
Introduction

Progressivism and Traditionalism: A Continuum of Educational Thought

A number of how-to books on teaching are written in terms that reflect a kinship with behaviorism and an educational philosophy in which the value of uniformity is emphasized (i.e., the standardization of instructional and evaluation practices as well as the standardization of expectations for students' cognitive and social development by any given age). Many of these more traditional texts do promote a number of progressive, child-centered strategies for teaching and learning, but they often attempt to fit those approaches into an ideological framework that presents the current trend toward standardization and the value of educational uniformity as inevitable and indisputable. Many urge teachers to adopt a positive attitude toward the "ideal" of mandated uniformity at the same time that they encourage the implementation of some progressive strategies in their teaching.

We do not believe that it is helpful to try to reconcile these fundamentally differing ideologies in this way. Traditional and progressive approaches to teaching are informed by vastly different beliefs and values about the purposes of schools and about how students learn, and that's a good thing. It should be acceptable for teachers—even those working next door to one another within the same school—to have differing ideas about education.

We recognize at the outset that phrases like *student-centered* and *progressive education* are used disparagingly by a number of prominent public school critics. We view such criticism as helpful and necessary—not only for ensuring that progressively oriented educators can clearly articulate why they embrace learner-centered theories and practices in

their classrooms but also to highlight what is at stake when intolerance for others' perspectives and methods is normed. Our belief is that in a genuinely democratic society, the creative tension between opposing ideas about such a crucial topic as the education of its children must be consciously welcomed and officially valued; for freedom to exist, there must be room for competing beliefs. The extent to which vigorous, respectful public debate is enjoyed is actually a telltale measure of social freedom and democratic integrity. This idea, we must remind ourselves, is equally relevant for those of us who are frustrated by "traditional" views about the appropriate ends and means of education.

From one perspective, then, education is seen primarily as the process of ensuring that all students are "on grade level" in terms of their ability to master a prescribed body of knowledge and skills by a certain age. The essential purpose of education in this traditional view is for all students to achieve established learning goals that are standardized by content area and by their age or grade level. Progressive educators, on the other hand, are more concerned with where students are in their development as readers, writers, mathematicians, and so on rather than with where they are supposed to be by a certain age. They are focused on identifying and building on students' strengths, keeping a constant eye on what is next for them to learn—which can be helpfully informed by established standards and benchmarks that define typical developmental progression, not age-based mandates, in the content areas.

In contrast to a school of thought that presents the need for standardization more visibly than the needs and progress of individual students, a progressive educator would argue that (1) students' needs must come before all others, existing as the central focus for every educational decision—whether those decisions are made at the corporate, federal, state, district, school, or classroom level (this hierarchical ordering reflects what we see as an egregious reality, that the farther an educational decision maker is from children, the more authority and power he has to define the ends and means of education); (2) strong language and math skills are the essential means for education rather than its end goal; and (3) the purpose of education, or the end goal, is to help students to discover and develop their talents to the fullest. This last idea is in keeping with a definition of education that comes from the Latin word *educere*, which means to bring out and to draw forth. From this perspective, education is for helping children to find their place in the world, to discover what their unique contributions to society might be. This is why motivation matters so much to learner-centered teachers: they believe that for students to want to learn and to do their best, they

need to have a measure of control over their environments and activities (Deci & Koestner, 1999; Deci & Ryan, n.d., 1996, 2000; Kohn, 1993; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon & Biddle, 1998). The desire to achieve must come from within, but student-centered teachers understand that one of their most fundamental responsibilities—if not *the* most fundamental responsibility—is to cultivate and to nurture that desire.

From a student-centered point of view, a genuine desire to learn and to develop one's talents to the fullest is particularly important in the context of democracy. Educators at the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education (2002) at the University of Vermont explained:

Although there are numerous differences of style and emphasis among progressive educators, they share the conviction that democracy means active participation by all citizens in social, political and economic decisions that will affect their lives. The education of engaged citizens, according to this perspective, involves two essential elements: (1) *Respect for diversity*, meaning that each individual should be recognized for his or her own abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identity, and (2) the development of *critical, socially engaged intelligence*, which enables individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good. ¶1

While these ideas are presented to differentiate between traditional and progressive education, it is useful to note that these two words represent a continuum rather than a dichotomy in educational thought. A philosophical continuum (illustrated in Figures 0.1–0.5) can be defined in terms that represent distinctly different kinds of educational thought, from radical progressivism on the far left to radical traditionalism on the far right. We offer definitions for radical progressivism, moderate progressivism, moderate traditionalism, and radical traditionalism in five different areas in education: curriculum (Figure 0.1), accountability (Figure 0.2), standardization (Figure 0.3), motivation (Figure 0.4), and classroom/school environment (Figure 0.5). We do so believing it is possible for a person to occupy various positions on this continuum of educational thought, depending upon which aspect of education is under consideration. We, for example, are more moderate in the areas of curriculum and accountability than we are on the topics of standardization, motivation, and classroom/school environment. This book, then, is ideologically positioned between moderate and radical progressivism as we have defined those terms in Figures 0.1–0.5.

