

The Educators and the Curriculum: Stories of Progressive Education in the 21st Century

Sally J. W. Read*

Michigan State University

Abstract

This study, inspired by phenomenological and narrative methods, explored the question, “What does it mean to be a progressive educator in the 21st century?” Rather than a prescriptive piece about what progressive educators should or should not do, this study uses the experiences of three self-identified progressive educators to build a new understanding of this term. The participants, two heads of private school and one public school district superintendent, shared stories of their backgrounds, their current schools, and a time when they felt particularly successful in their work as progressive educators. Their stories reveal a commitment to risk taking, to achieving a balance between individual student and social needs, and to finding meaning in their connection with students and colleagues.

Keywords: Progressive education, personal practical knowledge, school leaders, phenomenological study, narrative inquiry, 21st century

* Sally J. W. Read is a PhD candidate in the Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education program at Michigan State University. Her primary interests include world language education and teachers’ personal practical knowledge in progressive schools.

Correspondence: SallyJWRead@gmail.com

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This is a story about education in the 21st century, but it is not about standards, “No Child Left Behind,” or accountability measures. This is a story about progressive education, but it is not about John Dewey. In fact, this is not just a story about progressive education, but, more importantly, about progressive educators. This is a story about three educational leaders, innovators, risk-takers. It is a story about how these individuals enact their philosophies, how they work within and around the established structures, and how they build curriculum and challenge existing notions about the purposes of education.

In this study I explored the question, “What does it mean – or rather, what does it *look like* – to be a progressive educator in the 21st century?” The participants spoke to many different aspects of progressive education, both in their explicit understandings of the term and through their lived experiences. Although I began the project with the intent to study specifically *Deweyan* progressive education, I, like Kliebard (1995), came to the realization that “the term [progressive education] encompassed such a broad range, not just of different, but of contradictory, ideas on education” (p. xv), that attempting to adhere to any one particular interpretation would be problematic.

Numerous scholars (e.g., Church & Sedlak, 1976; Kliebard, 1995; Labaree, 2005) have written about the complicated nature of the term “progressive education,” both as it applies to a particular historical period, and as it has been used in more contemporary contexts. Labaree (2005) provides a thorough explanation of two “overlapping and competing tendencies” that characterized the historical movement in education, which he terms “administrative and pedagogical progressivism” (p. 279). He notes that these labels roughly overlap with other authors’ categories, such as Church and Sedlak’s conservative and liberal progressives (1976), and Kliebard’s social efficiency and social reconstruction (1995). According to Labaree (2005), pedagogical progressivism ultimately “lost” to administrative progressivism, in terms of what actually happens in schools. The former offers a “romantic” (p. 280) vision of children and schools, emphasizing “child-centered instruction, discovery learning, and learning how to learn” (p. 277). In contrast, administrative progressivism’s more utilitarian message of preparing students to meet societal needs and its basis in scientific testing had a broader appeal among educational decision-makers.

Although the goals of these two groups were generally opposite, they were both part of the larger progressive movement in the first half of the 20th century. Today, the term progressive education usually refers to Labaree’s pedagogical progressivism, and is most closely associated with the figure of John Dewey (Labaree, 2005). Yet even within this tradition, there is still significant disagreement about how to interpret Dewey’s extensive collection of writings. Fallace (2011) notes that scholars have long used Dewey to support their own – often contradictory – theories of education, drawing on different texts “often without any reference to others” (p. 488). He argues for a more nuanced approach to understanding progressive education that focuses more on how educators have enacted progressive philosophies in schools, rather than their fidelity to any specific vision.

With such varied interpretations of progressive education, it would be impossible to hold today’s educators to a single standard of what progressive education “should” be. Accordingly, this is not meant to be a story about “good” or “bad” progressive education. Like Fallace (2011), I find more meaning in understanding how the individuals in this study live out their philosophies of progressive education today. These individuals’ stories are not meant to be fully representative of progressive education today. Instead, they offer glimpses into their particular lifeworlds and suggest possible themes of the progressive experience.

Their stories reveal aspects of what Connelly and Clandinin call the educators' "personal practical knowledge" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Rather than some static collection of facts and theories, personal practical knowledge is understood as "that body of convictions, conscious or unconscious, which have arisen from experience... and which are expressed in a person's actions" (Clandinin, 1985, p. 362). In this way, knowledge can only be "seen" in action: in the way an individual brings his or her previous professional and personal experience to bear in a situation. This type of knowledge is in the body as much as in the mind. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) emphasize that studying educators' personal practical knowledge "allows us to talk about [them] as knowledgeable and knowing persons" (p. 26). This approach asks us to value what these educators have to offer and to learn from their experiences.

The Study

Participants included three school leaders who self-identified as progressive educators: two Heads of small private schools, Henry and Paula; and Jim, the head of a small rural school district (all participant and school/district names are pseudonyms). Potential participants were identified through a variety of means: online search, in the case of Henry; personal recommendation of a colleague, in the case of Jim; and familiarity with the school, in the case of Paula. I emailed potential participants directly, explaining that I was conducting a study about what it means to be a progressive educator today, and asked if they personally identified as progressive educators. Thus, participants were able to self-identify as "progressive" and assign their own meaning to this term.

