

## **Progressive = Permissive? Not According to John Dewey...Subjects Matter!**

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### **Abstract**

The progressive education movement, which promoted the philosophy of school reform that prevailed among waves of educational innovators throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been associated historically with John Dewey and has prided itself on implementing *his 'child-centered' principles*. However, there were major differences between many of the progressives' attitudes and Dewey's ideas about learning. To better understand why issues that originally separated Dewey from other progressives continue to be a source of conflict and confusion even today, as exemplified by an article that appeared in an edition of Education Week (Spencer, 2001; Weiner, 2001), this paper examines the philosophy and practices of some significant early progressive thinkers in light of Dewey's theory of experience.

### **John Dewey and Progressive Education: How Have Practicing Teachers Understood Progressive Education?**

In keeping with the United Federation of Teachers statement displayed prominently on its website that "... the Single Most Influential Factor to Student Learning is a Well-Educated, Professionally Current Teacher." The authors of this paper recently undertook an informal survey of teachers and supervisors in their geographical area about how educational theories informed their practice. Most of the participants had impressions of "progressive education" and a large majority could identify John Dewey with its philosophy, but many seemed to know little about Dewey's actual beliefs and even less about the role of other "progressive" thinkers in development of the theory. The respondents used phrases such as "child centered" and "permissive," in both approving and derisive ways, to describe what they understood to be progressive attitudes toward curriculum design and students' social behavior. These practitioners' perceptions mirror the diverse interpretations of progressivism that have been evident since its inception and that affect teaching and learning today.

The progressive education movement, which promoted the philosophy of school reform that prevailed among waves of educational innovators throughout the 20th century, has been associated historically with John Dewey and has prided itself on implementing his principles.

However, there were major differences between many of the progressives' attitudes and Dewey's supposedly "child-centered" ideas about teaching and learning. Not only did these progressives misinterpret Dewey, as Byrns (1938) suggested, but, if they had understood him, they would have objected to his views about the relationship between children's experience and their learning. <sup>1</sup> Furthermore, various classroom practices implemented under the banner of progressivism were, according to Dewey himself, "mis-educative" (Dewey, 1938; Bode, 1938).

Although the term "progressive" has been used over time to refer to divergent strains of educational thinking (Cremin, 1961; Walker & Soltis, 1998), many educators today continue to identify with what they believe to be Dewey's approach. Issues that originally separated Dewey from other progressives continue to be a source of conflict and confusion as exemplified by an article that appeared as two comparative commentaries in the same edition of *Education Week* (Spencer, 2001; Weiner, 2001). In this piece, the authors differ about how the progressive approach to education is affecting children from two public schools located in New York City's highly regarded Community School District 2.

In her observations, titled "Progressivism's Hidden Failure," Spencer (2001), blames the district wide use of "... progressive educational practices, well-known, according to a consensus of rigorous experimental research, to be destructive to the elementary education of underprivileged children" (p.29) for the inability of almost half of her school's multi-cultural, lower socio-economic status children to meet minimum fourth grade reading standards. She writes that, despite being "nationally celebrated for its dramatic improvement in reading and math scores since 1987...*most* [italics hers] of District 2's deprived children cannot read fluently enough to face comfortably the rest of their schooling" (p.29). Spencer criticizes the district for not providing these children with the teacher-directed, skill-centered strategies that she believes are necessary to help them learn. Instead, at the school where the author is a tutor, lower grade classrooms are organized and arranged physically to facilitate cooperative learning, guided reading, and group work activities in which

...many unsupervised children daydream or fool around. ... A rug in each classroom is a hallmark of progressive education... to convey an informal, campfire-like image of schooling, rather than a presumed oppressive rigidity.... Sitting in the lotus-like 'best learning position' is not easy ... Resulting handwriting is horrendous...A progressive classroom requires that an entire class of small children must often move around all at once, from desks to rug or vice versa...the result too often is a rising tide of noise and disorder.... The upshot is the most fearful waste of precious time in the school day (p.29-32).

Spencer quotes Howard Gardner, "the revered progressive educator," as agreeing with

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<sup>1</sup> Dewey did not align himself with the child-centered position in the school reform debate. He shows this when discussing the 'fallacy' of both the traditional and the 'child centered' educators in *How Much Freedom in New Schools?* [lw 5:320 "That there was need for the reaction, indeed for a revolt, seems to me unquestionable. The evils of the traditional, conventional school room, its almost complete isolation from actual life, and the deadly depression of mind which the weight of formal material caused, all cried out for reform... The relative failure to accomplish this result indicates the one-sidedness of the idea of the "child-centered" school That is, they are still obsessed by the personal factor; they conceive of no alternative to adult dictation save child dictation." :Page lw.5.321

her that, “A large and possibly growing number of students need the kind of help, support, modeling and/or scaffolding that has often been seen as antithetical to the unstructured atmosphere of progressive education” (p.29). She states that, despite Gardner’s view and other professional literature recommending more traditional approaches, District 2’s leadership remains “Deeply committed to progressive methods, [and] requires them in all schools, including schools like mine” (p.29).

From Spencer’s perspective, whatever positive changes that occurred in District 2 since 1987 accrued mainly to economically and socially privileged children and primarily through top-down, district wide administrative reforms, such as, firing weak principals and teachers and requiring continual professional staff development, “...inevitably improving performance in all schools” (p. 32).

