

Tom Little and Katherine Ellison. 2015. *Loving Learning: How Progressive Education Can Save America's Schools*. New York: W. W. Norton. 256 pp. \$26.95 (cloth).

In Los Angeles during the fall of 2013, the board of Progressive Education Network (PEN) listened intently as Tom Little read a passage from the book he was writing. He shared an experience of joining Wingra School first-graders for recess on a below-freezing day in Madison, Wisconsin. The elegant prose of Little's words was captivating, and it provided a glimpse into *Loving Learning: How Progressive Education Can Save America's Schools*. The book, released less than two years later, and after Little had lost his battle with bone cancer, represents 18 months of Tom Little researching and writing a culminating expression of his life's work.

In *Loving Learning*, Little and Katherine Ellison tell stories of Little's visit to 45 progressive schools across the United States. The book recounts Little's personal experiences with the school children, teachers, and administrators he met during his tour and his practical knowledge as a teacher and educational administrator at Park Day School, while it also integrates some research findings on progressive education. By presenting the successes of how progressive schools provide joy in learning, this work provides ideas for saving America's schools.

As a founding board member of the Progressive Education Network and a founding member of the East Bay Independent School Heads Association, Little was a highly respected progressive educator. He was a Klingenstein fellow at Columbia University's Teacher's College and a visiting scholar at Mills College. Little spent his 38-year educational career as teacher and head of school at Park Day School in Oakland, California. Park Day School is a kindergarten through eighth-grade independent school with an enrollment of over 300 students. The school, which proudly refers to its pedagogical philosophy as progressive, is highlighted throughout the book.

The introduction to *Loving Learning*, titled "Meet Me at Park Day," begins with a tour of Park Day School, where a picture of progressive schools begins to emerge. Outside, children are taking turns hanging on the monkey bars,

checking out the vegetables in the garden, or watching the chickens in the coop. Inside, students are typically sprawled out on a rug or lounged in an overstuffed chair. Typical of progressive schools, Park Day School deliberately embraces a diverse student body with a strong sense of community. Little's career as a progressive educator began at the age of 22, when, as a graduate student in 1976, he volunteered at Park Day School. Mentored by Susan Erb and Harriet Cohen, Little was hired to teach later that year. Ten years later he would find himself leading the school and building a community of learners of various socioeconomic backgrounds and a richness of ethnic, religious, and gender diversity.

Chapter 1, "Remakers of Mankind," provides a nice concise history of progressive education as background for the stories Little shares throughout the book. After a brief introduction of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel as providers of the early foundation on which progressive education is built, the early twentieth century progressive educators, like John Dewey, Francis W. Parker, Marietta Johnson, Maria Montessori, and Carleton Washburne, to name a few, are discussed. The type of education that focuses as much on children's emotional and social needs as it does on their academic needs is vastly different from Little's experiences attending Catholic school. Little credits Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age* as his introduction to progressive education and as the deciding factor for his pursuit of a teaching career. The chronological overview of progressive education, from a peak in the early part of the twentieth century through the turbulent years preceding the mid-twentieth century, is a comprehensible summary of progressive education.

Chapter 2, "The Rug," examines the focus of progressive schools on the whole child, while chapter 3, "The Inner Ear," investigates the commitment of progressive schools to an integrated real-world curriculum. Teaching the whole child and involving students in real-world endeavors are two core strategies practiced in the progressive schools Little visited. When sharing the story of nine-year-old Saleh Khalaf, Little beautifully illustrates what it means to educate the whole child in a caring community focused on connectedness. Khalaf attended Park Day School while undergoing numerous surgeries to remove life-threatening shrapnel at the Oakland Children's Hospital. Khalaf, born in Iraq, lost both his hands and one eye after picking up a bright yellow cluster bomb, thinking it was a toy. From initial "get well" cards to the friendships he forged, the caring connectedness of Park Day School provided the necessary medicine for Khalaf to heal from his emotional and physical traumas.