I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each participant. These interviews took place in the participant's office and lasted about one hour each. The first round of interviews focused on the educators' backgrounds and philosophies. To begin to understand their lifeworlds, we must first know something about these educators as people: where they come from, where they are going. Narrative inquiry views people as "in a process of personal change" at any given moment (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 30). Clandinin and Connelly relate this idea to Dewey's notion of continuity of experience, explaining that experiences both grow from and lead to other experiences. The educators' personal practical knowledge is embedded within the larger continuity of their life experiences. These experiences also occur within a certain physical, temporal, and social context. Thus, the participants began by describing their current schools and sharing a brief history of their lives as progressive educators.

The journeys that brought these educators to their current positions all involved several stops along the way. Their stories illustrated Clandinin's (1985) observation that personal practical knowledge is "not something which has an independent and objective standing apart from our personal lives" (p. 383). Numerous factors, both professional and personal, guided them from one experience to another.

After listening to their stories about their development as educators, I asked the participants to speak about what progressive education means to them. Not surprisingly, there was little agreement among the participants about what progressive education means today. It is important to note, however, that phenomenologists and narrative researchers argue that people's knowledge is embedded in experience and thus is not easily made explicit (e.g., Clandinin, 1985). I knew that asking participants to define progressive education might be "unfair" in this regard, but I felt that it was important to have a sense of how they conceptualize progressive education before seeing how they live it. Their explicit definitions and their lived experiences combined to paint a more complete picture of their priorities as progressives.

With a sense of their lives' journeys, in the second round of interviews I asked the participants to select a specific moment in their careers as progressive educators when they felt particularly successful. I had intended to ask participants to share two separate lived experience accounts, one about a success, and one about a time when they struggled in their work as progressive educators. I quickly realized, however, that for these individuals, success is not an isolated experience, but deeply intertwined with the experience of struggle. Indeed, this observation should come as no surprise. One cannot appreciate success without knowing what it means to overcome obstacles and risk failure. Gadamer (1996), too, predicted this realization. He wrote, "Every experience worthy of the name thwarts a previous expectation" (p. 364). The moments that stood out to the participants as examples of their greatest successes did so because the success was, to some degree, unexpected.

Sharing stories of struggle is crucial because, as Remillard and Cahnmann (2005) argue, "research that seriously examines and makes explicit the struggles that teachers face acknowledges and makes visible the real, multidimensional work of teaching" and "depicts teaching as a dynamic process, rather than a finished product" (p. 184). As the educators' stories show, progressive education can be messy and imperfect, but it is only through studying these "portraits of struggle" (Remillard & Cahnmann, 2005, p. 184) that we may appreciate the realities of what it means to work and learn in a school.

In the sections that follow, I have striven to let the educators speak for themselves as much as possible. Their stories are profoundly personal. Because their personal practical knowledge is so embedded in their actions, even putting words to an experience can be difficult. Using a combination of holistic and selective reading methods (Van Manen, 1990), I worked to isolate possible themes that frame the participants' understanding of progressive education. They spoke about making difficult, even unpopular decisions, about supporting individual students and the collective good, and about finding meaning in their connections with students and colleagues. These are their stories.

The Stories

Henry

Henry is the Head of Marsh School, an independent private school serving 115 students in pre-kindergarten through 8th grade. In the four years that he has been Head of School, this population has doubled and he hopes to continue expanding over the next several years with the ultimate goal of enrolling about 160 students. The school draws students from a wide radius and makes efforts to provide scholarships so that "cost is not a burden to families," he explained.

Describing himself as "closer to a nonprofit CEO than... a traditional public school principal," Henry noted that his involvement at Marsh School extends well beyond the academic day. He meets with teachers, parents, and the board of directors on a regular basis and knows all of the students, parents, and "probably most of the grandparents" by name. Henry is also closely involved with the school's current capital campaign, raising money to update their 1920's building and add a new gymnasium, library, science lab, and art and music facilities.

Always a teacher at heart, Henry works to find ways to stay involved with students, from stopping into classrooms throughout the day, to collaborating with the middle school humanities teacher to help teach a play or a book each year. About his work with students he said, "I think for my own sanity, it reminds me that what I'm doing in here is about children. And you can lose track of that way too quickly when you get bogged down on budgets and board issues and raising money." By maintaining this connection to students and to the work being done in classrooms, Henry models the type of open, supportive environment that he

values in the school.

Henry's journey.

Henry explained that his original ambition was to be a lawyer, and that he only began teaching as a way to pay his way through law school. "About the second year of law school I found myself spending more time talking about my kids and grading papers than proofing cases," he said. "And it became clearly apparent that that was where my interest was." In those early years as an English teacher, Henry would not have called himself a progressive educator, however. It was not until he took a job at the University of Chicago's Laboratory Schools (founded by John Dewey himself) that he began to learn about progressive philosophy and methods. Henry worked closely with a mentor there who challenged him to rethink his approach to education. It was at this point in his career, Henry explained, that he began making a transition from thinking mainly about "what to teach" to focusing on "how to teach." For him, this was a turning-point not only in his development as an educator, but specifically as a progressive.

After six years of teaching, he became the head of the middle school at "Lab," a position that he also held for six years. Next, Henry became the head of an east coast independent school for four years. A death in the family prompted Henry to begin looking for a position closer to his Midwestern roots. When he heard about the position at Marsh School, he was attracted by the school's mission statement, "the talk about experience-based learning, project based learning, child-centered-ness, interdisciplinary teaching. Talking about the partnership between parents and the school. Talking about a school community where children spend eight, nine, ten years together." What he found there, he said, "was a match" with what he believed in and had been working toward for the last several years in his career as a progressive educator and leader.

