Review essay: Can progressive education save America's schools?

John L. Pecore*
University of West Florida

Abstract
In *Loving Learning: How Progressive Education Can Save America's Schools*, Tom Little and Katherine Ellison describe Tom's experiences, personal journey and knowledge of progressive education. During a pilgrimage to 45 progressive schools, Tom set out to visit schools that unabashedly called themselves progressive and asked the question, "What is progressive education?" This essay first reviews the book around six core strategies identified as progressive, and then provides a discussion in the context of 20th century curriculum ideologies. Differences between ideologies are what lead to the dualism that makes education divisive. The current state of education reveals a new surge for change. By avoiding the *–isms* that force the dichotomy in education, progressive education strategies can play a more central role in curriculum.

Keywords: Progressive Education, America's Schools, curriculum ideologies

* John L. Pecore is an associate professor in the College of Education and Professional Studies at the University of West Florida. He also serves as assistant director for science education and evaluation of program development and assessment at the Institute for Biomedical Philosophy. Pecore is a founding board member of the Progressive Education Network. His scholarly interests include situating learning in contextualized experiences with an emphasis in project-based learning and instruction.

Correspondence: jpecore@uwf.edu

Little, Tom, and Katherine Ellison. *Loving Learning: How Progressive Education Can Save America's Schools.* **New York: W. W. Norton & Company. ISBN-13: 978-0-3932-4616-7.**

While tradition in academic writing dictates referring to an author by last name, use of first names is a common practice for progressive educators. For this reason, it seems awkward to refer to the book's author as Little. Additionally, I want to be forthright with respect to having known Tom for over 10 years since forming PEN with five of our colleagues from across the country.

Introduction

In the Fall of 2013, Tom Little stood at the podium in front of a packed crowd of more than 800 participants at the 4th biannual Progressive Education Network (PEN) Conference. Tom began by stating, "I am a very, very lucky guy. I was able to go on a pilgrimage that I dreamed about for many, many years" (Little 2013). Since he first read Lawrence Cremin's book *The Transformation of the School*, Tom had been "doing a deep dive" (Little 2013) into the history of progressive education. Over the years of PEN meetings, I had many conversations with Tom about progressive education and can vividly recall our discussion in the early days of PEN about defining progressive education. During one exchange, we questioned who were we to define progressive education. We struggled with the fact that progressive education today, as in the past, has different meanings for different people. In the end, we agreed that a good foundation would be the seven tenets of progressive education as described by Cremin (1961; Little & Ellison 2015, 207-208; Pecore 2015).

During his pilgrimage, Tom set out to visit schools that unabashedly called themselves progressive and asked the question, "What is progressive education?" He visited 45 schools and spoke with over 100 educators. Some of the schools were in regions of the United States more populated with like-minded educators and thus more accepting of the word progressive, while in other more isolated regions the term was less positively accepted. On a visit to one Midwestern school, one of the leaders commented, "Tom, you coming to visit is like the Pope coming to visit" (Little 2013). Tom joked that he was tempted to ask which Pope. What Tom found in the many schools he visited, was an uncanny commonality of practice. Except for the teachers and the kids, no one knew the difference between a progressive school in New York City and Des Moines, Iowa. Through his school visits, Tom ascertained that the progressive practices and pedagogies he observed were attributed to tradition passed down by word of mouth, from person to person, and teacher to teacher (Little 2013).

When asked to name schools he planned to visit, a common response was "really, they're progressive?" or a bolder statement like "I don't think they are that progressive." or even the extremely bold statement, "They're not progressive" (Little 2013). This crux of the debate over defining progressive education came down to whether we (i.e. progressive educators) should judge which schools are progressive or not. For several reasons, as well as outside pressures, progressive schools varied in the degree to which they adhered to each of the seven tenets; however, each school embodied child-centered practices and embraced the importance of the interest of individual children.

