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Progressive Education

Why It's Hard to Beat, But Also Hard to Find

By Alfie Kohn

If progressive education doesn't lend itself to a single fixed definition, that seems fitting in light of its reputation for resisting conformity and standardization. Any two educators who describe themselves as sympathetic to this tradition may well see it differently, or at least disagree about which features are the most important.

Talk to enough progressive educators, in fact, and you'll begin to notice certain paradoxes: Some people focus on the unique needs of individual students, while others invoke the importance of a *community* of learners; some describe learning as a process, more journey than destination, while others believe that tasks should result in authentic products that can be shared.[1]

What It Is

Despite such variations, there are enough elements on which most of us can agree so that a common core of progressive education emerges, however hazily. And it really does make sense to call it a *tradition*, as I did a moment ago. Ironically, what we usually call "traditional" education, in contrast to the progressive approach, has less claim to that adjective — because of how, and how recently, it has developed. As Jim Nehring at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell observed, "Progressive schools are the legacy of a long and proud tradition of thoughtful school practice stretching back for centuries" — including hands-on learning, multiage classrooms, and mentor-apprentice relationships — while what we generally refer to as traditional schooling "is largely the result of outdated policy changes that have calcified into conventions."[2] (Nevertheless, I'll use the conventional nomenclature in this article to avoid confusion.)

It's not all or nothing, to be sure. I don't think I've ever seen a school — even one with scripted instruction, uniforms, and rows of desks bolted to the floor — that has completely escaped the influence of progressive ideas. Nor have I seen a school that's progressive in every detail. Still, schools can be characterized according to how closely they reflect a commitment to values such as these:

Attending to the whole child: Progressive educators are concerned with helping children become not only good learners but also good people. Schooling isn't seen as being about just academics, nor is intellectual growth limited to verbal and mathematical

proficiencies.

Community: Learning isn't something that happens to individual children — separate selves at separate desks. Children learn with and from one another in a caring community, and that's true of moral as well as academic learning. Interdependence counts at least as much as independence, so it follows that practices that pit students against one another in some kind of competition, thereby undermining a feeling of community, are deliberately avoided.

Collaboration: Progressive schools are characterized by what I like to call a "working with" rather than a "doing to" model. In place of rewards for complying with the adults' expectations, or punitive consequences for failing to do so, there's more of an emphasis on collaborative problem-solving — and, for that matter, less focus on behaviors than on underlying motives, values, and reasons.

Social justice: A sense of community and responsibility for others isn't confined to the classroom; indeed, students are helped to locate themselves in widening circles of care that extend beyond self, beyond friends, beyond their own ethnic group, and beyond their own country. Opportunities are offered not only to learn about, but also to put into action, a commitment to diversity and to improving the lives of others.

Intrinsic motivation: When considering (or reconsidering) educational policies and practices, the first question that progressive educators are likely to ask is, "What's the effect on students' *interest* in learning, their desire to continue reading, thinking, and questioning?" This deceptively simple test helps to determine what students will and won't be asked to do. Thus, conventional practices, including homework, grades, and tests, prove difficult to justify for anyone who is serious about promoting long-term dispositions rather than just improving short-term skills.

Deep understanding: As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead declared long ago, "A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth." Facts and skills do matter, but only *in a context* and *for a purpose*. That's why progressive education tends to be organized around problems, projects, and questions — rather than around lists of facts, skills, and separate disciplines. The teaching is typically interdisciplinary, the assessment rarely focuses on rote memorization, and excellence isn't confused with "rigor." The point is not merely to challenge students — after all, harder is not necessarily better — but to invite them to think deeply about issues that matter and help them understand ideas from the inside out.

Active learning: In progressive schools, students play a vital role in helping to design the curriculum, formulate the questions, seek out (and create) answers, think through possibilities, and evaluate how successful they — and their teachers — have been. Their active participation in every stage of the process is consistent with the overwhelming consensus of experts that learning is a matter of constructing ideas rather than passively

absorbing information or practicing skills.

Taking kids seriously: In traditional schooling, as John Dewey once remarked, "the center of gravity is outside the child": he or she is expected to adjust to the school's rules and curriculum. Progressive educators take their cue from the children — and are particularly attentive to differences among them. (Each student is unique, so a single set of policies, expectations, or assignments would be as counterproductive as it was disrespectful.) The curriculum isn't just based on interest, but on *these children's* interests. Naturally, teachers will have broadly conceived themes and objectives in mind, but they don't just design a course of study *for* their students; they design it *with* them, and they welcome unexpected detours. One fourth-grade teacher's curriculum, therefore, won't be the same as that of the teacher next door, nor will her curriculum be the same this year as it was for the children she taught last year. It's not enough to offer elaborate thematic units prefabricated by the adults. And progressive educators realize that the students must help to formulate not only the course of study but also the outcomes or standards that inform those lessons.