Henry's vision of progressive education.

Since his days at "Lab," Henry has been surrounded by Dewey's philosophies. It is not surprising, then, that his explicit definition of progressive education drew strongly on these ideas. He began by explaining that progressive education is based in experiential learning, noting that most adults can relate to the idea of an internship and that people learn better through hands-on experience than through reading and memorization. He returned to his point that progressive educators focus less on "what" they teach and more on "how" they teach, and perhaps even more importantly, "who" they are teaching. In this way, he said, progressive education is child-centric – taking inspiration from what the particular individuals in a class know, can do, and are interested in learning. Next, Henry noted that progressive education is not just about academics; attention is also given to students' social, emotional, and physical development, what he called a "holistic approach to teaching." For him, progressive education is project-based and interdisciplinary, meaning that content is organized not around traditional disciplines but around meaningful topics, which students explore through in-depth projects.

Next Henry said, "I think in good progressive teaching, you're group-oriented rather than individual." At first glance, this comment seems in direct opposition to his belief in child-centered teaching. Henry went on to explain that students in progressive classrooms are encouraged to work collaboratively, to co-create knowledge, in ways that might be discouraged in more traditional settings. Thus, a progressive educator must be attuned to the needs of the individual student, but also support the student as he learns to navigate the social world. Finally, he spoke of a common ethos or set of shared values in progressive education that apply equally to adults and children. These values – "respect, responsibility, caring, honesty" – help create an environment where people are able to take risks in order to learn and grow.

Henry's story.

Henry noted that he has worn many “different hats” as a progressive: administrator, teacher, and parent of two children who attended a progressive school. As an example of a successful experience, he chose to share a story from his time teaching 8th grade English in Chicago. His story shows how he lives out his progressive philosophies in a particular school context. He explained that he and a few colleagues decided to develop a humanities program. “So we spent the next three months developing an interdisciplinary American Studies program, bringing in history, English, writing, psychology, economics, the arts all into this 2-year sequence of American Studies.”

Henry described this process as “a little overwhelming... incredibly exciting, and very threatening.” He and his colleagues struggled because they had to set aside their previously successful curricula in order to create something new. Yet, As Gadamer (1996) suggested, it was through this experience of struggle that Henry reaffirmed and deepened his understanding of his work as a progressive educator.

The middle school team encountered both support and resistance from others in the Laboratory School community. The middle school administration was “inspiring” in their support of this new endeavor, while the high school staff felt threatened by this reorganization in the earlier grades. Henry explained that his peers at the high school were “very departmental, very traditional in their approach to teaching their content area, and afraid that somehow we would water down the program by creating this interdisciplinary thing.”

The impetus for this curricular reorganization came from various sources. The school's staff was working to develop a unique middle school identity, distinct from elementary and high school. Previously, Henry said, the middle school had felt like a “mini high school” in many ways. “It didn't feel very Deweyan,” he lamented. Henry and his colleagues began to read about middle school philosophy and progressive philosophy, which he explained, “merge neatly together” because both focus on students' cognitive, physical, and social development as well as a more interdisciplinary, project-based approach than traditionally used in high schools.

The new humanities program also arose out of a very practical need for more time. Henry explained that he and a friend who taught social studies had been feeling restricted by their short class periods. They envied the ability of the teachers at the elementary school to work with longer periods of time and “self-pace” their lessons. With the new humanities program, the entire middle school schedule shifted to 3-hour blocks. This allowed teachers to teach fewer students (for Henry, that meant 23 students rather than all 110 in the 8th grade), and to work with them for a longer time. In turn, this supported the development of strong relationships between teachers and their students. Thus, the humanities program benefited teachers by giving them more flexibility and benefited students by giving them more individual attention and recognizing their unique status as adolescents.

Ultimately, Henry felt that this experience was “probably the most fulfilling thing I had ever done as a teacher.” The new humanities program “made me go back to school and think about how children learn,” how the early adolescent might interact with a humanities curriculum. Henry and his peers also considered questions of method: “How do you teach for 90 minutes when you're used to teaching for 45? How do you make sure you keep children's attention? You shift from being deliverers of content to being project-based... more group-oriented.”

Henry saw the true measure of the new program's success not in test scores, but in individual students' connection to the curriculum. Because of the school's location in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, the humanities team chose to focus a large part of their

8th grade curriculum around the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, which took place only a few blocks from their doors. This allowed them to integrate local, national, and world history, as well as literature (they read *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*), music, and fashion of the era. They studied architecture and technological developments at the turn of the 20th century, and were able "to physically walk the grounds... where the World's Fair took place... We had kids who were taking rope and marking off where buildings were..." It was these kinds of learning opportunities, he said, that made what the students were learning come to life in a way that they would remember for many years to come.

Through our conversations, I came to see Henry's passion for child-centered education. In his "portrait of struggle" (Remillard & Cahnmann, 2005) and success, we can see the kinds of obstacles a progressive educator might face: accusations of "watering-down" the curriculum, fear about trying something new. Henry is deeply connected to Deweyan pedagogical progressivism and to putting this vision into action. He returned several times to the principle that progressive educators think constantly about how and who they are teaching. For him, education is about the student, not a textbook or standardized test. Questions of how to teach are frequently answered through collaboration with colleagues. Thus, Henry positions himself as very person-centered in his work with students in the classroom, with colleagues as a curriculum planner, and with the entire school community as a head of school. He finds meaning in his work through these personal connections.

