

May 2016

# Holding Space for Progressive Practice

Abbe Futterman  
*The Earth School*

Dyanthe Spielberg  
*The Neighborhood School*

Cecelia Traugh  
*Bank Street College of Education*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#),  
and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Futterman, A., Spielberg, D., & Traugh, C. (2016). Holding Space for Progressive Practice. *Occasional Paper Series*, 2016 (35). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2016/iss35/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Paper Series by an authorized editor of Educate. For more information, please contact [kfreda@bankstreet.edu](mailto:kfreda@bankstreet.edu).



# Holding Space for Progressive Practice

*Abbe Futterman, Dyanthe Spielberg, Cecelia Traugh*

In the early '90s in New York City, there was a great deal of interest in establishing small schools within the public system. Inspired by Central Park East and its founder, Debbie Meier, these schools were often guided by progressive, child-centered values and predicated on the belief that children would be better known and educated in small settings in which close relationships could be more readily developed (Bensman, 2000). Teachers and parents on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, at the time a largely Hispanic and low-income neighborhood, founded the Neighborhood School in 1991 and the Earth School a year later. They are the focus of this paper.

One of the ways the teachers and leaders at some of these small schools maintain their progressive outlooks and practices today is through the use of descriptive inquiry processes (Himley & Carini, 2000). In descriptive inquiry, teachers, parents, or school leaders make a presentation to their colleagues or peers that is shaped around a focus question that they are interested in exploring. For example, in order to better understand a child, a teacher may include descriptive material based on her practice, knowledge of the child, and work samples. Afterward, the chair of the group provides a brief restatement of the ideas generated by the presentation. Then the group responds, first with informational questions and next with ideas aimed at responding to the original focus question.

The text that follows began as an oral presentation at *The Schools We Want*, a symposium celebrating the inauguration of Bank Street College of Education President Shael Polakow-Suransky on October 17, 2015. Abbe Futterman, the principal of the Earth School, and Dyanthe Spielberg, the principal of the Neighborhood School, used the review of practice, a component of the descriptive inquiry process, to share their practices around maintaining an educational space that is broad in scope and grounded in progressive values. The two principals told how they learned to push back against the contextual forces that narrow children's learning and teachers' work. The focus question of this review was: What strategies do you hear these principals using to hold space for the progressive practices of teachers and leaders in their schools? The chair for the review was Cecelia Traugh, dean of the graduate faculty at Bank Street and a long-time consultant to the schools.

For this written version of the review, the principals' presentations are offered in full, and readers are encouraged to respond to the focus question themselves after reading the text. As the chair of the review, Traugh closes the paper with a brief discussion of the ideas and questions raised by the work that Futterman and Spielberg describe.

### **Abbe Futterman, Principal, The Earth School**

The Earth School is an ecological institute with a progressive approach and collaborative governance structure. It now has 340 students from pre-kindergarten through grade 5 in 14 mixed-age classrooms. The student population is 13% Black, 35% Hispanic, 37% White, 7% Asian, and 8% multiracial. Six percent are English language learners and 23% are students with disabilities. Forty-six percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch under Title 1.

I've organized my comments around three key ideas about sustaining progressive education in a public school setting.

#### **First, collaboration with parents as key stakeholders in schools**

This idea embodies both a progressive value and a strategy for pushing back against a narrowing system. From our founding in 1992, we have held a belief in the importance of a broad view of parent involvement—from volunteering in a child's classroom or chaperoning a field trip to sitting on the School Leadership Team or on a teacher hiring committee. We initially wanted parent collaboration because we believed that constituencies closest to children should be decision-makers and because we felt that it would increase congruence between home and school and assure that parents would be “happy customers” as a result of understanding the school's progressive practices. But we soon learned that parents were also our allies in the perpetual battle for funding and space and for getting around stifling policies and regulations from local, state, and federal education departments as well as the teachers union.

In the early days of the school, after an election among three tiny progressive schools in District 1, our parents made up five-eighths of the local school board. We had some very fierce fighters. We fought and won battles for permitting parents to enter the building for drop-off and pick-up, against testing in second grade, for space in the building (which was also being used as headquarters and storage for School Safety), and more. We walked—and occasionally crossed—the line of civil behavior and used hardline tactics that sometimes severed relationships with district administrators,

but our actions also kept our school and its progressive vision alive. Banners were flown, tears were shed, expletives were exchanged, fax machines were clogged, favors were called in, and tomatoes were thrown.