Contrasting Spencer’s view of progressivism, Weiner (2001), a professor and parent at another school, contends, in *Standardization’s Stifling Impact*, that the socially and academically diverse students in her daughter’s District 2 school have benefited from the “...ideals associated with progressive education: arts-based learning; valuing children’s differences; attention to children’s social, political, and moral growth; and democratic governance” (p.29). However, Weiner claims that District 2, rather than supporting an individualized and child-centered education, “...has developed a more predetermined ‘standards-based instructional delivery system that we and all other schools are forced to accept,” which threatens her school’s existence since it is committed to progressive education (p.29). The author says that the parents “...are suspicious of packages that presume any single method or approach could be best for every child and teacher in our school,” even though the district has bundled curriculum materials and instructional strategies based upon constructivist theories generally favored at the school (p.29). Weiner argues that, although more traditional approaches may be helping to raise test scores in some schools, emphasis on standardizing instruction and conforming to administrative directives are limiting teacher and parent decision-making in the education of their children.

Both authors’ perceptions of their school district’s philosophy are classic arguments regarding the pros and cons of the progressive ideology. Spencer believes that “disadvantaged” children require a prescribed curriculum, in which a no-nonsense teacher inculcates certain skills in students to level the playing field. She infers from her experience that ‘almost anything goes in a progressive classroom, that is, teachers have few, if any, expectations for children’s social and academic behavior and are casual about curriculum standards. Therefore, progressivism’s child-centered emphasis is to blame for these students’ failures.

As counterpoint, Weiner believes that progressivism’s attention to children’s individuality promotes equality and that curriculum which emerges from children’s interests builds upon their diversity and stimulates learning. She suggests that mandates for the teacher to utilize a particular instructional design or subject matter content in advance neglects the developmental needs of students and, therefore, increases their potential for boredom, lack of interest, and classroom misbehavior.

Spencer and Weiner, like many others, present their cases as if progressivism was an “either-or” proposition. Are they right? Is progressivism to be equated with ‘permissivism,’ that

is, absence of structure and support for children? Does a progressive philosophy indicate that teachers will not hold meaningful expectations for children's learning and social behavior? Does a progressive classroom require that the child's current interests take precedence over subject matter study? Must the progressive teacher's decisions about curriculum process and content be motivated by whether the child will be pleased with the outcome? On the other hand, can progressivism paradoxically become standardized and regimented, thus stifling the needs of children? Over the course of six decades of publications, as his thinking went through revisions, John Dewey would be interpreted as both agreeing and disagreeing with all of these questions (Prawat, 2000, 2003).

Many of the child-centered progressives seized on elements of Dewey's philosophy to promote an ideology that presents a false dichotomy between children's immediate interests and needs (the "knower") and planned in advance curriculum content (the "known"), which has become self-perpetuating and continues to leave its imprint on the field of education a century later. To understand better the existence of this dualism, this paper compares Dewey's theory of experience with the philosophies of some of the leading progressive educators and, as a result, responds to the questions posed above.

### **Historical Context of Dewey and the Progressive Movement**

Historically, traditional educators believed that the role of schools was to transmit the long-established values and past knowledge of our society. As agents of the community, teachers were expected to infuse selected pre-determined skills into the students, often through a subject-centered, discipline-oriented, standards-based education. In practice then, as today, the traditional methodologies often result in a strict and controlling classroom where children are taught to learn by rote methods and are expected to memorize information to demonstrate mastery of subject matter content.

The progressive movement arose, at least in part, as a response to the demands being placed upon the rapidly expanding public schools between 1870 and 1910 (Handlin, 1959). As waves of immigrants entered the United States to find work in an expanding industrial economy, most schools used factory-like methods to assimilate large numbers of linguistically and culturally diverse children. The rigid structure of those schools at that time required children to learn content distant from their lived experiences in overcrowded, anonymous classrooms. Teachers often looked at students as passive vessels in which to pour knowledge regardless of the children's individual needs and differences.

Growing numbers of progressive thinkers began to believe that traditional approaches to education were not developing thoughtful, capable, well-rounded citizens who could contribute to a rapidly changing democratic society. These educators urged that learning should be based on "...experiential education, a curriculum that responded to both the needs of students and the times, child-centered education, freedom and individualism, and the relativism of academic standards in the name of equity" (Sadovnik, Clarkson, & Semel, p. 25). However, far from being a unifying concept within the progressive movement, over time the phrase "child-centered" came to refer to a range of educational philosophies and practices, which primarily emphasized the interests and needs of the child but varied in the degree to which they valued teacher initiated

curriculum, logically organized subject matter, and learning from experience.

John Dewey's early philosophy emerged during this period as he and his wife, Alice, developed the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago from 1896-1904. Dewey explained that the function of his school was not to educate teachers for the values found in the present system but "...to create new standards and ideals and thus to lead to a gradual change in conditions" (Page ew.5.438].

The Chicago Laboratory School was founded on the premise that children are growing and changing beings that require active learning experiences of immediate interest and personal involvement in order to learn. However, along with his view of the child, Dewey also paid attention to the organization of subject matter and systematic application of subject matter in the curriculum. In *The School and Society* (1902), Dewey took the position that curriculum must always be a question of the child's experiences and the ability of the child to connect the experiences and the subject matter.