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A CONTINUUM OF EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT

Figure 0.1 Curriculum

<i>Radical Progressivism</i>	<i>Moderate Progressivism</i>	<i>Moderate Traditionalism</i>	<i>Radical Traditionalism</i>
<p>←</p> <p>The curriculum must be developed at the classroom level, following the interests of the learners themselves. Any imposition of curriculum or standards from outside of the classroom is seen as an objectification of learners and teachers. Curriculum derives entirely from the idea that education is appropriately defined through the Latin term, <i>educere</i> (to bring forth, to draw out).</p>	<p>The curriculum can be created at the classroom, district, and state level. District- and state-level standards and benchmarks provide a suggested (not required) organizational framework for educators, particularly helpful for (1) beginning teachers who are new to instructional planning and to establishing developmentally appropriate learning goals with students, and (2) involving students in planning units, learning activities, and assessment instruments.</p>	<p>The curriculum can be created at the classroom, district, and state level. Standards and grade level benchmarks created by the district and/or state communicate mandated requirements (rather than a suggested framework) for teaching and learning in each of the content areas. Students are not involved in instructional planning or creating assessment instruments, but teachers are free to create them, drawing upon the community's cultures and resources to deliver locally relevant, standards-based curriculum.</p>	<p>→</p> <p>The curriculum must be developed outside of the classroom at district, state, and national levels. Standards and grade level benchmarks communicate mandated requirements for teaching and learning in each of the content areas. Local funds of knowledge are subordinated to a "what every child must know" approach to curriculum development.</p>

Figure 0.2 Accountability

<i>Radical Progressivism</i>	<i>Moderate Progressivism</i>	<i>Moderate Traditionalism</i>	<i>Radical Traditionalism</i>
<p>Educational accountability has meaning only at the individual, immediate level of classroom practice. Educators, parents, and students are therefore the only legitimate sources of authority for establishing educational goals and defining the means of assessing and evaluating scholastic achievement.</p>	<p>Accountability is oriented to the students, parents, and educators within each school as well as to the broader community served by the school. Value is seen in district-level oversight of the establishment of educational goals and the means of assessing achievement. Educators, parents, students, and leaders at individual school and district levels are recognized as legitimate authors of the public schools' educational goals and accountability efforts.</p>	<p>Accountability is primarily oriented to hierarchical authority at local, state, and federal levels. Authority for defining educational goals and the means for measuring scholastic achievement comes primarily from outside of the classroom, although value is also seen in including educators and parents in the process. Educators, parents, and students are just a few of the "stakeholders" with an interest in assessment data and accountability targets; other stakeholders represent corporate and political interests.</p>	<p>Students and educators must be directly accountable to the government at federal and state levels, and indirectly accountable to the corporate interests that are invested in the schools' production of a capable workforce. Students and educators must be held accountable by governmental agencies for achieving prescribed standards in the interests of stakeholders outside of the classroom, school, and district.</p>

Figure 0.3 Standardization

<i>Radical Progressivism</i>	<i>Moderate Progressivism</i>	<i>Moderate Traditionalism</i>	<i>Radical Traditionalism</i>
<p>← The standardization of instructional and assessment practices and resources is not tolerated at any level. Any kind of mandated uniformity imposed on the processes of teaching and learning is counterproductive because of its disregard for the concept of developmental readiness for learning.</p>	<p>Standardizing instructional and assessment practices and resources, while generally undesirable, is occasionally helpful at the school and district levels. When educators are learning to facilitate students' development of particular skills, their decision to adopt and mandate a limited number of student-centered approaches (e.g., 6+1 Trait Writing) is seen as a positive influence on their own growth and professional development.</p>	<p>Having some degree of mandated uniformity of instructional/assessment practices and resources is essential at school, district, and state levels in order to ensure that all teachers and students are working productively toward achieving district and/or state standards.</p>	<p>Instructional and assessment practices and resources must be standardized to the greatest possible extent to ensure uniformity in the pursuit of achieving mandated standards. →</p>