Review of *Loving Learning*

In *Loving Learning: How Progressive Education Can Save America's Schools*, Tom Little and Katherine Ellison recount the story of Tom's pilgrimage. They described his visits with school children, teachers, and administrators of progressive schools across the country and included stories of his personal journey as a teacher and educational administrator as well as his knowledge of the history of progressive education. The intent of their work was to show how the success of several progressive schools returned joy back into learning while simultaneously providing a solution for many of the most pressing education dilemmas in the United States.

For Tom, progressive schools had a history of engaging children's emotions as well as their intellects, building strong and caring communities, and encouraging children's sense of social justice.

Tom began the book with a brief history of progressive education. Certainly, summarizing 100 years of a movement along with the historical roots in 20 pages, a feat Cremin (1961) needed 353 pages to complete, was a daunting task. Still, Tom presented a concise overview highlighting major contributions to progressive education.

Despite his admiration for Cremin who considered defining progressive education an elusive task, Tom believed it a moral imperative to clearly define the term. During his school visits, Tom asked each person interviewed to define progressive education. Numerous responses provided Tom a coherent definition: "Progressive Education prepares students for active participation in a democratic society, in the context of a child-centered environment, and with an enduring commitment to social justice" (Little & Ellison 2013, 52). He also identified the following six core strategies:

- Attending to student's emotions and intellects;
- Guiding learning around student interests;
- Curtailing standardized testing and ranking;
- Integrating curriculum and disciplines;
- Involving students in real-world endeavors;
- Supporting active civil participation for social justice (Little & Ellison 2013, 52; Meier 2015).

The goals of meeting the needs, both emotional and intellectual, of students were highlighted throughout the schools Tom visited. He witnessed a tradition traced back to Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel of progressive schools creating a comfortable learning environment to include, for example, rugs where students gathered daily. The whole child approach is at the core of progressive practices, which involves reducing stress, fostering strong relationships with teachers and classmates, and providing a childhood that allows kids to be kids. Tom's recommendation for meeting the needs of the whole child that challenges students intellectually and ensures a feeling of emotional safety was smaller student-teacher ratios. The smaller the class size the ". . . better relationships between students and teachers, fewer discipline problems, higher student motivation, better academic performance, fewer high school dropouts, and better teacher morale" (Little & Ellison 2015, 66).

Another core progressive strategy involves focusing on student interests to foster children's natural love of learning. For nearly a century, progressive educators have advocated for students to pursue their interests, learn at their own pace, and explore through discovery learning (Bruce & Eryaman, 2015). The teacher is viewed as the *guide on the side* as opposed to the *sage on the stage*. As advocates of joyful learning, a method for bolstering social and cognitive skills, improving creativity and problem solving, and developing abstraction and collaboration abilities, spontaneity through play in children's lives resonated with many of the educators Tom interviewed. Thus, the arts are an important component of education, which is supported with research that suggests benefits in terms of decreasing drop out rates, building confidence, and even improving test scores.

Tom, along with most progressive educators, was vehemently opposed to standardized testing. Among the reasons Tom cited included teaching to the test; reducing time for art, music, or even lunch; and the pressure such high-stakes tests place on students. For progressive public schools the accountability movement of requiring teachers to be ranked using a rubric and tying teachers' salaries to students' scores created barriers to being progressive.

Through Tom's school visits, he observed instances of integrated curriculum. He observed students using science, math, and writing skills when collaboratively researching watersheds. Students traveled on field trips to a nearby creak, measured water levels and calculated flow rates, blogged about the process, and finally prepared audiovisual presentations. At another school, students invented an island to learn geology, ecology, and culture. The progressive curriculum has long embraced the technical and visual arts and the progressive schools Tom visited integrated technology as tools for learning whether through students interacting with students in China, taking classes in digital

photography, or designing a video game.