One thing, then, we wanted to find out is how much can be given a child that is really worth his while to get, in knowledge of the world about him, of the forces in the world, of historical and social growth, and in capacity to express himself in a variety of artistic forms. From the strictly educational side this has been the chief problem of the school. It is along this line that we hope to make our chief contribution to education in general; we hope, that is, to work out and publish a positive body of subject-matter which may be generally available. How can instruction in these formal, symbolic branches--the mastering of the ability to read, write, and use figures intelligently--be carried on with everyday experience and occupation as their background and in definite relations to other studies of more inherent content, and be carried on in such a way that the child shall feel their necessity through their connection with subjects which appeal to him on their own account? If this can be accomplished, he will have a vital motive for getting the technical capacity. It is not meant, as has been sometimes jocosely stated, that the child learns to bake and sew at school, and to read, write, and figure at home. It is intended that these formal subjects shall not be presented in such large doses at first as to be the exclusive objects of attention, and that the child shall be led by that which he is doing to feel the need for acquiring skill in the use of symbols and the immediate power they give. (mw.1.60).

Though Dewey also stressed the child's needs, the child-centered progressives frequently tipped the paradigm toward the child's immediate gratification and present life experiences to the exclusion of children learning from humankind's historical knowledge base. For example, Pratt (1930) believed that schools should stress the child's freedom of expression. This often meant that the desires of the child were of primary concern and that curriculum should respond directly to the child's creative impulses. In somewhat more balanced perspectives, Kilpatrick (1922) proposes that, while children's learning should have purpose, the child's "satisfaction" was

paramount<sup>2</sup> and teachers should introduce subject matter only “as needed” to implement his project-based approach. While Rugg (1941) also thought that the curriculum should account for both the child’s level of development and societal context, he developed content in the early grades into pre-planned units that focused primarily on the child’s current life issues. Although they intended to nurture learning in the child, these child-centered progressives’ own practices often sabotaged their good intentions. Dewey’s views of child-centered education show that the concept of “experience” is key to understanding his perspective (lw 5.321).

### **Dewey’s Theory of Experience**

In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey explains that the fundamental purpose of education is to prepare students to function productively as adults in a democratic society that could afford equal opportunity for all, regardless of social class, race, or gender. In *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey continues his conviction that “...democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life” (1938, p. 34).

Dewey, similar to other educators, wants children to have educational experiences that foster the greatest learning for the greatest numbers. The difference between Dewey and his contemporaries, both traditional and progressive, focuses on how that educational experience comes about and what are its aims. Dewey sees educational philosophy becoming mired in divisive ‘isms’ and he criticized both traditionalism and child-centered progressivism as mis-educative for missing the opportunity to fully equip students with necessary knowledge and skills for life in a democracy. He disapproved of traditional educators who seemingly stressed subject matter at the expense of the child’s individual interests, and progressive educators who too often focus on the child’s traits at the expense of society’s needs for students to understand contemporary issues and to learn from and about our history (1916, 1930, 1938). Dewey’s goal is for education to make all of us problem solvers employing intelligent thinking. For Dewey, his ‘project in life’ was to intellectualize practice, to have all of us live intelligent lives, and not to ‘practicalize’ intelligence (Eldredge, p.5).

Dewey’s perspectives are further clarified by Alfred L. Hall-Quest, editor of Kappa Delta Pi Publications in the editorial forward to *Experience and Education* (1938):

Frowning upon labels that express and prolong schism, Dr. Dewey interprets education as the scientific method by means of which man studies the world, acquires cumulatively knowledge of meanings and values, these outcomes, however, being data for critical study and intelligent living. The tendency of

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2 In William Heard Kilpatrick: *Trail Blazer in Education* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), pp. vii-x. First published in Samuel Tenenbaum, Dewey agrees that Kilpatrick was more even handed. He states: “...if it is noted that Dr. Kilpatrick has never fallen a victim to the one-sidedness of identifying progressive education with child-centered education. This does not mean that he has not given attention to the capacities, interests, and achievements and failures of those who are still students; but he has always balanced regard for the psychological conditions and processes of those who are learning with consideration of the social and cultural conditions in which as human beings the pupils are living.” Page lw.17.57

scientific inquiry is toward a body of knowledge that needs to be understood as the means whereby further inquiry may be directed. Hence, the scientist, instead of confining his investigation to problems as they are discovered, proceeds to study the nature of problems, their age, conditions, significance. To this end he may need to review related stores of knowledge. Consequently, education must employ progressive organization of subject-matter in order that the understanding of this subject-matter may illumine the meaning and significance of the problems. Scientific study leads to and enlarges experience, but this experience is educative only to the degree that it rests upon a continuity of significant knowledge and to the degree that this knowledge modifies or "modulates" the learner's outlook, attitude, and skill (p.10).

According to Dewey's theory, "educative experiences" are interactive, historical and social processes founded on the principles of continuity and interaction (which he later referred to as "transaction"). Continuity refers to the temporal concept that children will learn best when they are helped to connect their past and present experiences, both in and out of school, which can then be used to create new knowledge and to expand opportunities for future growth. When teachers reach back to what history has taught us, the content body of "inherited knowledge," they help children to link the lessons of the past with current individual and social concerns. Understanding the relationships between current and historical social issues may lead to children's developing insights about society's future.

Interaction, Dewey's second principle of experience, lends "equal rights" to both factors. Dewey explains that an experience is a situation with two sets of conditions: the internal or subjective (child) and the external or objective (society). Rather than opposing forces, Dewey (1902) suggests that the child and the curriculum be understood as "...two limits which define a single process of continual learning." Continual interaction between organized "logical" subject matter and the "psychological" needs of the child in a social context fosters universal growth (Dewey, 1897, 1938). Through continuity and interaction, learning becomes a regenerative, growing, never ending process.