Figure 0.4 Motivation

<i>Radical Progressivism</i>	<i>Moderate Progressivism</i>	<i>Moderate Traditionalism</i>	<i>Radical Traditionalism</i>
<p>Being intrinsically motivated to participate and to do one's best is emphasized as the reason for students, parents, and educators to value school activities. Extrinsic "motivators" (rewards and punishments) are seen as coercions and therefore counter-productive to the ideals of <i>educere</i> (<i>to draw out; to bring forth</i>). Within the paradigm of Radical Progressivism, these coercions are neither justifiable nor appropriate.</p>	<p>While coercive rewards and punishments are seen as counterproductive to the ideals of <i>educere</i>, they are also recognized as being occasionally necessary in the process of encouraging students' growth toward a more intrinsic orientation. With the development of intrinsic motivation as the long-term goal (by involving students in the decisions that affect them and by celebrating successes), the use of rewards and punishments is applied in shorter-term contexts.</p>	<p>Extrinsic motivations are emphasized as the reason for educational activities to be valued by students, parents, and educators alike. These include rewards (e.g., good letter grades, class points and parties, merit pay, public recognition for meeting AYP) and sanctions (e.g., poor letter grades, exclusion from class parties, loss of funding, and public disparagement for failing to meet AYP). A Moderate Traditionalist who believes in the value of intrinsic motivation may also believe that extrinsic motivators are effective means for facilitating students' interest in learning.</p>	<p>Extrinsic controls are the only effective way to achieve mandated goals. Students, teachers, and administrators are most effectively managed through the use of rewards and punishments.</p>

Figure 0.5 Classroom and School Environment

<i>Radical Progressivism</i>	<i>Moderate Progressivism</i>	<i>Moderate Traditionalism</i>	<i>Radical Traditionalism</i>
<p>←</p> <p>The learning and working environment for students and educators is characterized by a purely democratic governing style: community members' voices are equally valued when important decisions are made (i.e., popular democracy). In this environment, critical thought, respect for individual needs and developmental readiness, courage in asking (and skillfully pursuing) important questions, and cooperation are some of the operative values that are consistently evident.</p>	<p>The learning and working environment is characterized by a governing style in which strong leadership is valued at the classroom, school, and district levels. This paradigm is devoted to democratic and community values (critical thought, individual needs and developmental readiness, asking/pursuing important questions, and cooperation), but ultimate decision-making power lies with classroom, school, and district leadership (similar to the concept of representative democracy). Leaders work with community members at every level to define goals and assess progress.</p>	<p>The learning and working environment for students and educators may be characterized by a top-down management style and values (obedience, uniformity, correctness, and competition). However, moderate traditionalism is also concerned with the more humanistic values of cooperation, respect, and the value of diversity. What distinguishes Moderate Traditionalism from Moderate Progressivism in this realm is that the former's primary goal is to achieve strong control, and the latter's is to achieve strong community.</p>	<p>The learning and working environment in this paradigm is characterized by a top-down management style in which such operative values as obedience, uniformity, correctness, and competition are evident.</p> <p>→</p>

Progressive ideas about education are rooted in humanism—that is, in the belief that human beings and their dreams, capacities, and worth must be treated as ends in themselves and not as means for furthering imposed agendas. Vito Perrone captured this idea in summarizing the educational progressivism of John Dewey: “Do we fit the child to the

school, or make the school fit the child?" (1991, p. 3). Learner-centered educators are devoted to the idea that schools must work for students rather than the other way around. When schools work for students, young people are respected and challenged to identify and develop their "abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identities" to the fullest, which can allow their "critical, socially engaged intelligence" to grow in turn. In other words, when schools work for kids, their talents are recognized and developed, facilitating their eventual ability to "understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good" (John Dewey Project on Progressive Education, 2002, ¶1).

We close this introduction, this orientation to our ideas about progressive thought in education, with a suggestion for new teachers in particular: we urge you to define your world in small enough terms during the first years of your career so that you can, indeed, change it. If you accept this line of thinking, then your job during the initial years of your career is not to challenge the entire system and Change the World. Your job is to work on becoming a great teacher—to change the small world that you, your students, your families, and a few of your colleagues inhabit together. Whether you will eventually have a strong and respected voice in your larger community will depend to a great degree upon whether you are seen as a skilled, caring, and knowledgeable teacher by students, parents, and colleagues in your school. We hope this book might be of use toward that end, as you continue to develop and hone your professional skills and knowledge. Further, we hope that it may encourage educators everywhere to strive to *inspire* every last student whom they serve, and in so doing, to interrupt in small ways every day the reproduction of class-, race-, gender-, and ability-based disparities that limit possibilities for untold millions of children in the United States and around the world.

We launch the coming chapters, inspired ourselves by the words of a fourteen-year-old. In her diary, Anne Frank wrote, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." How wonderful, indeed, that we who teach get to know young people whose potential for wisdom, courage, and accomplishment lies in a sense of possibility that we can encourage. There's just no better way to spend a life.