

Past

Introduction: Aims of Progressive Education

JOHN L. PECORE

University of West Florida

Progressive education is based in pragmatism, a philosophical movement that began in the United States in the 1870s whose leaders included Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller. These pragmatists were inspired by earlier works such as Francis Bacon's scientific method, David Hume's ideas of naturalism, Thomas Reid's direct realism, and Immanuel Kant's idealism. Others who influenced progressive education include John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Friedrich Fröbel, to name a few. While related ideas of progressive education are seen internationally in the schools of Maria Montessori in Italy, Olive Decroly in Belgium, Leo Tolstoy in Russia, and Janusz Korczak in Poland, among others, this introduction provides a perspective in the context of American progressive education.

The term "progressive education," first used sporadically in the 1880s (Cremin, 1959), has appeared as a generic term in educational literature for over a century, usually with a commonly understood or misunderstood meaning. In 1933, Reisner wrote the following in response to the question: What is progressive education?

To undertake in this current year of grace an answer to the question put above may to many seem gratuitous and to many others belated. For years the term has been in constant use and presumably its meaning is clearly and comprehensively understood. And yet there remains a great deal of uncertainty regarding just what progressive education is. Laymen, hearing the term so freely used by professional educators, are abashed at their ignorance of what is apparently so well known, and only privately, with an apologetic air, do they confess to their deficiency of understanding, and request that in a very few and simple words the

mystery be made plain to them. Even among educators—educators organized in panels for the discussion of progressive education—there appears to be a deplorable lack of unanimity regarding the connotations of the word progressive. (p. 192)

AIMS OF PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

Progressive education began with the pioneering work of Francis W. Parker in the 1870s, and gained popularity through the writings of John Dewey and adoption by the Progressive Education Association as a movement to improve the lives of individuals. The movement entails a focus on 1) quality of family and community life, 2) instruction tailored to educate everyone, and 3) a culture where everyone shares in the benefits of science and the pursuit of arts. Progressive education has always represented different things to different people. For example, social settlement workers viewed progressive education as a means to transform the school into a community center for social education, while agrarian reformers envisioned a means to educate children on the joys and possibilities of farm life (Cremin, 1959). In *Schools of Tomorrow*, John Dewey and his daughter Evelyn (1915/1962) vividly documented the variety of progressive schools such as the Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education in Alabama and the neighborhood-oriented programs in Indianapolis. They argued for adjusting education to society through a new kind of education appropriate to a democratic society that equips everyone to live intelligently, making for a better and richer society. Thus, for education to have different meanings for different people makes sense.

For one group, the progressive education movement meant a society devoted to human worth and excellence through highly individualistic pedagogy where schools encouraged children to freely develop their uniquely creative potential. A second group, including Elsie Ripley Clapp, advocated for school activities directed at social and economic regeneration of local communities. George S. Counts and his followers were a third group, who sought to build a new social order through political reform. Eugene Randolph Smith and a fourth group of progressive educators concentrated on reorganizing and enlivening the traditional school studies. Finally, the fifth group, including John Dewey, regarded the progressive education movement as an expression of experimentalism emphasizing scientific method, naturalism, and social planning (Cremin, 1959).

TENETS OF PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

While aims provide a vision or goals for education, tenets are the principle ideas for achieving the vision regardless of the means with which to pursue the aims.

While the progressive education movement has never been precisely defined, prominent connotations are linked to child-centeredness, guided by concepts of interest, freedom, and self-activity, a psychology of learning by doing, and a social philosophy that stresses individual worth and cooperation over competition (Bode, 1938). Despite being ambiguous, Bode wrote,

A visitor to our schools ordinarily has no difficulty in recognizing a so-called progressive school. He can usually tell the difference the moment he opens the door. The progressive school cultivates an atmosphere of activity and freedom which is all its own. In academic language, the progressive school is a place where children go, not primarily to learn, but to carry on a way of life. (p. 9)

According to Washburne (1952), progressive education is not easy to define, simply because it is always changing. When trying to describe in concrete terms a progressive school, the school has progressed beyond the description. Progressive education is continuously progressing; it is alive and growing with no fixed creed, no unchanging body of knowledge, and no specific method to be applied. Just as science and society are constantly changing, progressive education adapts to the progress of science and humanity. As our knowledge of how students learn, develop, and mature improves, so does progressive education in providing experiences that help students to develop their abilities and interests, to understand their unique role in the changing world, and to view their own well-being as inseparable from that of others (Washburne, 1952).