Some of the features that I've listed here will seem objectionable, or at least unsettling, to educators at more traditional schools, while others will be surprisingly familiar and may even echo sentiments that they, themselves, have expressed. But progressive educators don't merely *say* they endorse ideas like "love of learning" or "a sense of community." They're willing to put these values into practice even if doing so requires them to up-end traditions. They may eliminate homework altogether if it's clear that students view after-school assignments as something to be gotten over with as soon as possible. They will question things like honors classes and awards assemblies that clearly undermine a sense of community. Progressive schools, in short, follow their core values — bolstered by research and experience — wherever they lead.

What It Isn't

Misconceptions about progressive education generally take two forms. Either it is defined too narrowly so that the significance of the change it represents is understated, or else an exaggerated, caricatured version is presented in order to justify dismissing the whole approach. Let's take each of these in turn.

Individualized attention from caring, respectful teachers is terribly important. But it does not a progressive school make. To assume otherwise not only dilutes progressivism; it's unfair to traditional educators, most of whom are not callous Gradgrinds or ruler-wielding nuns. In fact, it's perfectly consistent to view education as the process of filling children up with bits of knowledge — and to use worksheets, lectures, quizzes, homework, grades, and other such methods in pursuit of that goal — while being genuinely concerned about each child's progress. Schools with warm, responsive teachers who know each student personally can take pride in that fact, but they shouldn't claim on that basis to be progressive.

Moreover, traditional schools aren't always about memorizing dates and definitions; sometimes they're also committed to helping students understand ideas. As one science teacher pointed out, "For thoughtful traditionalists, thinking is couched in terms of comprehending, integrating, and applying knowledge." However, the student's task in such classrooms is "comprehending how the *teacher* has integrated or applied the ideas… and [then] reconstruct[ing] the teacher's thinking."[3] There are interesting concepts being discussed in some traditional classrooms, in other words, but what distinguishes progressive education is that students must *construct* their own understanding of ideas.

There's another mistake based on too narrow a definition, which took me a while to catch on to: A school that is culturally progressive is not necessarily educationally progressive. An institution can be steeped in lefty politics and multi-grain values; it can be committed to diversity, peace, and saving the planet — but remain strikingly traditional in its pedagogy. In fact, one can imagine an old-fashioned pour-in-the-facts approach being used to teach lessons in tolerance or even radical politics.[4]

Less innocuous, or accidental, is the tendency to paint progressive education as a touchy-feely, loosey-goosey, fluffy, fuzzy, undemanding exercise in leftover hippie idealism — or Rousseauvian Romanticism. In this cartoon version of the tradition, kids are free to do anything they please, the curriculum can consist of whatever is fun (and nothing that isn't fun). Learning is thought to happen automatically while the teachers just stand by, observing and beaming. I lack the space here to offer examples of this sort of misrepresentation — or a full account of why it's so profoundly wrong — but trust me: People really do sneer at the idea of progressive education based on an image that has little to do with progressive education.

Why It Makes Sense

For most people, the fundamental reason to choose, or offer, a progressive education is a function of their basic values: "a rock-bottom commitment to democracy," as Joseph Featherstone put it; a belief that meeting children's needs should take precedence over preparing future employees; and a desire to nourish curiosity, creativity, compassion, skepticism, and other virtues.

Fortunately, what may have begun with values (for any of us as individuals, and also for education itself, historically speaking) has turned out to be supported by solid data. A truly impressive collection of research has demonstrated that when students are able to spend more time thinking about ideas than memorizing facts and practicing skills — and when they are invited to help direct their own learning — they are not only more likely to enjoy what they're doing but to do it better. Progressive education isn't just more appealing; it's also more productive.

I reviewed decades' worth of research in the late 1990s: studies of preschools and high schools; studies of instruction in reading, writing, math, and science; broad studies of "open classrooms," "student-centered" education, and teaching consistent with

constructivist accounts of learning, but also investigations of specific innovations like democratic classrooms, multiage instruction, looping, cooperative learning, and authentic assessment (including the abolition of grades). Across domains, the results overwhelmingly favor progressive education. Regardless of one's values, in other words, this approach can be recommended purely on the basis of its effectiveness. And if your criteria are more ambitious — long-term retention of what's been taught, the capacity to understand ideas and apply them to new kinds of problems, a desire to continue learning — the relative benefits of progressive education are even greater.[5] This conclusion is only strengthened by the *lack* of data to support the value of standardized tests, homework, conventional discipline (based on rewards or consequences), competition, and other traditional practices.[6]