Several progressive schools noted in the book were fortunate to have working farms where students were given the real work on a farm. In other schools the use of project-based leaning provided experiential learning opportunities around real-world problems. Examples cited included assigning a kindergarten class as custodians of a new goldfish pond, figuring out why early American settlers fought with natives, and designing clothes for characters in a book. In one school, older students editing a journal assisted younger students who submitted manuscripts. Real-world projects like these also provided an opportunity to strengthen community. Another commonality of the schools Tom visited was fostering a sense of connectedness in the community and respect for diversity. Schools like Park Day surpassed tolerance by celebrating differences. More than a decade ago, Park Day School enrolled a transgender kindergartener; the school currently enrolls over half a dozen students who identify as transgender.

Social justice permeates the way many progressive schools function from the way students are encouraged, with adult guidance, to democratically solve their own problems, to a sliding scale tuition policy. Several of the schools Tom visited included an explicit emphasis in a social justice mission such as challenging oppression or environmental stewardship. While community engagement and activism was, for Tom, a core strategy of progressive schools, schools embrace of social justice varied.

Discussion

The extent progressive schools were able to satisfy all six of Tom's core progressive strategies differed. During Tom's speech at the 2013 PEN conference, he demanded that progressive educators stop being judgmental in terms of questioning a school's progressiveness (Little 2013). Many particulars like cultures, politics, geography, goals, and people impact the ideas and customs that schools support and practice. (Bohan in press). Meeting all six core strategies extremely well does not make one school more progressive than another. Likewise, a school that chooses to focus more on a social justice component of a social reconstructionist curriculum by including activism does not make that particular school more progressive. Tom sought to write a definition for progressive education on which all could agree in an effort to unite progressive educators; however, an attempt at a consensus definition may cause division among progressive educators. For example, some Dewey supporters might take issue with the phrase *preparation for life* as Dewey stated ". . . education is not a preparation for life but is life itself" (Dewey 1897/2013). Another potentially problematic component in Tom's definition is a commitment to social justice. While Tom asserted that Dewey's strong political opinions and social activism demonstrated a personal commitment to social justice, Dewey's ideas of education favored creating an aware and active citizenry as opposed to student demonstration of social justice through activism (Banks 2012).

As many progressive strategies become more mainstream, Tom reminded readers of the role of progressive educators in leading the way. According to one review by Eric Moore (2015) in *Middleweb*, Tom's work comes across as a bit pompous when pointing out that modern research supports the intuitive practices of progressive schools. Tom's zeal for progressive education may have established a duality, setting the progressives in opposition with other educational philosophies. This discord that Dewey, Bagley and others fought against eventually led to the downfall of the progressive education movement in the 1930's. Expanding on Tom's work by providing a theoretical perspective using curriculum ideologies could assist in tempering the divisiveness among ideologies.

According to Schiro (2013), most 20th century curriculum theorists organize ideological positions into three or four classification schemes: scholar academic, fostering ideas of perennialists; social efficiency, depicting aspects of essentialists; learner centered, providing views of progressives; and social reconstruction, representing thoughts of critical theorists. Of importance are overlapping interpretations of educational philosophies within some curriculum ideologies. As Tom (Little &

Ellison 2015) described, aspects of critical theorists philosophies can be seen throughout progressive learner centered schools. Additionally, different labels have been used over the last century. For example, learner centered ideology was termed child study in the 1890s, progressive education between 1910 and 1950, open education from 1965 to 1980, and constructivist from 1990 to present (Schiro 2013).

Differences among curriculum theorists relate to philosophical divergence in terms of the purposes or aims of education as well as ontological and epistemological views. The scholar academic curriculum teaches the essence of academic disciplines to students while the social efficiency curriculum teaches the intellect, morality, and skills required for students to contribute to society and the economy. Conversely, a learner centered curriculum is designed to provide an experience for students to function effectively in a democracy and the social reconstruction curriculum involves student activism to confront local injustices, global problems, environmental concerns, and political issues.