Jim

Jim, the Superintendent of Wharton Public Schools, provided a unique perspective on what it means to be a progressive educator. Wharton is a small rural school district with five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school of about 1,300 students. Like Henry, Jim spoke of increased enrollments due to rapid population growth in his town, the only community in the county to experience population growth in the last two years. He credits this growth to the strong vision that he has developed for the district: preparing students to be competitive in a global economy. In order to achieve this vision, the district implemented K-12 string music and world language (Mandarin Chinese and Spanish) programs, a middle school engineering program, and a "comprehensive biomedical curriculum" in the high school.

This vision also drives Jim's daily work, which he explained involves "reframing, retelling the vision, where we're going, how we're getting there." He shares the vision with staff members, encouraging them in their work. He also shares the vision with local and international businesses, building partnerships and revenue streams for the district. One major piece of Jim's global vision is a new collaboration with a high school in China. With about 20 students in China and 7 attending classes virtually from Wharton, this school is the product of Jim's efforts to connect globally and give students in both countries the best opportunities possible.

Jim's journey.

Although Jim began his career in education as a high school government and economics teacher, his journey has led him through many different careers in the public and private sectors. He explained that he enjoyed working closely with students both in and out of the classroom as a teacher, coach, and club leader. He felt so invested in these three roles that he "had no desire to leave teaching" when he was asked to take an interim administrative role in the district.

Despite his initial hesitation, Jim transitioned into being the high school principal as well as the district tech director. It was this latter position that sparked an interest in "how to use technology to improve teaching and learning." For three years, Jim visited schools

nationwide to learn about what others were doing to build “21st century schools.” Ultimately, he was disappointed but perhaps not surprised by what he found. “I came back and wrote an article about it,” he said. “I [posed] the question... what’s different when you remove the physical technology? The answer is nothing. Nothing’s different.” Jim took these experiences from around the country and created a model for developing educational facilities that would meet future needs, which he shared with administrators and other educational leaders through workshops and public speaking engagements. This led to the opportunity to travel nationally and globally, speaking at conferences about how to use technology in the classroom.

Like Henry, personal factors played an important role in Jim’s decision to return to his work in education and to take a superintendent position closer to home. He spoke of the strain his extensive traveling put on him, his wife, and their six children. He also felt a sense of “urgency,” after a year of traveling, “to take what I had learned and apply it. I didn’t want to talk about education; I wanted to be a part of education,” he said.

Jim’s first position as a superintendent was in Traviston, a small district in Michigan with a large population of at-risk students and steadily declining enrollments. Although at first he was reluctant to bring his family there, Jim made a point to look for the district’s assets, areas that he could develop during his tenure. Ultimately, Jim found that he connected immediately with the school board’s vision for the future of the district.

The board president said... “What we really want is to create a premier rural school district where our best students can compete against the best students for the best education and the best jobs. We want to create a big opportunity in a small school”... Well I was sold.

After spending four years reversing the district’s declining enrollments, eliminating pay-to-play fees for athletics, bolstering the arts, and initiating several innovative academic and community programs, Jim became the superintendent of Wharton, where he has worked since 2007.

Jim’s vision of progressive education.

When I asked Jim to define progressive education, his answer was very different from Henry’s. Whereas Henry spoke frequently about Dewey and a set of beliefs and practices commonly associated with this historical movement, Jim used the term “progressive” more broadly, in the sense of “forward-looking” or “innovative.” He began by saying that progressive education involves good leadership, or “knowing what to do.” In order to know what to do, a progressive educator must “follow the leading indicators of change; [pay] attention to how our world is changing.” By following the leading indicators of change, knowing what to do becomes “common sense,” said Jim. He added an important caveat, however, noting that true innovation requires a willingness to take risks. “To me when you say progressive,” he said, “it really is common sense and risk taking at the same time.”

In all of his work, Jim maintains an intense focus on his mission and vision for his district. A progressive educator, he explained, is focused on “strategic intent.” In Wharton, this vision involves preparing students for a global economy, while respecting the past. According to Jim, students who are educated in a progressive system should be able to communicate in more than one language, have a high cultural IQ, be flexible, problem solve in different situations, create and invent, and work as a member of an international team.

Jim’s story

In his story, he spoke about working with a struggling high school to build an exemplary arts program and to recognize student achievement in the arts as well as in

athletics. He began by illustrating the dire situation in the district: “My first two years in particular, I was under numerous death threats... One day alone [at the school], we had 27 cars vandalized. So I had 23 kids expelled my first year and 21 the second year.” Yet at the same time, “I was working on the arts program, trying to create an arts program for the kids who really didn’t have one.” Within five years, vandalism had dropped dramatically, student participation in arts programs had grown exponentially, and the school was home to a world-class theater.

Because he devoted so much energy to developing the arts program, I asked Jim if he was a life-long supporter of the arts or if his interest arose later, perhaps out of a need to give students a creative outlet. He laughed and explained that, actually, he had always been an athlete and “When I was in high school I thought the arts were for students who didn’t have talent.” It was only later, after seeing an embarrassingly bad band concert at the middle school where he was a principal, that he became involved in the arts program. At a meeting with the district superintendent, he made a suggestion that would change the course of his career: “I [said], ‘you know, we ought to do one of two things: either get rid of the arts because we don’t value it, or let’s make an exemplary program, but let’s not have this. This is embarrassing.’” To Jim’s surprise, the superintendent decided to put him in charge of improving the arts program. He continued, “To be [honest], it was not something I thought I wanted to do. In fact I thought he was punishing me for speaking up.” But with the help of the few existing members of the K-12 arts staff, Jim began to make plans to reinvent the program, providing the best facilities and best instructors, regardless of imagined financial restrictions.

