

Briefing paper: Progressive education

Introduction

Progressive education refers to a coalition of theories and practices in education, which rose to prominence in educational circles in Britain in the twentieth century. Peter Cunningham describes progressive educationalists as ‘a group of travellers’ (Cunningham, 1988). Although this band of progressive theories and resultant practices are distinct, and sometimes contradictory to one another, grouping them together is useful when assessing their place in the broader landscape of British education. Progressive vs. traditional education was one of the most important battle lines in the political struggles over education in Britain since the Second World War. Progressive education is often used synonymously with ‘modern’ education, linked to the expansion of educational provision to broader constituencies in the twentieth century, whilst traditional education typically referred to the practices of the public and grammar schools.

Theory

Progressive educational practices as are often described as a ‘child-centred’ approach. They are informed by an inherent respect for the child-learner as an individual. According to Peter Cunningham, progressive education’s core concepts are individuality, freedom, and growth. He lists the common themes of progressive education as follows (Cunningham, 1988):

- Reduction in traditional authoritarianism of teacher
- Alternatives to dominant pedagogical form of class lesson
- Removal of harsh punishment and drill
- Pupil self-governance
- Dissolution of formal timetable and breaking down of subject barriers/curriculum integration
- Shift in curriculum emphasis from the ‘3Rs’ to creative and expressive activities

What were the origins of these ideas? Liberal pedagogical theories developed in Western Europe from the late eighteenth century, were advanced into the nineteenth centuries through experimental schools and institutions, and eventually applied to social reform agendas as state educational provisions expanded. Important amongst these theorists were Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), Maria Montessori (1870-1952), and, in the USA, John Dewey (1859-1952). In early twentieth century Britain, the abstract ideas of these thinkers were often cited as a general philosophy of progressive education, in contrast with traditional didactic systems.

Progressive education in Britain has proven to be an adaptable handmaiden, serving a range of ideologies. Between the wars progressivism and internationalism found particular synergy, thus the League of Nations Union championed progressive methods such as drama and

handwork to promote their message in the classroom (McCarthy 2011). At the same time, socialist thinkers saw progressive methods as the key to opening elite education up to the masses. In Secondary education for all (1922) R. H. Tawney evoked the progressive emphasis on the individual child: ‘every child has to be assured of the certainty that his capacities will be wrought into their true values’ (Tawney, 1922). Later in the century, in response to the post-1945 establishment of universal secondary education, the ideas of Paulo Friere (1921-1997) and Colin Ward (1924-2010) were taken up as vehicles of a more radical vision of progressive education on the left. Both thinkers critiqued the fundamental structures of educational systems as oppressive and were influenced by postcolonial and Foucauldian thinking. However, we should be careful not to pigeon-hole progressive education on the left. With its emphasis on individual uplift, more conservative educationists also found progressive education a useful tool, for example the primary educationist Sybil Marshall.

Practice

Progressive education has been widely studied and acknowledged as a theoretical orthodoxy, but its traction in schools is more debateable. One approach to assessing its application is looking at classroom resources, such as textbooks and readers. Peter Yeandle’s recent study Citizenship, nation, empire (2016) is a stellar example of this. He convincingly shows how Herbartian theory, with its emphasis on moral training, percolated through the content of history readers used in elementary schools between 1870 and 1930. Yeandle argues that previous studies of classroom resources have underestimated their pedagogical underpinning, which he finds to be very strong in the case of the readers used for history teaching.

A second approach is through the study of teachers’ professional discourse. A key example of this is Peter Cunningham’s Curriculum change in the primary school since 1945 (1988), which also serves as a useful introduction to progressive education. As the title suggests, much of the literature focuses on primary education, because progressive education emerged from theories of early years’ education. However, as the twentieth century progressed, progressive practices were reworked for and imported into settings of secondary (and higher) education. Thus, Laura Tisdall’s PhD thesis (and forthcoming book) Teachers, teaching practice and conceptions of childhood in England and Wales, 1931-1967 (2015), successfully spans teaching practice in both primary and secondary education. Her most important conclusion in the secondary context is that teachers frequently misunderstood or found themselves in conflict with ‘child-centred’ methods, resulting in their poor or limited implementation in postwar secondary schools.

In the interwar period, and especially after the publication of the Hadow Report in 1926, the Board of Education consistently endorsed progressive educational methods in its publications, notably the Suggestions series for teachers. The 1930s saw some flowering of progressive educational practice, allied to the embryonic development of secondary education, for example in Cambridgeshire under Henry Morris as Chief Education Officer (CEO). Morris’s vision and realisation of a series of rural educational centres known as Village Colleges demonstrated an aesthetic investment in the educational environment



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through architecture, design, and the spatial layout of classrooms. In the same decade George Lowndes, LCC Assistant Education Officer, published The Silent Social Revolution (1937), which enthusiastically endorsed progressive methods as the harbinger of an expanding system of democratic education. On the ground, material collected by the History in Education Project from pupils educated in the late 1930s did demonstrate concentrated pockets of progressive activity, especially in London. But this was not widespread, and progressive education was clearly not mainstream in schools between the wars.

