

Using the Power of Questions to Organize for Progressive Education

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“Progressive education” is widely admired and rarely implemented in schools. In this commentary, a group of educators—K-8 teachers and administrators and teacher education students and faculty—discuss their shared journey as they come together to study their own practice in schools committed to this model of teaching and learning. While acknowledging the reality that progressive education is most often found in areas of “economic privilege,” they nonetheless challenge teachers to engage in “thoughtful participation, description, and dialogue,” in some fashion, as a means of counteracting the demands of the current reform climate.

Using the Power of Questions to Organize for Progressive Education

In the fall of 2013, we established the *Progressive Education Consortium* to explore questions that are often missing from most current professional development and many teacher preparation programs. Our collaboration sought to discover ways progressive education ideals can protect the wonder of childhood and the art of teaching amidst the bombardment of test-driven local, state, and federal mandates. This example of interchange between current educators and pre-service teachers has provided an opportunity to connect educators and influence the direction of educational discourse in our respective schools.

The Progressive Education Consortium began with nine members: two teachers and an administrator from The Children's School, an independent, K-8 progressive school in Berwyn, Illinois; two teachers and an administrator from Hubbard Woods Elementary School, a public, K-4 school in the historically progressive Winnetka, Illinois school district; and two pre-service teachers and a professor from Northeastern Illinois

University, an urban, public university in Chicago (see appendix). The philosophies of these three institutions situate them in a progressive tradition, albeit better practiced in the schools than in the university. Further, each articulates a common belief in the deep potential of children and seeks to develop learning environments that allow for children's (and adults') full humanity to be expressed and their voices to be heard.

The two school administrators and the university professor discussed a potential collaboration during the summer of 2013. After sketching out a high-level plan during the summer months, the administrators approached two teachers from each of their schools who they felt would not only be interested in such an opportunity but would also benefit from this approach to professional development. The professor, in turn, solicited interest from students enrolled in a colleague's educational foundations course and selected two from a group of a dozen who volunteered. When the group initially met in the fall, we came together with many shared questions: What does progressive education look like amidst a testing-oriented school reform environment? How can progressive education not only endure but also thrive in urban, suburban, public, and private institutions? What are the qualities and circumstances that make it possible to teach in progressive ways? And, how does one learn the pedagogical skills necessary to put progressive educational ideals into action? We sought opportunities to learn from each other through observing and teaching in each other's classrooms, as well as reflection, discourse, and deliberation.

During the 2013-14 school year, members of the Progressive Education Consortium met monthly at either Hubbard Woods or The Children's School. School administrators supported this endeavor by providing full-day release-time from their classrooms for teachers to visit each other's schools, securing substitute teachers, providing lunch for the group, and dedicating space for the meetings. Working with the university professor, the administrators also coordinated and communicated the schedule for each site visit.

During each gathering, we spent time within classrooms in the morning and then met in the afternoon to share observations, discuss questions, raise challenges, and consider how our work ties into larger educational issues. Our own experiences as building administrators, university faculty, students, teachers, and learners broadened and deepened our perspectives in this conversation. The breadth of our collective experiences allowed us to consider the backdrop of current mandates in education reform, such as the Common Core State Standards, as well as factors specific to teaching in public and private settings, such as material resources and parent involvement. Though we did not, nor was it our intention to, reach conclusive answers to our questions, we grew by offering careful descriptions of teaching and learning, articulating the rationale for our practice, expressing our vulnerabilities, and listening to the perspectives of others.

Part of our time together was spent working to answer the broad question of *what is progressive education?* This question is not easily answered. As a way to have shared language around a working definition, we discussed some scholars who influence our thinking (cf. Dewey, 1915, 1916, 1938; Freire, 1970/2000; Kohn, 2008; Little, 2013; among others), while also describing what we saw in each other's classrooms. Our observations included progressive tenets such as the valuing of children's voices;

democratic decision-making about classroom curricula as well as school governance; experiential and project-oriented learning; justice-oriented curricula; and in some cases, a propensity for social action where the learning both reflects on and attempts to solve problems in society. These ideals directed the experiences of children and teachers in learning environments. Recognizing this, we concentrated our observations on the roles of teachers and children in the classrooms in each school.

With consensus about what progressive education may include, one task was to understand the qualities and skills of a progressive teacher. In our observations of each other's classrooms, we noticed that as progressive educators, teachers act as guides in the classroom, not rulers. Teachers share authority with their students. Teachers cultivate relationships by listening to their students' questions and interests. Another quality of progressive teachers is the ability to pose questions that will open students' minds to further exploration, and likewise encourage their students to problem-pose (Freire, 1970/2000). Good questions engage children to be their own teachers, inspire curiosity, and encourage deeper thinking. Curricular improvisation, meaning the ability to adjust to a multitude of classroom situations without explicit preparation, is another difficult but important skill of progressive teachers because it allows them to respond flexibly to their students' ideas, as well as act in culturally relevant and responsive ways (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

During our time in each other's classrooms and schools, we observed co-curricular creation and authority-sharing amongst teachers and students, as well as teachers struggling to "get done with" externally imposed curricular goals so they could get on with what they felt were the "real teaching and learning." We discussed the role of the teacher in believing in student competence and in asking probing questions. We wondered about the tension between what students are interested in and what adults believe students need to know.