Some of these tactics do not work nowadays, but we were also doing something that does work and that continues in our schools today: We were building a culture where parents and educators have opportunities to sit side by side to engage in conversations about the work of schools in order to closely consider aspects of teaching and learning—not unlike the review that we are doing here today. We expressed opinions and grappled with issues and because of this, we now have an informed base of parents and educators who are ready to speak and to act when their consciences dictate, by opting out of tests, participating in demonstrations, serving on the Community Education Council, and standing up in public meetings for our principles when conflict occurs within the school community. It is Democracy 101, but it doesn't happen in schools without intention.

## **Second, keeping a full picture of learning and the learner**

A second key aspect of holding space for our progressive values, which overlaps in important ways with collaboration with parents, is the diligence with which we strive to keep in front of us at all times a full and complex picture of the student. Resisting the tendency to simplify the complex complicated work of teaching and learning flies in the face of most institutionalized ways of seeing children, teachers, and schools. We forego the easiness of using labels, scores, and other blanket categorizations of students and their growth. We favor lengthy descriptions and extensive documentation of observations and evidence, not just about academic learning, but about many other areas of development. Here are some examples:

- Teachers write long narrative reports that include descriptions of student strengths, interests, social development, and approaches to learning tasks. We are curious about much more than the simple degree to which students “succeed” or what they “master.” Telling parents about a child’s strengths and interests may seem unnecessary, but we have an abiding belief that building on those aspects allows us to meet children on their own terms. They provide insights and open possibilities that are shut down by a focus on deficits and unattained proficiencies.
- In support team and pupil personnel team meetings, where teachers present students about whom they have concerns or who present challenges, we always begin with strengths, interests, and “whole student” information. Even in our casual conversations, it is what we turn to when we feel stuck. Being descriptive when articulating the hills and valleys

of a young person's life in school is an important way that we work to respect each child's uniqueness and to avoid judgments that may harm, pigeonhole, or blind.

### **Third, entering the contested areas of teacher evaluation: PROSE and learning domains**

Here's an example of how we are trying to hold space for the schools we want that is unfolding right now. I'll start with a bit of background.

In the last decade, as education departments around the country have become more deft at using standardized tests to rate students, schools, teachers, and principals, we have needed to devote a great deal of time and energy to shielding ourselves from the damaging effects of those tests. This constant drain on our energy is compounded by the strain of knowing that our high-quality, labor-intensive authentic assessment work is completely disregarded by those who govern us. Despite the dearth of support, we have persevered in our practices of both knowing children through their strengths and interests and through close observation and collaborative inquiry and of writing narrative reports.

About three and a half years ago, a teacher evaluation system that incorporates principal observations and rubrics was announced in New York City. Before long, we were being trained in the intricacies of the Annual Professional Performance Review system, a complex ratio of measures of teacher practice, as scored using the Danielson Framework for Teaching (which Dyanthe will describe below), and measures of student learning, as indicated by state and local metrics (standardized test scores). These initiatives met the eligibility guidelines for the federal Race to the Top grant monies requiring that student learning outcomes be part of a teacher's evaluation. Most teacher evaluation systems are based on the flawed premise that the only real evidence of great teaching practice is in how kids do on standardized tests of literacy and math.

We were mainly concerned about the mandated measures of student learning and wondered whether they would create both a system-wide disincentive to work with "difficult-to-teach" students and an even greater focus on test scores and test prep. We were also concerned about how they would impact curriculum and teaching. In the end, we did not believe it would result in accurate or formative assessments of teachers.

Simultaneously, with the increased use of state tests influenced by the Common Core, the opt-out movement was taking hold in many schools. Media exposure of cheating scandals, poor test design, and the arbitrary manipulation of rating thresholds bolstered public awareness of the testing industry's shortfalls. Protections were put in place to mandate that multiple measures be used to make important decisions about students, such as those regarding grade promotion. However, test results would still be used to rate teachers, and those results would always trump principals' observations and assessment of a teacher's practice.

