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Now Is the Time

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Now Is the Time

Jonathan Silin & Meredith Moore

Schooling has always been a contested terrain that both reflects contemporary politics and social arrangements and offers opportunities for resistance and models of alternative possibilities. Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education), waves of critique have emanated from both those who decry the failure of schools to turn out a globally competitive labor force and those who are critical of schools for perpetuating socially unjust practices and outcomes for students. While efforts to remedy these problems have brought with them new resources and policies, they have also resulted in heightened calls for accountability and national standards.

Past issues of the Occasional Paper Series (OP 24, OP 27) have described how teachers' professional lives are circumscribed by high-stakes testing and pre-digested curricula. They also document the ways that students are subjected to narrowly conceived, academically focused programming that leaves little room for personally meaningful learning and socially relevant curriculum. In the current educational environment it is challenging for teachers and administrators to live up to the progressive ideal of the school as responsive to the values and needs of local communities and families. Nor is there space for continuous reflection on practice, including the rigorous collection of qualitative and quantitative data that results in an evolving, socially transformative curriculum.

In an era when intense pressure has been brought to bear on educators at all levels to “fix” education, *Progressive Practices in Public Schools* is designed to shine a light on the programs and pedagogy that are too often hidden from public view. The goal is to highlight what is hopeful by identifying educators who model rich, complex, and compelling alternatives to what is on offer from many contemporary “reformers.”

A Complicated History

From its inception in the late nineteenth century and flowering during the early decades of the twentieth, the progressive movement has had multiple strands, some emphasizing self-expression and actualization, and others focusing on social critique and change. The majority of progressives sought a balance between maximizing the potential of every student and realizing the power of group learning. The emergent and integrated curriculum they promoted drew on the immediate experiences of students to facilitate learning about the larger world.

Progressive educators wanted to bring the world into the classroom at the same time as they brought their students out of the classroom and into the community. Most importantly, they were committed to public education as a means to achieve social justice by providing opportunities for students to participate in democratic processes and to become activist citizens.

Some progressives—John and Evelyn Dewey, Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker, Joseph Mayer Rice, Lelia Partridge—are well known. Many others, such as Leonard Covello, whose life is described by Lorenzo Krakowsky in *Occasional Paper 24* (2010), were less prominent on the national scene. Covello, Krakowsky reminds us, spent his 40-year career promoting the welfare of his first-generation students and their families in East Harlem, where he himself grew up. Working in large public high schools, he crafted programs that were culturally reflective of the students’ immigrant backgrounds—at first Italian and Eastern European, later Latino—and that taught them how to become community activists.

Despite the many examples of small, experimental progressive schools within the public system and entire districts that implemented progressive programs (Cremin, 1961; Pignatelli & Pflaum, 1993), there is little doubt that it is the factory/banking model of education that characterizes most public schooling today. The huge size of many districts, bureaucratic sluggishness, battles over centralized control of the schools, and failure of political will all contributed to this outcome. In the 1970s and 1980s progressive education, increasingly identified as a middle-class pedagogy, underwent critical

reviews by both Marxist and race-based scholars. Basil Bernstein (1975), for example, critiqued open classrooms that favor students who come from middle-class families and are able to learn at home the skills necessary for success when choice, initiative, and independence are given primacy. Lisa Delpit (1988) raised questions about how race and culture shaped the experience of children and their families in progressively oriented educational settings.

A Real Opening

These insights into the limits of progressive education when questions of class, race, and culture are taken into account do not detract from the intent of committed educators who aim to realize the twin promise of equity and excellence in public education. Lucy Sprague Mitchell, chairperson of the Bureau of Educational Experiments, later Bank Street College of Education, was clear about how she hoped the work pursued at its laboratory school would impact public education. In 1919 she commented in her annual report:

We think of all our work ultimately in relation to public education. We wish to keep constantly in mind and to be ready to attack whenever there seems to be a real opening those unresolved social and administrative problems of the public schools which will need attacking before anything we may work out in our laboratory school can be made effective. (Antler, p. 283)

We want to suggest that the “real opening” is now. The rising resistance of families, educators, and policymakers to the hard-edged accountability movement tell us that there is support for re-visioning public education. This is epitomized by the growing “opt-out” movement, in which parents around the United States, with the support of many educators, are refusing to let their children participate in state tests. In New York State in 2014-2015, 20 percent of eligible students opted out of standardized testing (Ujifusa, 2016). The December 2015 passage of The Every Student Succeeds Act, in place of No Child Left Behind, suggests that policy may also be reversing course. Redefining the federal government’s role in elementary and secondary education, the law shifts power back to states and school districts, providing an opportunity to rethink what it means to be accountable.