Since I published that research review, similar findings have continued to accumulate. Several newer studies confirm that traditional academic instruction for very young children is counterproductive.[7] Students in elementary and middle school did better in science when their teaching was "centered on projects in which they took a high degree of initiative. Traditional activities, such as completing worksheets and reading primarily from textbooks, seemed to have no positive effect."[8] Another recent study found that an "inquiry-based" approach to learning is more beneficial than conventional methods for low-income and minority students.[9] The results go on and on. In fact, I occasionally stumble upon older research that I'd missed earlier — including a classic five-year investigation of almost 11,000 children between the ages of eight and sixteen, which found that students who attended progressive schools were less likely to cheat than those who attended conventional schools — a result that persisted even after the researchers controlled for age, IQ, and family background.[10]

Why It's Rare

Despite the fact that all schools can be located on a continuum stretching between the poles of totally progressive and totally traditional — or, actually, on a series of continuums reflecting the various components of those models — it's usually possible to visit a school and come away with a pretty clear sense of whether it can be classified as predominantly progressive. It's also possible to reach a conclusion about how many schools — or even individual classrooms — in America merit that label: damned few. The higher the grade level, the rarer such teaching tends to be, and it's not even all that prevalent at the lower grades.[11] (Also, while it's probably true that most progressive schools are independent, most independent schools are not progressive.)

The rarity of this approach, while discouraging to some of us, is also rather significant with respect to the larger debate about education. If progressive schooling is actually quite uncommon, then it's hard to blame our problems (real or alleged) on this model. Indeed, the facts have the effect of turning the argument on its head: If students aren't learning effectively, it may be because of the persistence of *traditional* beliefs and

practices in our nation's schools.

But we're also left with a question: If progressive education is so terrific, why is it still the exception rather than the rule? I often ask the people who attend my lectures to reflect on this, and the answers that come back are varied and provocative. For starters, they tell me, progressive education is not only less familiar but also much harder to do, and especially to do well. It asks a lot more of the students and at first can seem a burden to those who have figured out how to play the game in traditional classrooms — often succeeding by conventional standards without doing much real thinking. It's also much more demanding of teachers, who have to know their subject matter inside and out if they want their students to "make sense of biology or literature" as opposed to "simply memoriz[ing] the frog's anatomy or the sentence's structure."[12] But progressive teachers also have to know a lot about pedagogy because no amount of content knowledge (say, expertise in science or English) can tell you how to facilitate learning. The belief that anyone who knows enough math can teach it is a corollary of the belief that learning is a process of passive absorption —a view that cognitive science has decisively debunked.

Progressive teachers also have to be comfortable with uncertainty, not only to abandon a predictable march toward the "right answer" but to let students play an active role in the quest for meaning that replaces it. That means a willingness to give up some control and let students take some ownership, which requires guts as well as talent. These characteristics appear not to be as common as we might like to think. Almost a decade ago, in an interview for this magazine, I recalled my own experience in high school classrooms with some chagrin: "I prided myself on being an entertaining lecturer, very knowledgeable, funny, charismatic, and so on. It took me years to realize [that my] classroom was all about me, not about the kids. It was about teaching, not about learning."[13] The more we're influenced by the insights of progressive education, the more we're forced to rethink what it means to be a good teacher. That process will unavoidably ruffle some feathers, including our own.

And speaking of feather-ruffling, I'm frequently reminded that progressive education has an uphill journey because of the larger culture we live in. It's an approach that is in some respects inherently subversive, and people in power do not always enjoy being subverted. As Vito Perrone has written, "The values of progressivism — including skepticism, questioning, challenging, openness, and seeking alternate possibilities — have long struggled for acceptance in American society. That they did not come to dominate the schools is not surprising."[14]

There is pressure to raise standardized test scores, something that progressive education manages to do only sometimes and by accident — not only because that isn't its purpose but also because such tests measure what matters least. (The recognition of that fact explains why progressive schools would never dream of using standardized tests as part of their admissions process.) More insidiously, though, we face pressure to standardize

our practices in general. Thinking is messy, and deep thinking is really messy. This reality coexists uneasily with demands for order — in schools where the curriculum is supposed to be carefully coordinated across grade levels and planned well ahead of time, or in society at large.