In New York City, the 2014 teachers' contract included a new provision called PROSE (Progressive Redesign Opportunity for Schools of Excellence), a joint venture between the unions and the NYC Department of Education (DOE). PROSE purports to support innovations by enabling schools that have a demonstrated record of effective school leadership, collaboration, and trust to implement innovative practices outside of existing rules.

A group of six progressive elementary schools, all with a long history of collaboration and of shared practices, was able to come together quickly to propose an innovation that would modify the teacher evaluation system so that teachers were rated according to student growth as measured by qualitative documentation, work samples, and other authentic assessments, rather than by standardized test results.

However, we kept returning to the same dilemma: how not to penalize teachers for their work with challenging students, such as those in crisis, if—as can happen—those students fail to make significant academic progress despite brilliant teaching practice and outstanding teacher efforts. Remember, according to the Annual Professional Performance Review system, the quality of teacher practice and effort don't count in evaluating student learning outcomes. Again, we found our way by maintaining a broad view of students, teaching, and learning. Kohn (2004) writes, “perhaps the question, ‘How do we know if education has been successful?’ shouldn't be posed until we have asked what it's supposed to be successful at” (p.2). We held a series of meetings asking our faculty, school leadership team, and parents, “What does it mean to be well educated at the Earth School?” and organized a list of learning domains based on the responses. When this list is used to judge a child's progress, a student who may not seem to have made enough progress in math, for example, may be shown to have grown in significant ways in equally important non-academic areas. When teaching outcomes include children's progress across learning domains such as connecting with adults and peers or being aware of one's feelings, the effects of great teaching become apparent.

Using authentic assessment in lieu of standardized test scores in the teacher evaluation system has not been approved yet. Nevertheless, we are continuing to consider ways to move this work forward.

## **Dyanthe Spielberg, Principal, the Neighborhood School (TNS)**

The Neighborhood School was designed to meet an expressed need for a progressive approach to educating the children of its local community. At present it has 306 students from pre-kindergarten through grade 5 in 14 classrooms. The student population is 15% Black, 32% Hispanic, 44% White, and 9% Asian. Four percent are English language learners and 29% are students with disabilities.

I have organized my thoughts for this review according to:

- ways that the DOE has made openings, through PROSE, that broadened the parameters of existing requirements;
- ways that we have made openings within DOE structures/mandates; and
- ways that we simply “buck the system” (which we use the least).

Most of this review speaks about the work of educators. However, when we push against the system, it is also with the force of our most powerful allies, our parents, who are equally invested in the progressive values of our school.

A big part of my job as a leader is interpreting the work that we do at TNS in ways that makes sense to the DOE. All efforts to broaden DOE mandates are dangerous to various degrees, and speaking frankly about them with people outside our relatively small group of progressive public schools feels risky. My approach in dealing with the DOE is to share the details of our work as little as possible, and if the DOE, using their metrics—quality reviews, school snapshots, and parent surveys—rate our work as “effective,” we can continue to do what we want.

At TNS, policies and practices are formed collaboratively and dynamically to provide a cohesive, unified, thoughtful environment for children. We are self-reflective and reevaluate our policies periodically in an effort to meet the needs of our children and ever-evolving community. Our staff has been coming together for professional development after school each week since we began, although I don’t think we called it that then. We approach professional development as inquiry: It is emergent and therefore not linear. Our professional development committee—made up of me, teachers and frequently Cecelia (Traugh)—meets regularly to reflect on our work and plan next

steps. The process is constantly evolving in response to students' changing needs and interests, parental and community interests and concerns, and teachers' priorities. As a rule, inquiry is messy and often uncomfortable; it is another example of where we broaden our expectations for teachers.

## **Student portfolios**

This fall, the staff has been rethinking the place of portfolios in our school. Unlike DOE portfolios, ours are collections of student work, selected by students and teachers; they are not used for promotional purposes. Our portfolios are not created at the end of the year, but on an ongoing basis, beginning in Pre-K. Their audience is not the superintendent of schools, but rather the student, the teacher, and the family. Our inquiry has led us to consider the kind of work that goes into a student portfolio.

