efficiency education, when examined closely from the perspective of American traditions of democratic equality and individual opportunity, was not an attractive sight. As a social process, it sorted students into ability groups based in part on social origins, provided them with access only to the knowledge deemed within their ability, and then sent them off to particular positions in the pyramid of jobs based on their academic attainments. As an educational process, it was mechanistic, alienating and dull, with a dumbed-down curriculum and a disengaging pedagogy. This was a coldly utilitarian and socially reproductive vision of schooling, and the offer it made to students—learn a skill and take your place in the workforce—was hard to get excited about and easy to refuse. Into this efficient and heartless environment, the romantic educational vision of the pedagogical progressives introduced welcome elements, such as natural learning, student-centered teaching, an interest-based curriculum, and possibilities for personal fulfillment and social improvement. Therefore, having education schools imbue student teachers with commitment to this kind of engaging and optimistic form of teaching and learning helped make the whole prospect of social efficiency education seem a little more palatable.

Tragedy, Comedy and Romance

What can we make of this story about progressivism, schools and schools of education in the twentieth century US? As I suggested at the beginning, it is best understood as a series of overlapping stories, each in a different genre: tragedy, comedy and

romance. The tragic story was the abject failure of education schools to make an effective case for pedagogical progressivism, which left the educational field free of impediments to the administrative progressives in their sweeping reconstruction of American schools in the early part of the century. The result was a system of schooling that was tilted heavily in the direction of social efficiency rather than liberal education, curriculum delivery rather than engaged learning, differentiation of school subjects rather than broad access to knowledge, and social reproduction rather than social opportunity.

Not that pedagogical progressivism by itself offered a particularly compelling alternative. Part of what made the story comic was the tendency of Dewey's unwanted acolytes to put forth a caricature version of child-centered instruction, which emphasized pedagogical process over knowledge acquisition and a romantic faith in natural learning over a more pragmatic belief in a sound curriculum.²⁵ If the Kilpatrick wing of the pedagogical progressives had won, American classrooms might well have turned into places with florid instructional process and pallid academic content, where students were highly engaged but academically unchallenged. Part of the comedy also was the result of the ineffectual advocacy for pedagogical progressivism by hapless education school professors, whose professional pratfalls made it all too easy for opponents to discount us as ideologues of constructivist teaching, with little influence on schools and little credibility in the academy.

In the end, as at the beginning, the story also has retained the feel of a romance: an account of a longstanding affair of the heart between the faculty in education schools and the ideal of child-centered instruction, made all the more bittersweet because this ideal remained, and continues to remain, unrealized. The romantic nature of these education school beliefs may account in part for the melodrama in the debate between constructivist education professors and standards-based reformers over the process and content of American education, and for the unwillingness of both sides to seek a middle ground. As a result, for both sides this debate seems to extend beyond a disagreement about what works, becoming more like a battle between good and evil—with the professors, despite all evidence to the contrary, holding onto the dream of Dewey triumphant, and the reformers, despite all evidence to the contrary, persisting in the belief that Dewey's followers have already ruined teaching and learning in schools. The Pyrrhic victory by the pedagogical progressives in the airy realm of educational rhetoric has fooled participants in the debate into assuming that substantive victory on the ground in the classroom is (for one) a possibility and (for the other) a reality.

²⁵ In this way, many misguided followers of Dewey ignored his explicit faith in a form of schooling that emphasized equally both the child and the curriculum: Dewey, "The Child and the Curriculum".