At the suggestion of Marietta Johnson, between late 1918 and early 1919, Stanwood Cobb convened a small group of leaders carrying on experimental programs and their supporters to prepare for the formation of the Association for the Advancement of Progressive Education (renamed in 1931 as Progressive Education Association). As the founder of the School of Organic Education in Fairhope, Alabama, Johnson, at the time, was implementing her unconventional ideas about education, which included no examinations, no homework, and no possibility of failure. Another leading pioneer in the group was Eugene Randolph Smith, first headmaster (1912–1922) at the Park School in Baltimore, Maryland, and later headmaster of the Beaver Country Day School in Brookline, Massachusetts. Smith (1939) recognized that what children needed was an education

that helps an individual to develop an understanding of life, and the character and the power of thinking and doing that will help him to live richly, to use his abilities wisely and fully, and to be a useful and constructive member of his community.

The group, with mostly a synthesis of the ideas from Johnson and Smith, crafted seven tenets of progressive education, edited in Table 1.

Table 1. Statement of Seven Principles of Progressive Education.

Principle	Description
1. <i>Freedom to Develop Naturally</i>	Students should manage their conduct according to the social needs of the community rather than by arbitrary rules and be provided with opportunities for initiative and self-expression in an environment rich with interesting and freely available materials.
2. <i>Interest, the Motive of all Work</i>	Student interest should be satisfied and developed through 1) direct and indirect experiences with the world and its activities, 2) application of knowledge and integration of subjects, and 3) consciousness of achievement.
3. <i>The Teacher as Guide, not a Taskmaster</i>	Teachers should be facilitators of small classes by encouraging student use of their senses; training students to observe and make judgments; mostly guiding students to use various sources of information, including lived experiences and books; providing support for student reasoning about acquired information; and expressing forceful conclusions reached logically.
4. <i>Scientific Study of Student Development</i>	Student assessment should not be limited to grades but should include both objective and subjective reports on the physical, mental, moral, and social attention on the all-important work of student development rather than simply teaching subject matter.
5. <i>Greater Attention to all That Affects the Student's Physical Development</i>	Health of the student should be the first priority of schools by providing adequate space for movement, good light and air, clean and well-ventilated buildings, and easy access to and frequent use of adequate playgrounds and the outdoors.
6. <i>Cooperation Between School & Home to Meet the Needs of Student Life</i>	Parents and teachers should intelligently cooperate to provide as much of the natural interest and activities for practical experience, to include homemaking and healthful recreation for both boys and girls. All, if not most, student studying should be done at school, and extracurricular studies should be at school or home to dissipate unnecessary energy. Parents should know what the school is doing and why and ways to effectively cooperate; teachers should help parents develop a broad outlook on education and provide help by making school resources available.
7. <i>The Progressive School a Leader in Educational Movements</i>	The school should be a laboratory of new ideas—which, if warranted, are encouraged—and lead movements in education, combined with the best of the past, and added to the sum of educational knowledge, rather than schools being ruled by tradition alone.

Note. Originally phrased principles can be found in *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education 1876–1957* by L. Cremin, 1961, pp. 243–245.

Today, progressive education is viewed as “a pedagogical movement that emphasizes student-centered learning experiences and that incorporates aspects such as learning by doing, valuing diversity, integrated curriculum, problem-solving, critical thinking, collaborative learning, social responsibility, democracy, and lifelong learning” (Pecore & Bruce, 2013, p. 10). As in the early 1900s, progressive education today means different things to different people. For example, while some progressive education schools focus on learning by projects and others focus on social justice, the important common feature is the situation of learning within a social, community, or political context that some progressive educators may more broadly use to actively promote critical pedagogy and democratic education (Pecore & Bruce, 2013).

THIS SECTION

In this first section within the *International Handbook of Progressive Education*, we include 10 chapters that explore the legacy of progressive education by drawing on the history of progressive education as a way of looking at relevant present-day educational issues and, in that context, engage in critical dialogue about the aims of education. Two chapters address the role of critical discourse in higher education and teacher preparation. Others examine progressive education reform initiatives and visions to provide historical context for the aims of progressive education, including efforts both within and beyond the U.S. Further chapters focus on specific trends, such as project-based learning, issues-centered education, aesthetic education, or wonder.