Dewey wants to inspire the active engagement of the learner with content to be learned by striking an orderly yet dynamic balance between the needs of the learner as an individual in a social context and the subject matter to be learned; a balance between the teacher's control over traditional subject matter and the child's expression of personal understanding. Dewey's (1916) "twilight zone of inquiry" is the space created by the teacher where both subject matter and children connect, where knowing and not knowing intersect, where learners become a part of a self-perpetuating learning process.

Another example, when one of the authors of this paper, was trying to help her fifth graders understand the causes of the Civil War, some children found little interest or meaning from the textbook's traditional approach that focused on mastery of the historical facts that seemed meaningless to the children. Therefore, she developed a curriculum that presented classroom experiences designed to help the children empathize with the plight of slaves. By stimulating the children to think about times in their own lives when they felt under the total control of an authority as well as dependent on that figure, she actively engaged them with the

subject matter through what Dewey calls “psychologizing” the content. Then, when she used Readers’ Theater techniques to juxtapose Frederick Douglass’ Independence Day Speech at Rochester with Martin Luther King Jr.’s, The March on Washington Address (“I Have a Dream”), the abstract concepts of freedom became concrete for the children.

### **The Romantic Child-Centered Progressives**

While some progressives aimed at balancing the interests of both child and society in reforming the curriculum, others maintained that schools needed to focus almost exclusively on the child’s nature and well-being. Burnett describes “romantic progressivism” as emphasizing the child’s natural state, their “...will, feeling and imagination – as natively generative of the good person and citizen independently of any pronounced formal or academic training” (1979, p207.). Basing their thinking on the work of the psychologists, Edward Thorndike and G. Stanley Hall (under whom Dewey studied), these progressives believed that a curriculum that emphasizes traditional organization of subject matter prevented the child from learning. Referred to by Cremin (1961) as “sentimentalists,” they derived many of their ideas from Jean-Jacque Rousseau’s views on human nature: they saw the child as sacred. There was little place in their schools’ “romantic pedagogy” for traditional school studies that the sentimentalists believed ignored the child’s needs (Ravitch, 2000; Rugg and Shumaker, 1928).

As at the University of Chicago, many campuses across the country experimented with progressive approaches to teaching. Writing in *Schools of To-Morrow* (1915), Dewey and his daughter, Evelyn, initially lauded examples of the child-centered laboratory schools, such as that developed by J.L. Meriam at the University of Missouri, which designed a curriculum for the early grades that emerged primarily from the child’s immediate experience. He also identified, as exemplary, M. P. Johnson’s Organic School in Alabama, which presented an ungraded, test-free, play-centered environment, absent of external rewards and punishments, where children’s independence was valued and formal academic subject-matter was postponed as long as possible (Ravitch, 2000). More than a decade later, Dewey (1926) evidently re-thought his position:

There is a present tendency in so-called advanced schools of educational thought...[to] surround pupils with certain materials... and then let pupils respond to these things according to their own desires... Now such a method is really stupid; and it misconceives the conditions of independent thinking (p.37).

Reiterating the point in 1938, Dewey stated that: “Just because traditional education was a matter of routine in which the plans and programs were handed down from the past, it does not follow that progressive education is a matter of planless improvisation” (p. 28).

The romantics made the interests of the child the “ultimate standard for schoolwork” (Dewey, 1897), but ultimately their pedagogy limited the child’s access to knowledge and ability to think independently. They failed to distinguish among fundamental conditions necessary to support independent thinking: “... license began to pass for liberty, planlessness for spontaneity, recalcitrance for individuality, obfuscation for art, and chaos for education—all justified in the rhetoric of expressionism” (Cremin, 1961, p.207). Also, their mistaking of anarchy for freedom only fed a spirit of anti-intellectualism (Geiger, 1958, p.192).

Dewey was not alone in his criticism. For example, Rugg and Shumaker (1928) came to define an effective curriculum as taking into account the necessary steps toward increasingly more complex and independent tasks that children are expected to master. In their experience, children often became frustrated when it took an inordinate amount of time to complete their projects because they may have acquired incomplete information in a haphazard way.

A primary example of what the moderates faulted was Caroline Pratt's Play School (later named the City and Country Day School), which epitomized the romantic pedagogy of the early twentieth century (Antler, 1987). Pratt understandably attacks those who forgot the child's place in the educative process, but stresses the importance of educators to focus on the child to the extent that the child dominates the entire curriculum. In addition, she overemphasizes the methods of teaching that often displace the use of inherited knowledge in the curriculum content. Pratt (1930) believes that children learn mainly by working with concepts from their everyday experiences and, therefore, teaching meant using familiar subject matter. She wrote, "The old conception [of education] is that life reveals itself in books. The new conception is that life reveals itself in life" (Pratt, 1930, p. 8). Taking an extreme position, she believes that for children to study history was meaningless because history was "irrelevant to present day concerns" (Antler, 1987, p.301). This effectively led to the exclusion of systematized subject matter from the Play School's curriculum. In fact, Pratt seems to view traditional subject matter as the child's enemy. She states that:

...when subject matter dominates a curriculum, habits of acceptance of other people's opinions are formed, and memorizing becomes the functioning quality... the more and the longer the children are exposed to a subject matter program, the less they are capable of making use of opportunities for experience (p.175)

Whereas Dewey stresses the interdependence between everyday experiences and the curriculum content<sup>3</sup>, Pratt essentially divorces the child from the traditional disciplines. She effectively drove a wedge between the child's thinking skills (what she called "growth habits") and subject matter. She gave children limited guidance or supervision and, because they did not have access to long-established subject matter that could provide a context for making everyday experiences more meaningful, they were restricted in what they could learn.