One moment stood out to Jim more than any other in this process. He explained that until this point he was not “married to the arts;” he was simply taking on an assigned task and trying to do his best. Then one day he had given a presentation to some of the fine arts students,

And I’ll never forget [one student] coming up. She tugged on my shoulder... and I looked down at her and she had these crocodile tears coming down... I got emotional and I didn’t even know why... She just said, “Dr. S., are you serious about doing all of these things?” And I said, “yes,” and my voice was quivering at that point... And I left and went back to the office and was broken down emotionally, not knowing why other than thinking about, you know, why didn’t I have this attitude? Why am I not as deeply committed? Why do I not value the arts as much as I value athletics? Why is it these kids deserve anything less than the kids who are in sports or other activities? ... I just changed my whole attitude.

From that day forward, he said, he was “on a mission” for those students.

Jim’s stories raise a number of important questions about what it means to be a progressive educator today. His vision for his district aligns in many ways with the administrative progressives (Labaree, 2005), in that he is focused on preparing students to be competitive in a global economy by developing certain marketable skills (such as medical, engineering, and foreign language skills). Additionally, as Catherine Belsey (2002) points out, “common sense” is not an unproblematic notion. “On the contrary,” she writes, “the ‘obvious’ and the ‘natural’ are not *given* but produced in a specific society by the ways in which that society talks and thinks about itself and its experience” (pp. 2-3). Jim’s understanding of what is common sense may not be shared by all educators or all progressives; it is shaped by his ideologies about education.

Because Jim’s definition of progressive education differs so strikingly from someone like Henry’s, it may be tempting to write him off as “not a true progressive” or “the wrong kind of progressive.” While recognizing that his philosophy seems to draw more on neoliberal ideas than Deweyan progressive ideas, I believe that it is not productive to limit what

progressive education “should be.” Further, as Connelly and Clandinin (1988) remind us, knowledge is visible in actions, not just in words. In fact, the experience Jim chose to illustrate a great success had very little to do with preparing students for the future and much more to do with identifying a need and dedicating himself to finding a solution. His “portrait of struggle” shows us the effort it can take to affect meaningful change. In this way, Jim lives out his commitment to risk-taking based on his educational vision. Throughout his career, he has embraced risk and uncertainty in the name of providing innovative, world-class education.

Paula

Finally, Paula is the Head of Greystone, a private alternative school that last year served 43 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The school is divided into three programs: elementary (K-5), middle school (6-8), and high school (9-12), all housed in one building with their own designated areas and several common spaces. In addition to the campus program, Greystone also offers an advisory program providing support for families home schooling their children, which is coordinated by another woman.

In just less than two years since Paula took the position of campus director at Greystone, the student population increased by over 30 percent. The majority of these students are in the high school program, which she explained is not the norm for private schools in the area. Whereas many students attend private elementary schools and then return to public school for high school, she said, many students come to Greystone as a “last resort” after realizing that they do not fit into a traditional public school model.

During her relatively short tenure at Greystone, Paula has also made many changes to the school itself. She explained that she has hired several new teachers, restructured and redefined various programs, and will be implementing a new drug and alcohol prevention program next year. Additionally, the school will be moving to a block schedule, a model proposed by the teachers themselves. “They [teachers and students] run the school,” she explained, “I’m just here for the... structure and the follow-through, and the support that they need.” Paula later referred to herself as the school’s “barn door watcher,” explaining that her “type A personality” makes her well suited to oversee an often free-spirited school.

Paula’s journey.

Paula’s story follows a much less traditional path than the other two educators’. After a brief career in marketing, she earned a Master’s degree in criminal justice and began working as a drug and alcohol probation officer. When her son was born, her plan was “not to ever return to work, actually. I was going to stay at home with my son and raise my son,” which she did for 15 years. When her son was in 4th grade, they determined that public school was not a good fit for him, so she began home schooling him for four years.

A few years later, Paula said, “life changed.” She explained that she needed to go back to work and the job at Greystone “literally fell in my lap.” She was originally hired to do marketing for the school, with the expectation that in two to three years she would move into the role of principal or campus director, but “the time frame got sped up a little bit” and she moved into this role within six months. Her son now attends the school as well.

Paula’s vision of progressive education.

Paula’s definition of progressive education focused on students’ involvement in creating their own education. She began by noting that in a progressive approach, the school must provide a flexible framework in which students are able to make their education what they wish. She went on to say that Greystone was founded on democratic principles, and that

these principles are still in place today. Students, teachers, and parents play an important role in the decision-making process, from small decisions (“videos at lunch time”) to more significant decisions such as designing classes and hiring new staff. “Anybody I hire,” she said, “they come in and they meet the students and the students get input.” This vision of the school as a site of democracy figures prominently in the work of other progressive educators from Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* (1944) to Deborah Meier’s *The Power of Their Ideas* (1995).

In addition to being the Head of the campus program at Greystone as well as its marketing director, Paula is also the founder of “a small group of very, very outside of the box thinkers.” Currently all women, the group includes heads of five area schools who are all committed to “[looking] at education another way.” Thus, Paula shares Jim’s view of progressive education as innovative, nontraditional, even risky.