We first present two chapters addressing the role of critical discourse in higher education and unique perspectives on teacher preparation. In “Anti-Progressivism in Education: Past and Present,” Wayne Urban presents the works of three mid-20th-century critiques of progressive education in teacher education faculties. He relates the criticism to the decline of academic standards in American teacher education and the need for committed faculties to raise the intellectual demands in colleges of education. In the next chapter, “John Dewey and Village Institute Model in Teacher Training System in Turkey,” Selçuk Uygun compares Dewey’s ideas on teacher education to the village institute model within the Turkish teacher training system. Relying mostly on Dewey’s 1924 report to Turkish authorities documenting his observations, evaluations, and recommendations of Turkish teacher training, Uygun compares Dewey’s ideas to the principles governing the foundation and operation of Turkish village institutes.

The next four chapters offer insight into progressive education reform initiatives and visions to provide some historical context for the aims of progressive

education. In “John Dewey and the Challenge of Progressive Education,” Leonard Waks considers John Dewey’s ideas to reconcile new tendencies in education with democratic social concepts. As present-day teachers connect with the historical tenets of progressive education, Waks analyzes specific aspects of Dewey’s work in relation to a global network society. The next chapter is “Austrian School Reform, 1919–1934,” which articulates the reform movement of Otto Glöckel in post-World-War-I Austria. Here, George Hein highlights the influence of politics on educational policy. Anna Brix Thomsen in “Revamping the French Educational Philosopher Célestin Freinet’s Pedagogy and its Relevance for Current Discussions on Progressive Education” presents the philosophy and pedagogy of Freinet, which includes an educational environment incorporating work-play into children’s daily school activities. Then, Rhonda Webb and Chara Bohan, in “Beyond Jane Addams: The Progressive Pedagogies of Ella Flagg Young, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Lucy Maynard Salmon, and Anna Julia Cooper,” feature four pioneering women exemplifying different contexts of progressive aims in practice. They examine the work of Ella Flagg Young in administrative reform, Lucy Sprague Mitchell in elementary education, Lucy Maynard Salmon in history teaching, and Anna Julia Cooper in education for the disenfranchised.

The final four chapters describe trends (i.e., project-based learning, issues-centered education, aesthetic education, and wonder) to inspire the practices for achieving the aims of progressive education. In “From Kilpatrick’s Project Method to Project-Based Learning,” John Pecore illustrates the progression from project method to project-based learning as an example of how progressive education changes from the scientific progress of knowledge. Next, Gregg Jorgensen advocates for fostering democracy through education by making personal and political beliefs part of our national debate in “Discovering Dewey as a Guiding Foundation: Examining Moral Problems Using Issues-Centered Education.” After presenting John Dewey’s theories of ethics and moral education, Jorgensen highlights the possibilities of stimulating students’ critical thinking through issues-centered curricula. Then, in “Saving a Progressive Vision: Assessing the Move of the Barnes Foundation,” Walter Feinberg and Jeanne Connell help us to understand the controversy of moving Barnes’s multibillion-dollar art collection by examining Barnes’s conceptualization of art with respect to John Dewey’s ideas for aesthetic education and its role in progressive education aims. Finally, in “Where’s Wonder?” Fred Burton comments on the lack of joy, passion, and imagination education provides for today’s students. He reflects on ideas from preeminent progressive educators such as David Hawkins, Eleanor Duckworth, and Ken and Yetta Goodman, in the context of current school reform. Fred reminds us that wonder plays an essential role in today’s educational environment of standards and high-stakes tests.

REFERENCES

- Bode, B. H. (1938). *Progressive education at the crossroads*. New York, NY: Newson & Co.
- Cremin, L. A. (1959). What was progressive education: What happened to it? *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 25(23), 721–726.
- Cremin, L. A. (1961). *The transformation of the school: Progressivism in America 1876–1957*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Dewey, J., & Dewey, E. (1915/1962). *Schools of tomorrow*. New York, NY: E. P. Dutton.
- Pecore, J. L., & Bruce, B. C. (2013). Editorial. *Progressive Education: Antecedents of Educating for Democracy [Special Issue]*. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 9(1), 10–12.
- Reisner, E. H. (1930). What is progressive education? *Teachers College Record*, 3(35), 192–201. (ID Number: 7315). Retrieved from <http://www.tcrecord.org/library>
- Smith, R. E. (1924). *Education moves ahead: A survey of progressive methods*. Boston, MA: The Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Smith, R. E. (1939). United States: Paper three. *Teachers College Record*, 1(1), 345–355.
- Washburne, C. (1952). *What is progressive education? A book for parents and others*. New York, NY: The John Day Company.