Pratt and the romantic child-centered progressive educators largely base their practices on a denunciation of traditional education rather than affirming a new philosophy (Dewey, 1938). Their practices became as equally "mis-educative" as the traditional practices:

Many of the newer schools tend to make little or nothing of organized subject-matter of study; to process as if any form of direction and guidance by adults were an invasion of individual freedom, and as if the idea that education should be concerned with the present and the future meant that acquaintance with the past has little

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<sup>3</sup> See Dewey, . Page mw.1.106.. first published in *The School and Society* First published by University of Chicago Press, 1899.

or no role to play in education (p. 22).

Many child-centered educators, especially the romantics, believed that children's everyday experience should be the main criterion for subject matter selection and development. The call to "start with the child," often attributed to Dewey, is a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Dewey's ideas<sup>4</sup>. He believes that teachers should not separate children's experiences and inherited subject matter because both designate different aspects of the same learning process (Dewey, 1956). The separation occurs when the teacher over-emphasizes either traditional subject matter or the child's nature.

### **The Project Method: William Kilpatrick**

Any discussion of progressive educators must include William Kilpatrick of Teachers College Columbia University, who became known for his "project method," described as a way for children to live out a "wholehearted purposeful activity in a social environment" (1922).

His critics believe that while intending to popularize Dewey's theories, Kilpatrick's child-centered emphasis, which came to dominate the progressive education movement, took "the very position Dewey himself rejected..." (Cremin, 1961, p.220). Kilpatrick claimed that it was the teacher's responsibility to help children see a purpose for every activity. By keeping the purpose of the project in mind, the student could take the initiative to plan, experiment, problem solve, and evaluate the results. In one example, Kilpatrick (1926) tells us that when a boy learns to plant corn, he learns better by solving the problem himself, rather than basing his actions on knowledge attained from books. He opposed setting out subject matter in advance because it would stifle the creativity of the child (Cremin, 1961). Kilpatrick (1926) theorizes that discovery, "first-hand experience," should be the building block of every learning activity; learning from others, "second-hand experience," was permissible only if primary experiences were too costly or time-consuming. (Bode, 1927).

Kilpatrick (1922) justifies his project method largely by invoking Thorndike's laws of learning, especially the law of effect, which asserts that connections between stimuli and responses are strengthened or weakened by the child's feelings of satisfaction or displeasure. At each step of a project, therefore, the teacher must be vigilant to ensure the pupil's happiness. Kilpatrick's purpose may have been to interpret Dewey's philosophy of learning, but his critics believe his overemphasis on the child's gratification in the process contradicted Dewey's principles of continuity and interaction by underemphasizing the importance of the subject matter to be learned.

Kilpatrick's (1922,1926,1931,1936) bias toward the child tends to devalue the integration of inherited knowledge with the child's everyday experiences, which formed the basis of Dewey's theory of experience. Kilpatrick's student is thus in danger of being deprived of opportunities in which inherited knowledge may become personalized and internalized.

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4 In *The Child and the Curriculum*, What he does say in this essay is "Abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself, outside the child's experience; cease thinking of the child's experience as also something hard and fast; see it as something fluent, embryonic, vital; and we realize that the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process." [ mw.2.279].

Kilpatrick eliminates the key that can enable students to achieve self-generating growth, making it difficult for teachers to create contexts for continuous learning. Bagley (1935), a major critic outside the progressive movement, faults Kilpatrick for ruling out any systematic study of educational values embedded in the nation's cultural heritage. At the least, students need to use knowledge for background information, because this background aids in the acquisition of new knowledge. Why require the child to reinvent the wheel at every turn?

However, Dewey did not place his colleague in a totally negative light. In his view, Kilpatrick's Project Method needed to be qualified: it was not the only way to teach but it could be a very useful method if done properly. A legitimate project for Dewey was one that did not have a separation between theoretical knowledge and practicality. He believed that Kilpatrick went too far by minimizing the value of subject matter.

More harshly, Cremin (1988), discussing the clash between Dewey and Kilpatrick's theories, concludes that "it was not merely that good theory was not always effected in practice, it is also that good theory was frequently pre-empted by bad theory" (p.240). Greene (1966) observes that, not surprisingly, in 1938 Dewey disassociates himself from many of the progressive practices. Indeed, she claims that Kilpatrick's project method should not be considered as part of the Deweyan tradition<sup>5</sup>. For Kilpatrick, the teacher had a responsibility to guide the children's purposes, but he believed that child spontaneity should direct the subject matter to be included in the curriculum. By contrast, Dewey (1916, 1938) views the classroom as an arena where it is impossible to separate continuity and interaction; and where the teacher, students and community together create a common zone of inquiry that fosters "educative" experiences (Dewey, 1916, p.148).

Although Dewey (1931) used the project method was in his own laboratory school, he did not endorse it "as the sole way out of educational confusion." Instead, Dewey's teachers were encouraged to pay equal attention the child and society by incorporating responsiveness to the children's needs along side of the subject matter (Mayhew and Edwards, 1936). Teachers were encouraged to arrange for experiences that are "more than immediately enjoyable," that lead to future educative experiences (Dewey, 1938), which, in turn, lead the child to "the cumulative experience of the race" (Cremin, 1961). Though Kilpatrick (1922) criticized those who reacted against traditional education by humoring students' "childish whims," his project method encourages teachers to use subject matter *only as needed* to successfully complete the activity. Thus, learning can become a "hit-and-miss affair" (Bode, 1927). The project method eclipsed the more subtle relationship between the experience of the child and the content of the subjects that Dewey (1902, 1938) valued as crucial to educative experience (Cremin, 1988).