In addition, ongoing developments in neurobiology support many of the basic tenets of progressivism. Neuroimaging technologies reveal that learning occurs as the brain changes, forming new neural networks; these neural networks are strengthened through repeated opportunities for practice, with support, over time (Fischer, 2009). Here is “scientific” evidence for active

learning processes, which engage children in making connections between their own experiences, classroom-based experience, and the larger world. Likewise, work in neuroscience on the impact of social factors on learning (Cozolino, 2013) lends weight to progressives' argument for the power of group learning.

Nine Essays that Show the Way

Confirmation of the current enthusiasm for re-visioning progressive education arrived in our inboxes this fall when we received more submissions for this issue than for any other in the journal's 17-year history. From these we have selected a range of essays that reflect pre-kindergarten through high-school settings; focus on individual classrooms, entire schools and school districts; and attend to matters of pedagogy and curriculum building or to working within the constraints of the contemporary moment.

Three of the essays showcase child-centered public schools and present twenty-first century embodiments of progressive principles laid out more than a century ago. Mirasol-Spath and Leibowitz explore the benefits of play for students and teachers alike in a New York City elementary school that provides students with time to explore their interests through long-term projects of their choosing. Seher, Cheng, and Birnbaum paint a portrait of another school with experiential learning at its core; at City-As-School in New York City, internships take the place of many classroom-based courses. "The Center for Inquiry: Anatomy of a Successful Progressive School" transports us to Indianapolis, Indiana, where authors Leland, Wackerly, and Collier were part of the original cohort of teachers and university faculty who founded a progressive magnet school. Premised on inquiry-based teaching and learning, the Center for Inquiry has grown from one to four schools.

Answering Delpit's concerns, a second group of essays addresses the ways that progressive education in public schools has shifted and must continue to shift to meet the needs of America's increasingly diverse student population. In "Beyond Child-Centered Constructivism," Algava argues that twentieth-century progressive pedagogies are not sufficient to fulfill twenty-first century needs. She calls for a culturally sustaining progressive pedagogy that is accessible, relevant, and strength-based for all children, especially those from marginalized communities.

Fennimore confronts the deficit-based talk prevalent in many schools serving marginalized students in "Say that the River Turns." She argues that teaching for social justice begins by replacing deficit-based talk with clearly articulated intentions that subsequently transform into actions. Echoing

the theme of the power of language, Smith summarizes efforts to transform the negative and disrespectful culture at a small California high school with a racially diverse student population. Here a humanizing approach to discipline, rooted in an affirmation of students and their families, and entailing an alignment of school and family values with the school's mission, has been successful. Finally, incorporating data from an ethnographic case study of a bilingual (Spanish/English) Head Start program serving the children of Dominican and Mexican immigrants, Axelrod explores the tensions in parents', teachers', and administrators' beliefs about language use and the role of play.

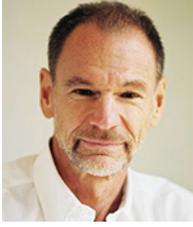
Balancing these essays on classroom life, our final two essays focus on administrative practices that support progressive education. In "Holding Space for Progressive Practices," elementary principals Futterman and Spielberg and Bank Street dean Traugh use a descriptive review process to share their methods for maintaining educational spaces that are grounded in progressive values, in the face of conflicting mandates from the district or the state. In a provocative counterpoint, Knecht, Gannon, and Yaffe, former New York Department of Education administrators, describe their work adding a quality review process to the accountability system for city schools. Positing that the quality review is itself a progressive process, they argue that it can help schools to focus more on the lived experiences of their students and less on high stakes moments.

Together these essays tell us that only through a shared commitment of families, teachers and administrators can progressive practices flourish in public schools. They also tell us that success requires a combination of hard work in the classroom and savvy political strategizing in the larger systems, along with a deep understanding of the foundational tenets of progressivism and a willingness to reimagine how best to realize them in the twenty-first century. We hope these essays will inspire you as they have inspired us to continue advocating for more just, engaging, and child-friendly classrooms for all children.

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