In looking through old collections of work from our former students, we were most struck by those pieces that originated fully from the child. They revealed so much more of the student than pieces that came from class sets or worksheets. I'm not talking about work that children selected that was based on certain criteria or a rubric. I'm talking about work that children have created that is based on their own inquiry and exploration: both project work (either the work itself or photos of it), encompassing a range of subjects, and work that targets specific areas like math, reading, and writing but which actually encompasses a large range of disciplines as well. For example, a writing sample can speak to a child's understandings of several subjects simultaneously and even to things we don't normally think to look for, such as a child's body awareness, motor skills, and visual and auditory perceptions. If we value this data most, we need to ask where opportunities for student voice and choice come into the curriculum. How do we structure our day and week to allow time for children to explore their own interests? How do we make this measurable according to the DOE's standards?

## **The descriptive review process**

The descriptive review process is a structure used for looking and thinking that reminds us to maintain a broad lens. The process not only expands how we see one child, but profoundly changes the culture by which teachers think about and see all children and their work. We devote our six professional development half-days to reviews in which teachers present areas of their practice, pieces of student work, or children. In addition, we structure our student study team process as a review, albeit loosely. Teachers describe the whole child at these meetings and don't jump



immediately to the child's challenges and struggles (although those are, of course, the reason that the teacher is presenting the child to the group).

## **The design your own assessment project**

For many years now, Cecelia has worked with a group of progressive schools that has met on a monthly basis. One aspect of that work was the Design Your Own Assessment (DYO) project (2006), a DOE option our schools used to create a way of documenting the process of looking at student work. Through this effort, we developed a tool we still use today. We have always followed a descriptive review structure to study children and children's work, and the DYO project was an opportunity to use that approach to meet DOE requirements. The DYO work has included teachers, but most recently only principals have participated in it.

In October I presented a part of my practice, the teacher observation cycle, for review. My question for those at the review was: How can the observation process generate an ongoing reciprocal conversation and foster teacher growth?

One aspect of my conversation with teachers is that I use a DOE-mandated evaluative tool and process for my own purposes. However, in the past two years, I have found my efforts to combine my ideas with those of the DOE to be clunky, disjointed, and not reflective of teachers' work and growth. The review illuminated this in a way that was uncomfortable and a little frustrating. It also raised questions about the relationship between professional development and evaluation. Is it possible to turn an evaluative process, one with very high stakes attached to it, into professional development?

Through the review, I realized that one value I hold in this work is teaching teachers to reflect. Bearing this in mind, I have reshaped our observation process in three important ways. First, I share the low-inference notes from my observations with teachers and give teachers a place in the notes to record their own thoughts. Second, I document our debrief conversation and include their voice in the final write-up. Finally, documenting what the teacher did as a result of our conversations creates a thread that will become part of our work for the year. I haven't put any of this into action yet, but I anticipate the process will continue to evolve as the year unfolds. Moreover, I am doing this review again with teachers in December, which I am certain will broaden my thinking in new ways.

## **The PROSE program at TNS**

As Abbe described, the PROSE program was established as part of the new contract between the teacher's union, the Counsel of School Supervisors and Administrators, and the Department of Education. Not surprisingly, given the progressive and independent nature of the six schools that submitted the joint PROSE proposal, our initiative looked different in each of them. For TNS, PROSE facilitated our school-wide inquiry last year: What is descriptive work and how can it help me? Within the larger school inquiry, we formed small teacher inquiry groups, organized according to how many years of experience the group members had in the classroom. Teachers selected six focus students based on a question about their own practice. Throughout the year, teachers met with their inquiry group to review documentation and rethink children, teaching practices, and, in some cases, their initial inquiry question. At the end of the year, teachers chose one child and presented the story of the pivotal decisions that they had made based on their documentation and what they had observed in their classroom. In June, each teacher presented her findings to her inquiry group. Teachers were evaluated on their ability to study children's work; their final evaluation was based on a rubric for inquiry created by Cecelia, the teachers, and me that evaluated their inquiry process.

For TNS, PROSE became a means to build our school and our capacities and to affirm processes that grew our practice. The school-wide inquiry pushed us to do what we think is best for children. For example, because we believe that revising goals and thinking about children is evidence of good teaching, teachers did not set three end-of-year goals for their six students in October, even though the PROSE guidelines required that. Similarly, PROSE may look different this year because we want to remain open and responsive to our students. However, we will continue to use the descriptive review process to guide our thinking because it gets to the crux of work that is fundamental for maintaining our broad, progressive stance about children and teaching.