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<sup>5</sup> While Dewey supported the project method, he again did so in qualified terms. In *The Way Out of Educational Confusion* [First published as The Inglis Lecture, 1931 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), 41 pp., from the Inglis Lecture on Secondary Education at Harvard University on 11 March 1931.] Dewey explains: "while the student with a proper "project" is intellectually active, he is also overtly active; he applies, he constructs, he expresses himself in new ways. He puts his knowledge to the test of operation. . . .I have referred, as already indicated, to the "project" method because of these traits, which seem to me proper and indispensable aims in all study by whatever name it be called, not because this method seems to be the only alternative to that usually followed. I do not urge it as the sole way out of educational confusion, not even in the elementary school." [Page 1w.6.88]

Education was an end unto itself for Dewey; “the child was an end unto itself to Kilpatrick” (Childs, 1956).

Today, cognitive psychologists use the concept of “schema” to describe the connection between self-generating growth and how an individual organizes knowledge of the world (Haywood & Karpov, 1998). Children are better able to understand the importance of new factual material when teachers help them to fit facts into basic theoretical frameworks (Sclan, 1991). Cognitive psychologists argue that the teacher should not only help children to reassemble pre-existing “packets of knowledge,” but should also encourage them to construct new schema (Bransford, 1984; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). In this manner, we can teach children to teach themselves; in this way, teaching can become a form of empowerment.

### **The Moderate Child-Centered Progressives: Integrated Curricula**

Harold Rugg, Director of Research at Teachers College Columbia University’s Lincoln School from its inception in 1917, took Kilpatrick’s project method a step further in developing a program that paid more attention to subject matter. Rugg believed in the importance of reorganizing the traditional disciplines because he felt that it was only by being made aware of the immediate relevance of contemporary social issues that inherited knowledge could become meaningful for children. In his curriculum, while lower-grade students concentrated on immediate life interests, students in the upper-grades studied contemporary problems that could become a relevant part of their lives. Rugg (1941) abolished boundaries between history, geography, civics, economics, and sociology by grouping them into all encompassing “social studies” units. He no longer divides culture into history or geography but groups it into three categories: the external civilization as an economic system, the social institutions, and the underlying psychology of the people. Rugg clearly tries to connect child and society in the curriculum.

The Lincoln School’s curriculum reflected Rugg’s belief that traditional subject matter should be reorganized and planned out, as opposed to the idea that curriculum should solely emerge from spontaneous experiences of the child. However, while Rugg included cultural content in the curriculum, he tended to emphasize the importance of the immediate present and to give less attention to the role of historical knowledge in the learning process, especially in the early grades. For teachers to foster a sense of continuity in children’s thinking, the content of the subject matter needs to consistently reflect the subtle interaction between past and present experience. That the Lincoln School had such a lasting influence on the subsequent history of American education (Cremin, 1961) testifies to the fact that educators saw much of value in Rugg’s more societal approach to curriculum making. Rugg may have come closer than any of the other early child-centered progressives to achieving the critical balance between child and society that Dewey saw as essential to an “educative experience.”

By the 1930’s, the “project method” had evolved into a new reform movement, the “activity curriculum,” which was inspired, at least in part, by the Lincoln School experiment. The activity curriculum movement spread rapidly throughout public school districts across the country. Where some educators used the term to describe unplanned experiences, most schools defined the activity curriculum as basing planned subject matter upon the child’s developmental

needs and life experiences. They pushed for a redistribution of traditional subject matter into integrated “units.” Instead of learning specific subjects, the child could study a larger thematic unit that combines new knowledge from all the disciplines and is based on familiar, everyday experiences. Following the Lincoln School’s findings, the activity curriculum developers believed children could learn more readily through actively participating in an integrated curriculum.

However, though the pre-planned units were largely based on familiar experiences in the children’s everyday lives and were conceptualized as developing throughout the elementary school grades, they did not necessarily respond to individual children’s unanticipated needs and interests which arise in every classroom. In addition, while the units introduced were based on what students already knew they often failed to go beyond the children’s own lives. Although this assured that children could feel successful, the approach often limited the introduction of new knowledge.

Although activity curriculum developers paid more attention to the importance of planned subject matter than did Pratt or Kilpatrick, planning units in advance frequently became as rigid and arbitrary a practice as the traditional methods. One representative example of an activity curriculum leader, and a misreading of Dewey, are the ideas of Ruby Minor (1929), director of Kindergarten and Elementary Education in Berkeley, California. She claimed that redistributing subject matter enabled teachers to respond to the child’s traits, interests, and needs. That is, she advocated what she believed Dewey (1897) called ‘psychologizing’ the subject matter, but she did not always link actual present and past student experiences into new fields of knowledge and understanding. In addition, she did not seem to be aware of when Dewey distanced himself from usage of the term. For example, alluding to the work of Johann Pestalozzi. Dewey states:

In drawing, he used various combinations of straight and curved lines. In music and arithmetic similar reductions to the elements supposed by him to be simple. This is what Pestalozzi called "psychologizing education"--that is reducing all subjects to elements. It was poor psychology for the child. It was imposing upon the child the adult point of view, which is not simple, but difficult for the young mind. (mw.7.381).