Paula’s stories.

Paula shared two stories of success that stood out in her mind. In one, she was very closely involved in working with a student; in the other, she gave an example of the type of work that occurs every day at her school. She began by saying that, for the first time in the school’s history, she had to expel a student the previous year. She described this experience as “traumatic... at the time,” yet ultimately it was “very successful” for the school and for the student. Like Henry’s and Jim’s experiences, what began as a difficult situation led her to deeper understanding of her work as a progressive educator. Rather than simply expelling the student, Paula worked with the staff to craft a plan that allowed the student to continue working with the school in order not to lose credit. She said,

In the end, we ended up finding a way for this family to get this kid, who was a high risk of never graduating from school, to see that he could get to the end and in fact I think he will graduate in January.

Paula served as the point of contact between the school, the student, and his parents during this whole process. She emphasized that the school was committed to supporting the student, even after he was no longer welcome on campus. She attributed the success of this experience to the school’s ability to tailor each student’s education to meet his or her specific needs. “When you do what the student needs, you get a positive result,” she said.

In her second story, Paula also talked about tailoring the curriculum to meet student needs. She told the story of a high school class the previous year in which students and their teacher worked together to design a course based on what they wanted to learn and accomplish. At first, the students decided they wanted to study “music production. They were going to produce music,” Paula said with a slight laugh. Soon, however, “it was very clear that they were never going to produce anything... [they just] could never get it together.” So the teacher began to provide more structure, guiding the students toward essentially a music appreciation class. (“But we would never say that out loud because they would say ‘Ah! No, we’re not doing that!’”) She described the evolution of this course:

[They] talked about, how does music impact our daily lives? And what does it look like in advertising? What does it look like to each of us? And what are genres? And then they started talking about beats. Well when they started talking about beats, they started banging on things. Then when they started banging on things, they started talking about percussion and how rhythm has played ritualistic things...

In this way, the class was able to follow students’ changing interests while still exploring some important questions about music and society. In home schooling her son and now as a Head of School, Paula demonstrates her commitment to alternative approaches to

education. She used the metaphor of structure – “A K’NEX structure rather than a Lego structure” – to describe the type of environment she hopes to create in her school. This flexible framework allows students more freedom to design their own education, but it also requires a delicate balance between the needs or desires of the individual student and the needs of the whole class, the school, or the curriculum. Paula draws on her experience in business and criminal justice in managing this balance.

Discussion

When I set out to write about progressive education in the 21st century, I assumed that this would be a story about Dewey – how he lives on through the work of a select few who identify as progressive educators. And, in many ways, Dewey’s legacy can indeed be seen in each of these schools and in many other places today. Yet, ultimately, the image of progressive education that arose out of these individuals’ stories was far more complex and far richer than anything I could have predicted.

It is not the purpose of this work to engage in the long history of debates about the “true” meaning of progressivism, or who “won” and who “lost” (Labaree, 2005) the struggle for the curriculum nearly a century ago (Kliebard, 1995). Instead, I take for granted the validity of the participants’ experiences and use their stories to develop a new understanding of what progressive education means today. Their individual stories weave together to reveal three possible themes of the progressive experience. Progressive educators take risks, refuse to accept the status quo, and enact a curriculum that challenges the recent emphasis on standardization. Progressive educators work with students as individuals and as groups, supporting students as they learn to see themselves as part of a larger society. Finally, progressive educators are intimately connected to their work, finding meaning in their relationships with students, colleagues, and the curriculum.

Progressive Educators Take Risks

As educational leaders, Henry, Jim, and Paula make important decisions every day. The experiences they selected as most meaningful reveal a commitment to innovation. As Jim said, progressive education is based on “common sense and risk taking at the same time.” For him, “it was common sense what had to happen” with the fine arts program, yet he also knew that it was risky to undertake such a massive overhaul in a district that previously had not valued the arts. Again, although his version of “common sense” may not be universal, the notion of identifying a need and working against the odds to find a solution was certainly common to each of these progressive educators.

The other two educators echoed Jim’s sentiments. Paula noted that, at most schools, after a student is expelled, “he would have been done. There would have been no discussion about anything, either what he had already turned in or what he wanted to turn in.” But she was willing to take a chance on this student and allow him to finish his high school education at her school. Although the school had never made this kind of arrangement before, she remained hopeful that the student would be successful.

Henry, too, took a risk by giving up an old, proven curriculum to implement the new humanities model. He argued that progressive educators must be willing to make mistakes and not to know all the answers. Although this can be scary, it is also what makes this type of education so exciting, he said. Henry noted that, too often, educators try to make things “teacher-proof... And it doesn’t matter who you give it to, it’s going to be the same curriculum everywhere it’s taught.” But in his experience, the curriculum cannot and should not be standardized. Each teacher must be willing to let his or her students take the lead and explore ideas in their own ways.

Both Paula and Henry attributed some of their ability to take risks to the fact that they work in private, independent schools. Said Henry,

I think being a private school – an independent private school – what it does is give my faculty freedom. My faculty have autonomy to create curriculum... Our teachers are given that autonomy to be professionals and are treated as such.

While working at “Lab,” he experienced this autonomy first-hand as he and his colleagues took the initiative to create the new humanities program. Later, when he became the head of the middle school there and more recently at Marsh School, he has continued to emphasize the importance of teacher autonomy to create curriculum.