Despite the differences among ideologies, philosophers like William C. Bagley and John Dewey opposed the dualism that made education divisive. According to Null (2007), Bagley's goal was to raise the status of the teaching profession by uniting education professors and academic colleagues. Likewise Dewey disliked the *-ism* that forced the dichotomy present in education (Dewey 1938/1998). Because various curriculum ideologies are deeply rooted in core philosophical positions, there is perhaps little hope in reconciling major differences among curriculum theorists.

Conclusion

A history of the influence of curriculum ideologies on American education reveals how, during the rise of America's Progressive Era between 1870 and 1920 (Little & Ellison 2015), opposing ideologies were simultaneously active in preventing progressive schools from being the norm in America (Schiro 2013). Tom pointed out how shortly after the peak of the progressive education movement in the 1930s, progressive educators declined in number and the schools that remained became isolated. After being dormant for half a century, the nineties brought about a short-lived reprise of the Progressive Education Association followed by organizations like the Coalition of Essential Schools, Forum for Education and Democracy, and Progressive Education Network that promote progressive reforms (Little & Ellison 2015). For the last decade, schools of education have been teaching a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. As a result progressive educators have been gathering and growing in numbers.

The current state of education reveals a new surge of each curriculum ideology to influence American education. According to Tom,

> Educators all over the country today are hungry for change, and specifically for models of teaching and learning that make more sense for stressed kids in our globalized economy. The burden of high-stakes tests and the clumsy initial rollout of the Common Core, on top of continuing signs that our system has been failing students and their families, are pushing many to seek alternatives (Little & Ellison 2015, 191).

Tom called for progressive educators to continue to organize and support one another, to educate about progressive practices, and above all, to establish evidence-based practices through research. Providing more empirical evidence of curriculum ideas as advocated by Tom might lead to the use of progressive practices in saving America's schools, as Tom desired.

References

Bohan, C. H. (In Press). Presidential address: The past, present, and future of teaching and teacher education curriculum. *Teaching and Curriculum Dialogue*.

Bruce, B. C. & Eryaman, M. Y. (2015). Introduction: Progressive Impuls in Education. In M. Y. Eryaman & B. C. Bruce (Eds.). *International Handbook of Progressive Education*. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 1-52

Cremin, L. A. (1961). *The transformation of the school: Progressivism in America 1876–1957*. New York, NY: Random House.

Dewey, J. (2013). My pedagogic creed. In D. J. Flinders, & S. J. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader* (pp. 33-40). New York, NY: Routledge. (Original work published 1897)

Dewey, J. (1998). *Experience and Education*. West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi. (Original work published in 1938)

Little, T. (2013). A National Tour of Progressive Schools. *Progressive Education Network Conference*. Los Angeles, CA. (Copy in possession of author)

Little, T & Ellison, K. (2015). *Loving Learning: How Progressive Education Can Save America's Schools.* New York, W. W. Norton & Company.

Meier, N. (May 10, 2015). Loving Learning: Book Review. Retrieved from http://nicholasmeier.com/2015/05/10/loving-learning-book-review/.

Moore, E. (2015). Progressive Education: Can it Save America? *Middleweb*. Retrieved from http://www.middleweb.com/21483/progressive-education-can-it-save-america/.

Null, J. W. (2007). William C. Bagley and the founding of essentialism: An untold story in American educational history. *Teachers College Record, 109*(4), 1013-1055.

Pecore, J. L. (2015). Section Introduction: Aims of progressive education. In John Pecore (Ed.). Section 1 – Past of *International Handbook of Progressive Education*. Editors-in-chief: Mustafa Y. Eryaman and Bertram C. Bruce, New York: Peter Lang.

SFGATE. (May 7, 2014). Obituaries. Thomas Little: 1953-2014. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Retrieved from http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/sfgate.

Schiro, M. S. (2013). *Curriculum theory: Conflicting visions and enduring concerns*. (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Zacko-Smith, J. (2012). Social reconstruction and education. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education.* (pp. 2009-2011). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.