Since present experiences cannot always be anticipated or pre-planned, teachers must use their expertise to make subject matter come alive. Truly “educative experiences” grow out of both pre-planned subject matter and curriculum created on the spot by a skilled teacher who knows and appreciates what the children bring to classroom life. Thus, by failing to recognize the reciprocal relationship between “interaction” and “continuity,” even the activity curriculum leaders may have somewhat circumscribed what children could learn.

### **The Progressive Legacy and Implications for Practice**

John Dewey’s interpretations, syntheses and criticisms of progressive education have stimulated more than a century of innovative thought, research and practice (Cremin, 1961). Dewey published his first major book in 1887 and continued to construct his educational thinking in the social context of dramatically changing times until his death at age 92, gradually

refining his ideas as he responded critically to misinterpretations of his theories being put into practice. Early in his thinking, he praised progressives for the same behavior that he was to disapprove of in his later writings. Thus, depending on when they applied Dewey's theory, child-centered progressives could have believed that they were following his philosophy at the time, misunderstood him, or, not uncommonly, chosen to subscribe only to those parts of his theory that matched their own beliefs, for their own purposes. Cremin (1961) comments that although Dewey attempted to clarify his ideas,

...right up to his death in 1952 - one wonders at the incredible distortions that have marked contemporary assessments of Dewey's role in the development of progressive education...the grossest caricatures of his work have come from otherwise intelligent commentators in the United States and abroad (p. 237).

The different strains of progressive education interpreted Dewey's ideas in sometimes-contradictory ways (Ravitch, 2000). The child-centered progressive educators may have thought they were implementing Dewey's ideas, but, in fact, many erred by believing that a laissez-faire approach to teaching would achieve a genuine spontaneity of thinking in the students. To their credit, the progressives' pedagogy respected the child's nature, which had been virtually ignored.

Dewey's philosophy was often misinterpreted as making the students' life experience an end unto itself, rather than a means for accessing and interacting with society's subject matter<sup>6</sup>. Not until publication of *Education and Experience* in 1938 does he so concisely articulate the subtle interdependence of the principles of continuity and interaction: principles frequently violated in many of the child-centered progressive schools. Dewey's theory of experience recommends connecting the known of the child's everyday life with previously unknown subject matter, thus allowing children to make new knowledge in a self-generating growth cycle. As Ravitch (2000) writes,

Unfortunately, many of Dewey's disciples treated subject matter as an outmoded relic from an antediluvian past. Over the years, Dewey was far too tolerant of fellow progressives who adored children but abhorred subject matter, and who loved random experiences and cared not at all for connecting children's experience to the cumulative experiences of the human race (p.172-173).

However, their overemphasis on what the child already knows as a major source for subject matter to be learned, limits access to new knowledge and completely misses Dewey's idea of experiential learning. For Dewey, experience was not just a person's thinking, feeling, or a psychic event. Experience is a "transaction between organisms and their environments that is implicated in our efforts to make our practices more effective" (Eldridge, 1998, p. 14). Dewey explains further that experience in its vital form is experimental; a force to change the given, to reach forward to the unknown in order to gain better control of the environment and to move in new directions that are pregnant with connections (Dewey, 1998, p.61).

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<sup>6</sup> His end is 'intelligent action'. See "'lw.3.39..

Research on school change during the past two decades (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996; Fullan, 1991; Goodlad, 1984; Hargreaves, 1997; Lieberman & Miller, 1999) suggests why so many of the progressives failed to implement fully Dewey's theory: teachers need to be better prepared for their roles. Their education must insure they have a wide repertoire of skills and knowledge, and the schools in which they work need to provide supportive working environments that encourage reflective practice. The structure of schools as we know them – even today – would have to be radically altered to accommodate the demands of Dewey's theory. Progressive teachers have three forces that work against their success: “bad theory,” inadequate teacher preparation, and insufficient resources and supports in the work environment (Cremin, 1961; Dewey, 1904; National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 1996). Dewey predicted that operating a school according to his theory of experience might be one of the most difficult tasks one could ever undertake in the field of education (Dewey, 1938).

In this paper, we have attempted to present the historical misinterpretations of Dewey's theory of education in order to better understand, what appears to be the dualistic approaches of many of today's educators, as exemplified by Spencer and Weiner. Cremin (1974) pointed to the failure of progressives to understand the context and history of their practices. Understanding the foundations and purposes of educational approaches allow for more intelligent decision-making in planning educative experiences (Dewey, 1916).

Spencer attempts to strengthen her arguments against the child-centered classroom by quoting Howard Gardner as agreeing with her that external structure can be helpful to children's learning, as if teacher support and traditional subject matter were antithetical to a progressive approach. In fact, Gardner (1992) believes that Dewey advocated a *balance* between traditional discipline-centered curriculum and children's needs and interests. On her part, Weiner argues against standards, formal curriculum, instruction not determined by the child's individuality.

Both traditional and progressive educators make thoughtless decisions. Spencer justly raises questions about the purpose of a rug in the classroom. In our view, while a rug can be used as a place of comfort or collaboration that may promote socialization, Dewey would disapprove of children having to sit there automatically, without regard to their abilities or the experience in which they are engaged. The early progressives introduced the rug into the traditional classroom as a reaction against the bolted-down desks that prevented social interaction and that created an atmosphere conducive to bolting-down minds and hearts. The rug signifies a less rigid atmosphere. Teachers can and need to be authorities, but can be so without being authoritarian. Unfortunately, when education is implemented mainly out of a revolt against what one does not want, rather than a carefully developed philosophy of what constitutes best practice for children, there is a danger in corrupting both theory and implementation. Dewey (1938) states that

...the fundamental issue... is not of progressive against traditional education but a question of what anything whatever must be to be worthy of the name *education*. I am not, I hope and believe, in favor of any ends or any methods simply because the name progressive may be applied to them. The basic question concerns the nature of education with no qualifying adjectives prefixed (p. 90).