Private schools also have their disadvantages, of course. All three participants mentioned, either directly or indirectly, that private schools are dependent on money and parental support. In relation to his experience at Lab School, Henry said,

For us to continue to do the [humanities] program, we have to win over people who influence decision making, and parents do that in a private school. So we had to demonstrate that what we were doing for their students was effective, powerful learning.

Paula also spoke of needing to design a curriculum that would “justify paying the amount of money that some parents pay.” Thus, innovative progressive education may be constrained by a lack of buy-in from parents who must choose to send their children to a private school. Without a clear understanding of the school’s mission and some form of observable results, parents can easily choose to send their children – and their money – elsewhere.

Overall, Henry and Paula seem to appreciate their schools’ independent status. When asked if he thought a progressive approach is possible in a public school situation, Henry said, “I think it is, if we’re willing to make some important choices about those accountability pieces and what we think is important.” Jim would agree with this sentiment, as he makes these important choices in his district. He argued that most districts are worried about two things: money and standardized test scores. For him, these are minor concerns; the only thing that is important is a steadfast focus on his vision for the district. He said,

I’ve chosen to ignore them all and do our own thing anyway. I don’t care what they say, I’m still going to do what I think is right, regardless... Money has never been our problem in education... Our biggest challenge is preparing kids for a global world of change 24-7. Everything has to be geared toward that... Progressive education will only occur when you understand the real problem and you stop making excuses.

Despite outside pressure from politicians and difficult economic times, Jim finds ways to make his district more progressive. His risk taking extends well beyond implementing a new fine arts curriculum, to truly rethinking what a public school district can do.

Jim explained that the greatest hindrance to quality, progressive education in public schools is the government bureaucracy. “Politicians are always looking for simple solutions to very complex problems,” he said. Increasingly, these “simple solutions” have taken the form of high-stakes standardized testing. Both Jim and Henry commented that these measures have forced schools to focus on the wrong things. Henry said,

You know, standardized testing for measurement of how far kids are moving, I don’t know if that shows what they’re learning. I mean, particularly what we have now

where we're just testing reading comprehension and computational math skills. What about research? What about creative writing? What about conceptual mathematics? What about history? Art? Music? Languages? Physical education? You know, the things that make kids excited to come to school? Those are incredibly valuable.

In this climate of standardization and reduction of the curriculum, the choices that educators make to expand their curriculum and make it more student-driven can be incredibly risky. Ultimately, it seems that all three of these educational leaders are able to enact their visions of progressive education in their schools, regardless of their status as public or private institutions. Henry and Paula embrace the unknown as they share decision-making power with teachers and students. Meanwhile, Jim pushes the boundaries of public education, counting on his vision, rather than some externally-imposed standard, to drive the future of the district.

Progressive Educators Balance the Individual and the Social

Progressive education is often referred to as child-centered, by both supporters and critics. To its advocates, child-centered education means focusing on the student, recognizing what he or she knows and can do and supporting his or her development. To its detractors, child-centered education means a dangerous abandonment of established disciplines of knowledge, leading to disorganized, inefficient learning. Dewey (2001) famously intervened in this debate, arguing that it is a false dichotomy to place the student against the curriculum when in fact both are part of the same continuum. The curriculum cannot be entirely internal, following personal whim without guidance, but it also cannot be entirely external, divorced from the student's experience. Similarly, the teacher must support each student's individual development, but also help the student come to share in the larger society of the classroom and the world. Through their stories, Henry, Jim, and Paula spoke to the delicate balance that must be achieved between all of these factors: the individual, the social, and the curriculum.

As Henry noted repeatedly, progressive educators think more about who they teach than what they teach. What he did not say, however, is that progressive educators think *only* about who they teach. Indeed, in his story, the "what" – the curriculum – is still very much present, but it was brought to life and connected to students' experiences in ways that were meaningful for his particular group of early adolescents. Rather than simply writing a research report, through their projects students had the opportunity to do the work of historians, authors, architects, fashion designers, musicians, and orators. In this way, the project connected them not only to the history of their city, but also to the social history of these professions, something Dewey emphasized in his work at the University of Chicago Laboratory School, as well.

Paula's metaphor of the flexible structure is particularly helpful in understanding this balance between individual and social goals. She spoke from personal experience with her son, an accomplished glass blower, who is able to spend part of his school day at Greystone while also taking glass blowing courses at an art institute. Another student is working toward his pilot's license outside of school, earning elective credits and integrating his math and science studies. This flexibility of scheduling would not be possible at a larger institution, she said. Because she only has 43 students' schedules to manage, she is able to "take their word" about their extracurricular activities. In fact, she argued, when students are able to earn school credit while pursuing their passions, they often put in far more effort than the school requires.

Although she stressed the importance of building curriculum to meet students' needs, Paula also recognizes that this individual tailoring can present some significant challenges. She explained that when students first come to her school, "we tell them you can learn anything you want here, [and] they translate that in their minds as we can *do* anything we want here," which is not the case. Instead, she said, if a student does not want to do a

particular assignment, he or she must propose an alternative. For Paula, as long as students are able to demonstrate their learning, the exact format is inconsequential.

However, the flexible structure can only bend so far, Paula noted. At times, she explained, “I have to say, I’m sorry... If the state says you’ve got to do math, you’ve got to do math... I don’t get to choose that and neither do you.” Students are held accountable to school and state standards, all part of the process of helping them see themselves as part of a larger society. Paula explained that she feels that it is important to help students “keep their options open” as far as what they will do after graduating from her school, whether they currently think they want to attend college or not. Students fulfill the same graduation requirements as at traditional schools, but can do so in nontraditional ways.