The Importance of Skills for Progressive Teaching

It became clear that progressive teaching requires skills that are not typically nurtured in teacher preparation programs, at least for our group's teachers. The university students within our group noted that (despite the promising rhetoric in the college's conceptual framework) the majority of their coursework was not focused on developing these progressive teaching qualities. This led us to ask: What discrete skills do progressive educators need to have? What specific training helps teachers allow for more emergent learning and child-centered experiences? For example, how do teachers know how to structure emergent learning—a kind of curricular approach that engages the questions, interests, and curiosities of students while adapting to the obstacles and challenges that are presented in the context of the exploration (cf. Hopkins, 1954)? What questions do they ask? How do they navigate finding consensus on what a course of study might be amongst a group of children? Is there always a consensus? If not, then what? How do teachers choose activities that are responsive to students' interests? How do they know when to keep the topic going and when to move to something new? We believe the format of the Consortium may help answer many of these questions over time.

Another skillset necessary for progressive teaching is gathering information about children's interests and learning in ways that differ from currently popular assessments. We wondered: What does good listening look like? When do teachers listen, and when *should* they listen? How do they document and make sense of what they hear? What practices enable teachers to share authority with students? What specific activities or tools do they use to allow young people to be co-creators of classroom curriculum? We recognized that current educational mandates demand demonstrations of learning, and believe progressive educators must address this challenge, even though such demonstrations may appear quite different from the norm of standardized tests.

Our discussions led us to try to define how educators learn to be *progressive educators*. We initially considered our own journeys into education. We asked more questions: How did we become teachers? What was our own preparation like? One of the administrators talked about her experiences in the Mississippi Teacher Corps, where she became a teacher after only eight weeks of training that focused mostly on classroom management. Her experience left her wondering what else there could be, in terms of preparation, and challenged her to look more deeply into educational philosophies on her own. A long-practicing teacher spoke of her college coursework as focused primarily on lesson planning, and revealed her belief that it was her own internal connection with children that drove her to learn more about progressive education. A college student talked about how her training has emphasized connecting standards to every lesson while lacking discussion of the potential for "higher aims of teaching." For most of us, whether veteran educators or brand-new to the profession, our teacher preparation programs missed the mark in fostering us to become the kinds of teachers we wanted to be.

Though we were able to articulate many of the skills of progressive educators through our discussions, we agreed that fostering these skills in today's aspiring teachers is a challenge. At a time when state and federal standards restrict curricular decisions by classroom educators, multiple assessments are mandated, and instruction is being measured by the minute, we worried about the loss of developing the art of teaching and learning. With our experiences in mind, we believe teacher development models must incorporate examples of progressive teaching, and collaborative interchange such as the Consortium could be key to doing this. Further, our group hopes to promote conversations about how to weave progressive teaching skills more meaningfully and deeply into education methods courses and professional development.

The Importance of Progressive Education

Beyond considering the skills of progressive educators, we discussed progressive education as a powerful tool to address the needs of all children, regardless of socioeconomic background. Progressivism's focus on democratic learning and social action makes it particularly suited to address the issues of inequity that have driven current testing-based mandates. At the same time, we recognized that both The Children's School and Hubbard Woods Elementary School primarily serve families of considerable economic means in suburban communities. When considering some of the

most well-known progressive schools in the nation, we noticed that progressive education opportunities tend to coincide with economic privilege more broadly. We asked: Why is it that progressive practices are most evident in more privileged settings? What will it take to allow for these practices in urban or historically marginalized public schools? What role can we as individuals play in promoting progressive education without *imposing* our beliefs on others? Although the level of thinking and discourse we witnessed and shared in each other's classrooms impressed us, we recognized the limitations of our own experience.

It is our fervent hope that the work of the Progressive Education Consortium will continue and grow. We want to keep visiting classrooms, collecting data, and reflecting on progressive practice. Next year we plan to expand the Consortium. To further address our questions about the skills necessary for progressive teaching, we want to reach out to other progressive educators in other schools and learn about their struggles and successes. To continue exploring our questions about teacher preparation, we want to include more Northeastern Illinois University students with whom we can learn from and alongside. To deepen and expand our dialogue, we want to include a more diverse population of both students and educators. More specifically, we want to explore our questions about supporting progressive ideals in socio-economically diverse environments, such as the Chicago Public Schools. Knowing that the pressure from outside mandates is even stronger in such schools, we would be able to more accurately consider what factors help grow progressive practices everywhere as we expand the boundaries of our inquiry.

We challenge other groups of educators to collaborate in exchanges similar to the Consortium's, either within a school building or between schools. Through participation in thoughtful observation, description, and dialogue, we hope others will take on the challenge of answering the questions we have posed, or develop and share their own questions. It is through this dialogue that we hope to influence the local, state, and national conversation about the aims of education and the roles of teachers and children in schools. Our work this year has just begun to uncover the power of observation and discourse in helping progressive education endure and thrive across settings... and we look forward to continuing to ask important questions.

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Appendix

Institutions

The Children’s School is a small, progressive, independent K-8 school in Berwyn, Illinois—a suburb just outside of Chicago. The school was founded, in part, to “create an environment where education is joyful, a child’s independence is nurtured, and all voices are respected.”

Hubbard Woods Elementary School is a public K-4 school in Winnetka, Illinois. The Winnetka Schools were established with a progressive education philosophy rooted in the work of John Dewey (1915, 1916) and actualized by its first superintendent, Carlton Washburne (1940; Washburne & Marland, 1963). The district’s schools proudly promote themselves as “a dynamic community of learners committed to respecting childhood, challenging the intellect, nurturing creativity, fostering reflection, encouraging action, and exploring possibilities for the future.”

Originally established as Chicago Teachers College in 1867, Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) embodies its urban mission through a focus on both access and diversity. NEIU’s College of Education strives to develop teachers who have the capacity to create learning environments that are “reflective, collaborative, and transformative.”