Perhaps the most salient example of dualistic thinking over the past two decades may be evident in school reform arguments for and against national and state level curriculum standards. Some reformers claim that our nation must continue to adopt pre-determined, common standards so that all students have clear expectations upon which to improve their achievement (Resnick, 1999). However, according to Marzano, et.al. (1999), the standards movement has gotten out of control:

...a high school diploma would require as much classroom time as has historically resulted in a master's or professional degree. Even the brightest students would need nine additional years of schooling to master the nearly 4,000 benchmarks experts have set in 14 subject areas. (<http://www.edweek.org>)

Other educators believe that creating common standards may merely serve to reward students for achieving a narrowly defined set of outcomes, rather than providing opportunities to develop a lifelong love of learning for its own sake (Sheldon & Biddle, 1998). We believe that Dewey would look at the standards movement today and see that it has evolved into an absurdity<sup>7</sup>.

Standards, founded on narrowly conceived measures of performance, often lead to a “standardization” of instruction that promulgates a non-thinking curriculum. Standards, if used wisely, can support imaginative, innovative experiences that lead to creativity and promote democratic values. A progressive classroom can be a place where there are agreed upon expectations and organization, where children are considerate of each other, and where anarchy and disarray are not accepted in the name of freedom or democracy. For Dewey, the ultimate and unified standard is defined by the way it brings the pupil “to consciousness of his social environment, and confers upon him the ability to interpret his own powers from the standpoint of their possibilities in social use....” (mw 5.67). From this perspective, students could be productively involved in determining the standards for their social and academic behavior.

Implementing standards do not necessarily preclude students’ intrinsic motivation to learn or the freedom of teachers to use their own judgment in the children’s best interests. Standards can provide a framework for a creative, challenging engagement with curriculum; one that is not dominated by a skill and drill approach characterized by rote or meaningless tasks. Common standards can be implemented in ways that create enough spaces for teacher judgment to account for individual student interest, ability, and diverse traits, and which can support the common good. Standards can provide a guide for ensuring an intellectually literate and

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<sup>7</sup> For Dewey, standards designed independent of the nature of experience are irrelevant. In *As Concerns The College*, he explains that the belief in recipes for education is foolish. Though this article discusses the college curriculum, the point is made regarding standards: “ Now it is absurd to the point of fatuity to say, under such circumstances, we will restrict our curriculum to a certain group of studies; we will not introduce others because they have not been part of the classic curriculum of the past, and consequently are not yet well organized for educational purposes...Until the various branches of human learning have attained something like philosophic organization, until the various modes of their application to life have been so definitely and completely worked out as to bring even the common affairs of life under direction, confusion and conflict are bound to continue. When we have an adequate industrial and political organization it will be quite time to assume that there is some offhand and short-cut solution to the problem of educational organization.”[First published as "Are the Schools Doing What the People Want Them to Do?" Educational Review 21 (1901): 459-74. Reprinted as "The People and the Schools," Education Today, ed. Joseph Ratner (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1940), pp.36-52.] mw.1.306].

spiritually enriched society. One important legacy of Dewey's thinking for today's students suggests that standards can well serve students and not the other way around. Darling-Hammond (1997) puts it this way:

An alternative approach to reform uses standards and assessments as means of giving feedback to educators and as tools for organizing student and teacher learning, rather than as a sledgehammer to beat schools into change (p.241).

The authors believe that Dewey would advise future Spencers and Weiners to strive for a more interdependent approach to solving their district's educational problems. If we can learn from history, being progressive doesn't have to equate with "permissivism," nor must planning curriculum in advance and having realistic expectations for children's behavior lead to an adult-dictated classroom. However, to be both "child-centered" and "learning-centered" requires thoughtful, reflective, analytic teachers who are not wed to a single philosophy. Designing a comfortable reading area or implementing subject matter that strives to challenge students' thinking are not inherently 'miseducative' practices in themselves. What counts is how the teachers use them and for what purposes. Dewey writes:

...formal studies and lessons can be effectively completed only through the development of a new subject matter, as well organized as was the old--indeed, better organized in any vital sense of the word organization--but having an intimate and developing relation to the experience of those in school (lw 5.321).

The dualism between child and curriculum must be eliminated for change to occur in education. Dewey offers educators an option other than either the best impulses of progressivism or of traditionalism. The child's needs do not have to oppose societal interests. They can become mutually supportive, rather than competing goals for today's schools, if based upon a theory of experience as defined by Dewey.

## Notes

References to Dewey's works are to the Electronic Edition, 1996. Larry A. Hickman, General Editor Director, The Center for Dewey Studies. This present edition is based on the critical edition, but differs from it in significant ways. First, its text had to be completely rekeyed. Previous editions had been sent to the press in the form of copy-edited photocopies of the best available edition of any particular text, accompanied by typed corrections and ancillary materials. Previously unpublished materials were transcribed and delivered in hard copy. Consequently, no machine-readable text was produced at the Center as a part of the editorial process. The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953. The Electronic Edition Folio Bound VIEWS ver 3.1a. Distributed by IntelLex corp.

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