From his position as superintendent, Jim is less directly involved in the process of balancing students’ interests with curricular guidelines. Although he did not place as much emphasis on flexibility as the other two participants, his experience, too, demonstrates the importance of attending to group needs while recognizing individual achievement. Thus, each of the educators works to find some kind of middle ground between individual and social goals, structure and flexibility.

Progressive Educators Find Meaning in their Work

With a commitment to risk taking and achieving a delicate balance between the individual and the social, progressive education can be a very challenging endeavor. Like any other educational leader, these progressive educators work long hours, confront issues from students and parents, and worry about fundraising. Yet, despite the many challenges, these individuals maintain a deep connection to their work. They find meaning in the relationships they build and in the connection of students to the curriculum.

As Lortie (1975) argued, teaching can be lonely work. Schools often become like “egg crates,” with each teacher working behind a closed door with his or her own class of students and little contact with other adults. Because of the “low task interdependence” in the profession (p. 15), teachers can feel isolated from their peers. It is interesting, then, that for these progressive educators relationships with colleagues were particularly salient. All three mentioned working with fellow educators in their stories of success. What made them feel most successful was not an independent accomplishment, but one achieved through collaboration with others who share common commitments. Thus, although they value professional autonomy and the ability to create a curriculum that is child-centered, an important part of what gives their work meaning is their connection to their fellow educators.

Perhaps even more important than their relationships with colleagues, however, were their relationships with students. As Henry said, it can be easy to forget amid all the other responsibilities of being a head of school, but ultimately this work “is about children.” Each of the educators shared stories of important connections they had with individual students. Jim, particularly, spoke about the influence a student had on him in making him completely rethink his priorities with regard to academics, athletics, and the arts. What had been just another task assigned by his superintendent suddenly became personal and he went “on a mission” to improve the condition and the value of the arts program in his district. This intimate moment was a turning point for him, as he continues this work in Wharton today.

Although student outcome measures, a common form of reward for many educators, are certainly important for these progressive educators, they take a number of different forms. None of the participants mentioned a single test they had given. In reflecting on his experience teaching middle school students about the Chicago World’s Fair, Henry said,

Those kids right now are in their 30s, [but] I would bet if you stopped one of them on the street walking through Chicago, they could give you a history of the fair. They didn't read it in a book; they didn't study it online; they lived it. And the learning was so deep that it stays with them... and I think that's the whole experiential learning piece. If you let kids live through something and go deeply into it, it's more meaningful and lasting. And that's what learning should be.

He added later that the greatest gift a student had ever given him was to say "you made me curious." The meaning for Henry came from seeing the "spark" in the student's eye and knowing that he would continue to seek new knowledge throughout the rest of his life.

As a superintendent, Jim sees results on an even larger scale. In the last three districts where he has worked, he took struggling schools and helped them blossom, achieving state and national recognition for excellence in education. For instance, in Traviston, he again invested heavily in the arts, opening up new opportunities for students. He explained that the school's choir program grew from 15 students to 240. "And those choirs... had never competed in a festival before, and my last year there, all five choirs got a superior rating at the district level and two of them went on to get a superior at the state level." For Jim, giving these students the experience of competing at a state music festival was a great accomplishment.

Finally, it is also interesting to note that Henry and Jim both spoke about experiences they had several years prior, while working at different schools. Their stories demonstrate a connection to the past and to the continuity of their own development as progressive educators. For them, the experience of being a progressive educator extends years into the past and, presumably, into the future.

Conclusion

Henry, Jim, and Paula offer us three images of progressive education in the 21st century. They told stories that reveal aspects of their personal practical knowledge, how they live their visions of progressive education in schools every day. Their stories share many commonalities, yet they maintain their unique priorities and approaches. In the end, this work does not aim to bring any kind of closure to debates about the nature of progressive education today. Progressive education is just as multifaceted now as ever in its history.

Through their stories we see that today's progressive educator may not follow a specific set of ideas or programs. Indeed, some might note that the themes of risk taking, seeking to balance the individual and the social, and finding meaning in ones work may be true of the experiences of many educators, not just those who identify as progressive. It may be that by allowing for a more expansive definition of progressive education in this piece I am diluting the efforts of those who have fought to bring more of Dewey's pedagogical progressivism (Labaree, 2005) into schools. On the other hand, it may also be just such an expansion that we need to reinvigorate these important conversations about what schools could look like. Tremmel (2010) argues that a large factor in the "downfall" (p. 129) of the progressive movement was its inability to move beyond certain programs, such as the project method of the early 20th century and the life adjustment curriculum of the mid 20th century. The "excesses" (p. 127) of these initiatives, he explains, led modern progressives to be "mistrusted," even "regarded as frivolous" (p. 121). Yet if one looks past the labels and examines what today's progressive educators actually do, it is clear that their experiences are not so unusual after all. One need not identify as a progressive educator to feel a connection to these individuals and their work, to learn from them, to see something of oneself in their stories.

Their stories challenge us to maintain a steadfast focus on doing what we believe is in the best interests of students – this work is about children, after all – regardless of the risks involved. They remind us to give students a voice in schools, and to form personal connections with them. More than anything, what these individuals give us is a chance to reflect on this exciting work. They invite us to return to our own practice with a renewed sense of the possible.

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