The manifestation of progressive education in the independent sector should not be overlooked. At Badminton School in Bristol in the 1920s and 1930s, progressive methods were used as a way to prepare middle-class girls for their modern position as world citizens (Watkins, 2007). The Elmshursts developed an ambitious educational programme from 1925 at Dartington Hall in Devon, which demonstrated the synergy between progressive education and utopian, idealist, and neo-environmentalist philosophies (Jeremiah, 2006). And, from the 1930s-1960s, ancillary educational institutions such as the BBC and museums experimented with progressive techniques such as film and object-learning in their quest to democratise access to culture. In addition, Paulo Friere's pedagogical ideas were influential amongst the first generation of academics at the Open University in the 1970s as they pioneered methods for delivering higher-education level courses to a new constituent of distance learners (Weinbren, 2015).

Regional variation continued to characterise the application of progressive education in schools in England, Wales, and Scotland after the Second World War. CEOs in some LEAs were strongly committed to progressive education. Such administrative orientation could have a profound impact on the experience of schooling in those areas. The most famous example is Sir Alec Clegg, CEO of West Riding 1945-1974. More subtly, the language of progressive education was permeating through educational discourse after 1945. Many teacher training courses involved some contact with progressive educational ideas by the 1950s. Carolyn Steedman wrote about the widespread practice of 'creative writing' in English teaching in British primary schools from the 1940s to the 1970s as form of training in selfhood. The practice required children to become emotionally involved and develop a 'sincere response' to the task (Steedman, 1999). Progressive education in this period was rarely theoretically sophisticated, but to many teachers it meant conceiving of education as preparation for social life, rather than as conveying content to pass examinations.

Although theoretically developed for primary pedagogy, the Ministry of Education endorsed progressive education as the basis for the new secondary modern schools from 1947, because they enjoyed curricula freedom and (hypothetically) more opportunities to take exploratory field trips (Grosvenor and Lawn, 2004). It is clear from the History in Education Project's surveys and interviews that such practices did carry over into some comprehensive schools from the 1960s, largely via the efforts of committed progressive teachers and probably delineated by streaming within large schools. Projects like the Schools Council History Project (established in 1972) had an aim of producing history lessons that promoted emotional training in the comprehensive school classroom (Cannadine, Keating, and Sheldon,

2011). Nonetheless, Roy Lowe cited several studies on classroom practice in the 1970s that found that such methods actually had little impact on everyday life in the comprehensive school classroom (Lowe, 2007). But progressive education was also a casualty of comprehensivisation. Bottom up pressure for structural reform of the secondary education system from the 1950s argued for new schools that would deliver the same things as the grammar schools, which often meant turning away from progressive practices (Mandler, 2014).

Politics

As has been suggested, in the interwar period and for at least two decades after 1945 central and local government took a generally positive stance towards progressive education. It promised to be one vehicle through which to deliver the increasing demand for democratic education. The most influential official endorsement of progressive education came with the two-volume report Children and their Primary Schools (The Plowden Report) of 1967. A flavour of Plowden progressivism can be gleaned from the following extract (vol 1, p. 187):

‘A school is not merely a teaching shop, it must transmit values and attitudes. It is a community in which children learn to live first and foremost as children and not as future adults. In family life children learn to live with people of all ages. The school sets out deliberately to devise the right environment for children, to allow them to be themselves and to develop in the way and at the pace appropriate to them. It tries to equalise opportunities and to compensate for handicaps. It lays special stress on individual discovery, on first-hand experience and on opportunities for creative work. It insists that knowledge does not fall into neatly separate compartments and that work and play are not opposite but complementary.’

In the years following Plowden a range of factors converged to shift the tide against progressive education. During the late 1960s and early 1970s the traditionalist educational discourse consolidated, and debates within the teaching profession became more diverse and adversarial (Lowe, 2007). In 1974 William Tyndale school, a primary school in North London, faced fierce media hostility after implementing an extreme child-centred programme that collapsed the formal school day (Maclure, 1990). In his infamous education speech at Ruskin College in October 1976, James Callaghan openly criticised child-centred methods. He evoked the ‘unease felt by parents and others about the new informal methods of teaching’.

Subsequently, there was greater central government interest (by both parties) in the internal work of schools. Some felt there was less trust placed in the expertise of the teaching profession as a result. This was often described as a breakdown in the postwar partnership between LEAs and teachers. For some progressive educationists 1976 signalled ‘a semi-permanent shift to the right in the grounds of educational debate in modern Britain’ (Lowe, 2007). The years that followed saw the publication of the Black Papers (1969-77), which hinged on the perceived excesses of progressive education, the abolition of the GLC (and effectively the ILEA) in 1985, and the debate around and implementation of the 1988

Education Reform Act. One former teacher described these changes as the coming of ‘the wolf pack with its dismal howl about standards’ (Barker, 2002).

Accounts of this policy shift are deeply polarised, often echoing the voices of professionals and activists who were involved and invested in the progressive and traditional projects. Although the 1970s were clearly a turning point, recent accounts have played down the narrative of progressive ‘ascendancy’ followed by traditional ‘backlash’. In her examination of reactions to the Plowden Report, Laura Tisdall found that many detractors of progressive education in the 1970s were not opposed to the theory, but they were intent on challenging its poor implementation in practice (Tisdall, 2015). Although Roy Lowe’s The death of progressive education (2007) is a strong statement of progressive education as a bottom up, radical force against the Establishment, he points to 1950s Cold War-era precedents to attacks on progressive education from the right, reminding us of the longer chronology (Lowe, 2007).

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