And then (as my audiences invariably point out) there are parents who have never been invited to reconsider their assumptions about education. As a result, they may be impressed by the wrong things, reassured by signs of traditionalism — letter grades, spelling quizzes, heavy textbooks, a teacher in firm control of the classroom — and unnerved by their absence. Even if their children are obviously unhappy, parents may accept that as a fact of life. Instead of wanting the next generation to get better than we got, it's as though their position was: "Listen, if it was bad enough for me, it's bad enough for my kids." Perhaps they subscribe to what might be called the Listerine theory of education, based on a famous ad campaign that sought to sell this particular brand of mouthwash on the theory that if it tasted vile, it obviously worked well. The converse proposition, of course, is that anything appealing is likely to be ineffective. If a child is lucky enough to be in a classroom featuring, say, student-designed project-based investigations, the parent may wonder, "But is she really *learning* anything? Where are the worksheets?" And so the teachers feel pressure to make the instruction worse.

All progressive schools experience a constant undertow, perhaps a request to reintroduce grades of some kind, to give special enrichments to the children of the "gifted" parents, to start up a competitive sports program (because American children evidently don't get enough of winning and losing outside of school), to punish the kid who did that bad thing to my kid, to administer a standardized test or two ("just so we can see how they're doing"), and, above all, to get the kids ready for what comes next — even if this amounts to teaching them badly so they'll be prepared for the bad teaching to which they'll be subjected later.[15]

This list doesn't exhaust the reasons that progressive education is uncommon. However, the discussion that preceded it, of progressive education's advantages, was also incomplete, which suggests that working to make it a little more common is a worthy pursuit. We may not be able to transform a whole school, or even a classroom, along all of these dimensions, at least not by the end of this year. But whatever progress we can make is likely to benefit our students. And doing what's best for them is the reason all of us got into this line of work in the first place.

SIDEBAR:

A Dozen Questions for Progressive Schools

Because of what I've described as the undertow that progressive educators inevitably

experience, it's possible for them to wake up one morning with the unsettling realization that their school has succumbed to a creeping traditionalism and drifted from the vision of its founders. Here are some pointed questions to spur collective reflection and, perhaps, corrective action.

1. Is our school committed to being *educationally* progressive, or is it content with an atmosphere that's progressive only in the political or cultural sense of the word?

2. Is a progressive vision being pursued unapologetically, or does a fear of alienating potential applicants lead to compromising that mission and trying to be all things to all people? ("We offer a nurturing environment . . . of *rigorous* college preparation.")

3. Is the education that the oldest students receive just as progressive as that offered to the youngest, or would a visitor conclude that those in the upper grades seem to attend a different school altogether?

4. Is the teaching organized around problems, projects, and questions? Is most of the instruction truly interdisciplinary, or is literature routinely separated from social studies – or even from spelling? Has acquiring skills (e.g., arithmetic, vocabulary) come to be over-emphasized rather than seen as a means to the end of understanding and communicating ideas?

5. To what extent are students involved in designing the curriculum? Is it a learner-centered environment, or are lessons presented to the children as *faits accomplis*? How much are students involved in other decisions, such as room decoration, classroom management, assessment, and so on? Are teachers maintaining control over children, even in subtle ways, so that the classrooms are less democratic than they could be?

6. Is assessment consistent with a progressive vision, or are students evaluated and rated with elaborate rubrics[16] and grade-substitutes? Do students end up, as in many traditional schools, spending so much time thinking about how well they're doing that they're no longer as engaged with *what* they're doing?

7. Do administrators respect teachers' professionalism and need for autonomy – or is there a style of top-down control that's inconsistent with how teachers are urged to treat students? Conversely, is it possible that teachers' insistence on being left alone has permitted them to drift from genuinely progressive practice in some areas?

8. Are educators acting like lifelong learners, always willing to question familiar ways – or do they sometimes fall back on tradition and justify practices on the grounds that something is just "the [name of school] way"? Are teachers encouraged to visit one another's classrooms and offered opportunities to talk about pedagogy on a regular basis?

9. Is cooperation emphasized throughout the school – or are there remnants of an adversarial approach? Do students typically make decisions by trying to reach consensus

or do they simply vote? Do competitive games still dominate physical education and even show up in classrooms? Do most learning experiences take place in pairs and small groups, or does the default arrangement consist of having students do things on their own?

10. Is homework assigned only when it's absolutely necessary to extend and enrich a lesson, or is it assigned on a regular basis (as in a traditional school)? If homework is given, are the assignments predicated on – and justified by -- a behaviorist model of "reinforcing" what they were taught – or do they truly deepen students' understanding of, and engagement with, ideas? How much of a role do the students play in making decisions about homework?

11. Does the question "How will this affect children's *interest* in learning (and in the topic at hand)?" inform all choices about curriculum, instruction, and scheduling – or has a focus on right answers and "rigor" led some students to become less curious about, and excited by, what they're doing?