### **Cecelia Traugh, Dean, Graduate School, Bank Street College**

Both Abbe Futterman and Dyanthe Spielberg name the core values that guide their work and push for an expansion of space, not a narrowing or standardization of space. Their presentations illustrate how progressive practice is intentionally value based. Here are five values I see at work in their schools.

## **Children at the center**

Children in their complexity are at the center of the work of these schools. Teachers, leaders, and parents focus on children's strengths and deep interests. The schools' approaches to assessment, especially the use of portfolios, illumine student thinking, learning, and engagement with curriculum.

## **A spirit of inquiry**

The spirit of inquiry is a key value that forms a basis for the space-making work of these schools. The power of description and descriptive inquiry as the ground for knowledge-making is recognized as a means to keep children at the center of the work of the school. The descriptive review process builds communities in which teachers are engaged in ongoing conversations about learning and teaching. Using inquiry to shape the professional development practices of these schools allows teachers' questions about their students to prime their own learning and growth in a way that respects their interests and capacities.

## **Community**

Communities are also valued and are part of the long-term goals of these schools. Teachers, leaders, and sometimes parents form inquiry groups within the school. An ongoing focus of the work is how to better include a wide range of children as full participants in the classroom community. The schools and their leaders also form networks to build larger communities of practice. Having been part of the learning communities developed within these small schools and a participant in the networks of the schools and their leaders, I know that these collaborations can help break down the isolation often experienced by educators in large systems.

## **Advocacy**

Advocacy is a process valued by these schools. From the beginning, parents and teachers have spoken out and stood up for their schools and the kind of education they aim to provide. This advocacy is possible because there is ongoing conversation and learning among all the critical community members, particularly parents. As the schools navigate the sometimes difficult waters of the NYC DOE, parents are viewed as allies of the teachers who work with their children and allies of the schools as a whole.

## Translation

The principals of both schools have underlined that translation is a necessary and valuable skill. They translate DOE policy into a form that can be understood by parents and by teachers, and they translate the ideas and practices of the school into language that can be understood by parents and the DOE. Recognizing that they are part of a much larger system and that there are reasons for policies, leaders must find and translate the intent of these policies into an opening for identifying ways to use the system to the schools' benefit.

Finally, I will argue that using a value base as a means of holding and expanding space for progressive practice must become a habit of mind for leaders, teachers, and parents. These schools have done this by being explicit about core values, taking an inquiry stance toward the work of education, and developing the skill of translation. They have created networks and communities that include parents, other schools and their leaders, and schools of education. These are just some of the lessons to be learned from these small schools as they use inquiry processes to support progressive education within the public system.

## References

- Bensman, D. (2000). *Central Park East and its graduates: Learning by heart*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Himley, M., and Carini, P. (Eds.). (2000). *From another angle: Children's strengths and school standards*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kohn, A. (2004). What does it mean to be well educated? In *What does it mean to be well educated?: And more essays on standards, grading, and other follies* (pp. 1–10). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.



**Abbe Futterman** was a founding teacher at The Earth School, in New York City, where she currently serves as principal. She taught science for many years during which time she helped found The Fifth Street Farm, a 2,400 square foot organic garden on the school's roof. She is an alumna of Bank Street College's Teacher Education and Educational Leadership programs. Abbe lives in Brooklyn with her two daughters, Elsabet and Mirette.



**Dyanthe Spielberg** is principal of The Neighborhood School. In addition to her on-going work to build staff capacity around descriptive processes such as reviews of practices, children, and children's work, this year she has focused on exploring issues of race, racism, and racial justice with staff. Dyanthe is a graduate of Bank Street's Leadership for Educational Change program. She lives in Chelsea with her husband and daughter.



**Cecelia Traugh** is dean of the Graduate School of Education at Bank Street College. Her current work includes school-wide inquiry groups in small schools across Manhattan and Brooklyn. These inquiry groups use the descriptive processes developed at the Prospect Center in North Bennington, Vermont to investigate issues important to the inclusive education of all children and the ongoing development of the schools themselves.