Progressive schools make understanding democracy a cornerstone of education, which is highlighted in chapter 4, "The Magic Circle." Stories

illustrating the various ways progressive schools live democratically and value mutual respect by sharing control with students are shared. Readers learn of the important role and historical significance diversity plays in building strong tolerant communities. Progressive educators, like the early feminists who founded progressive schools and encouraged female students to excel, have always been on the cutting edge of social change. Park Day School, as a contemporary example, has been on the civil rights frontier since enrolling its first transgender kindergartner in 2002. Training sessions with specialists were held for teachers and workshops were provided for students and parents. In time, a gender-neutral vocabulary was established along with gender-neutral bathrooms. Students were lining up by shoe color rather than by gender. Thus, the claim about progressive schools' attitude toward diversity going beyond tolerance is well supported.

In chapter 5, "The Storyboard," the authors address technology in progressive schools. Modern technology seen in progressive schools is simply an outgrowth of the shop class, where students are encouraged to tinker, invent, and create. Every autumn the Park Day School hosts a mini-maker faire, with activities related to metal-smithing, robotics design, model rockets, and jewelry making. Progressive schools' celebration of hands-on learning and criticism of standardized testing and the accountability movement is discussed in chapter 6, "Tasting the Soup." The authors provide a convincing argument on the harm of high-stakes testing stressing kids out with no appreciable improvement occurring over the past decade. For progressive educators, student evaluation focuses on mastery learning and incorporates effective alternative forms of assessment. As opposed to providing a letter grade, student evaluations at a progressive school are written narratives describing the student's social/emotional progress, approach to learning/work/play, and mastery of specific subject area content and skills.

Chapter 7, "The Laboratory," focuses on the need to find the right balance. Caroline Pratt's City and Country School in Manhattan is provided as an example of progressive teaching with a healthy amount of freedom and responsibility. Free-range schools like Summerhill, however, are indicted for taking good ideas too far. The three excesses leading to most of the criticism of progressive education that need addressing are giving children too much freedom, granting teachers too much autonomy, and lowering academic expectations when attending to students' perceived emotional needs. These critiques are what give progressive education the reputation for being "loosey goosey," but in most progressive schools they are unjustified.

The contentious idea of encouraging social agency and awareness in students, which led to the popularity of social reconstructionist and the

eventual split with progressive educators, is examined in chapter 8, “The Petition.” Some progressive schools, like Cambridge Friends Schools, fully embrace a social justice curriculum in their mission statements. A common theme among progressive schools is an ability and obligation to make a difference in the world, accomplishing more than community service by involving students in social justice projects. The authors conclude the book with chapter 9, “Back to the Future,” citing examples of a movement for using basic progressive strategies and collaborations through reform-minded networks. For readers interested in visiting progressive schools, a list of schools using progressive practices is provided in the appendix. The schools Little visited are notated with an asterisk mark.

While this review primarily highlights Little’s experiences during his visits to progressive schools, Little and Ellison also provide research-based evidence to justify claims made in support of the stories shared. Resources of these warrants are provided in 11 pages of notes and a two-page bibliography in the back of the book. This makes it easy for readers to find original source documents that support progressive practices.

The book *Loving Learning* is an excellent resource for both veteran and beginning teachers. Through their passionate and convincing voices, Little and Ellison provide research findings to support practices of veteran progressive educators and hope for beginning teachers who desire learning to be a joyful experience. Thus, the book is a great choice to use with educator professional development. Potential worthwhile discussions as a result from reading this text might include the following: (i) balancing student’s emotions and intellects, (ii) guiding learning around student interests, (iii) incorporating alternative assessments, (iv) integrating curriculum and disciplines, (v) involving students in real-world endeavors, and (vi) supporting participation in community service.

Loving Learning nicely weaves together Tom Little’s life experiences as a progressive educator and administrator and his journey to progressive schools across the United States within the historical context of progressive education. Little and Ellison not only coherently present views of progressive education but also provide practical examples of these ideas in contemporary twenty-first century schools. A few of the stories told in *Loving Learning* to represent the ideas of progressive education are highlighted in this review, and they are what make this book an interesting and memorable read.

By John L. Pecore