12. Is the school as progressive and collaborative in nonacademic (social, behavioral) matters as it is in the academic realm, or are there remnants of "consequence"-based control such that the focus is sometimes more on order and compliance than on fostering moral reasoning, social skills, and democratic dispositions?

NOTES

1. The latter view is represented in both the Reggio Emilia approach to early-childhood education and the Foxfire tradition.

2. James H. Nehring, "Progressive vs. Traditional: Reframing an Old Debate," *Education Week*, February 1, 2006, p. 32.

3. Mark Windschitl, "Why We Can't Talk to One Another About Science Education Reform," *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 2006, p. 352.

4. As I was preparing this article, a middle-school student of my acquaintance happened to tell me about a class she was taking that featured a scathing indictment of American imperialism – as well as fact-based quizzes and report cards that praised students for being "well behaved" and "on-task."

5. See Alfie Kohn, *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards"* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), esp. Appendix A.

6. I've tackled each of these issues in separate books. See the sources cited in, respectively, *The Case Against Standardized Testing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000), *The Homework Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006), *Beyond Discipline*, rev. ed. (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2006), and *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986/1992). Still other research exists to challenge assumptions about the benefits of specific practices ranging from school uniforms to explicit instruction in grammar.

7. See the addendum to "Early-Childhood Education: The Case Against Direct Instruction of Academic Skills" at www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/ece.htm.

8. Harold Wenglinsky, "Facts or Critical Thinking Skills?", *Educational Leadership*, September 2004, p. 33.

9. Michael Klentschy, Leslie Garrison, and Olga Ameral's four-year review of student achievement data is summarized in Olaf Jorgenson and Rick Vanosdall, "The Death of Science?" *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2002, p. 604.

10. Character Education Inquiry, *Studies in the Nature of Character*. Volume 1: *Studies in Deceit* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), Book 2, p. 184.

11. Educational historian Larry Cuban's review of "almost 7,000 different classroom accounts and results from studies in numerous settings revealed the persistent occurrence of teacher-centered practices since the turn of the century" (*How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890-1980* [New York: Longman, 1984]). John Goodlad, author of the classic study *A Place Called School*, revisited the subject in 1999 and concluded that "although progressive views have enjoyed sufficient visibility to bring down on them and their adherents barrages of negative rhetoric, they have managed to create only isolated islands of practice…. Most teachers adhere closely to a view of school as they experienced it as students and so perpetuate the traditional" ("Flow, Eros, and Ethos in Educational Renewal," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 1999, p. 573). His assessment was corroborated as recently as last year by a national study of first, third, and fifth grade classrooms in more than 1,000 schools: "Children spent most of their time (91.2%) working in whole-group or individual-seatwork settings" and "the average fifth grader received five times as much instruction in basic skills as instruction focused on problem solving or reasoning; this ratio was 10:1 in first and third grades" (Robert C. Pianta *et al*., "Opportunities to Learn in America's Elementary Classrooms," *Science*, vol. 315, March 30, 2007, p. 1795). A study of 669 classrooms in Washington state, meanwhile, found that "strong constructivist teaching was observable in about 17% of the classroom lessons" (Martin L. Abbott and Jeffrey T. Fouts, "Constructivist Teaching and Student Achievement," Washington School Research Center, Technical Report #5, February 2003, p. 1). For still more evidence, see Kohn, *Schools*, pp. 5-9.

12. David K. Cohen and Carol A. Barnes, "Conclusion: A New Pedagogy for Policy?" in *Teaching for Understanding*, ed. by David K. Cohen *et al*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), p. 245. The relevance of this point for the largely unsuccessful efforts of progressive education to establish itself over time has been noted by many thinkers, including John Dewey, Lawrence Cremin, and Linda Darling-Hammond.

13. Kitty Thuermer, "In Defense of the Progressive School: An Interview with Alfie Kohn," *Independent School*, Fall 1999, p. 96. In their book *Methods That Matter* (York, ME: Stenhouse, 1998), Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar drove the point home: "Teachers probably wouldn't have originally chosen their vocation if they didn't crave the spotlight on some deep psychological level. The hunger to 'really teach something' has probably derailed more student-centered innovations than administrative cowardice and textbook company co-option combined" (p. 12).

14. Vito Perrone, "Why Do We Need a Pedagogy of Understanding?" in *Teaching for Understanding*, ed. by Martha Stone Wiske (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 23.

15. For more on this phenomenon, see my essay "Getting-Hit-on-the-Head Lessons," *Education Week*, September 7, 2005, pp. 52, 46-47.

16. See Maja Wilson, *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006); or my article "The Trouble with Rubrics," *English Journal*, March 2006, pp. 12-15.