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# THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SCHOOL

PROGRESSIVISM  
IN AMERICAN EDUCATION,

1876-1957

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LAWRENCE A. CREMIN

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What was this progressive education movement that in two generations worked a transforming influence on American education? When did it begin? Who sponsored it? What were

its contributions? What happened to it? And what, if anything, remains of it? Is it quite as dead as its critics believe, or are the reports of its demise, in Mark Twain's words, very much exaggerated?

There is currently afoot a simple story of the rise of progressive education, one that has fed mercilessly on the fears of anxious parents and the hostilities of suspicious conservatives. In it John Dewey, somewhat in the fashion of Abou Ben Adhem, awakes one night with a new vision of the American school: the vision is progressive education. Over the years, with the help of a dedicated group of crafty professional lieutenants at Teachers College, Columbia University, he is able to foist the vision on an unsuspecting American people. The story usually ends with a plea for the exorcising of this devil from our midst and a return to the ways of the fathers. This kind of morality play has always been an influential brand of American political rhetoric, used by reformers and conservatives alike. But it should never be confused with history!

Actually, progressive education began as part of a vast humanitarian effort to apply the promise of American life—the ideal of government by, of, and for the people—to the puzzling new urban-industrial civilization that came into being during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The word *progressive* provides the clue to what it really was: the educational phase of American Progressivism writ large. In effect, progressive education began as Progressivism in education: a many-sided effort to use the schools to improve the lives of individuals. In the minds of Progressives this meant several things.

First, it meant broadening the program and function of the school to include direct concern for health, vocation, and the quality of family and community life.

Second, it meant applying in the classroom the pedagogical principles derived from new scientific research in psychology and the social sciences.

Third, it meant tailoring instruction more and more to the different kinds and classes of children who were being brought

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within the purview of the school. In a sense, the revolution Horace Mann had sparked a generation before—the revolution inherent in the idea that everyone ought to be educated—had created both the problem and the opportunity of the Progressives. For if everyone was to attend school, the Progressives contended, not only the methods but the very meaning of education would have to change. It was all very well for some educators to say, in effect: “We know what good education is; take it or leave it”—in much the same fashion that Henry Ford told customers they could have their cars in any color they wished so long as it was black. What happened was that youngsters in droves deserted the schools as irrelevant to the world of here and now.

Finally, Progressivism implied the radical faith that culture could be democratized without being vulgarized, the faith that everyone could share not only in the benefits of the new sciences but in the pursuit of the arts as well. Jane Addams, that noble lady who founded Hull House and led its efforts for fully forty years, once remarked: “We have learned to say that the good must be extended to all of society before it can be held secure by any one person or any one class; but we have not yet learned to add to that statement, that unless all men and all classes contribute to a good, we cannot even be sure that it is worth having.” Here was the spiritual nub of progressive education, and it simply negates contemporary nonsense about the movement being narrowly practical and nothing else.

The story of the progressive education movement: of its genesis in the decades immediately following the Civil War; of its widespread appeal among the intellectuals at the turn of the century; of its gathering political momentum during the decade before World War I; of its conquest of the organized teaching profession; of its pervasive impact on American schools and colleges, public and private; of its fragmentation during the 1920's and 1930's; and of its ultimate collapse after World War II; is the substance of this volume. Seen in the large, the movement constitutes a crucial chapter in the recent history of American civilization; to

ignore it is to miss one whole facet of America's response to industrialism.

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When the Deweys first moved to Chicago in 1894, Professor Dewey visited the practice school of Cook County Normal and obviously liked what he saw. That year (1894-5) his son Fred was in Miss Flora Cooke's first grade at the school, and the following year his daughter Evelyn followed in her brother's footsteps. There is every reason to believe the children would have continued, had the Deweys not decided to establish their own school early in 1896.<sup>7</sup> Called the “Laboratory School” to emphasize its experimental character, the new institution was designed specifically to test Dr. Dewey's theories and their sociological implications. Beginning with sixteen pupils and two teachers, it grew by 1902 to an enterprise involving 140 children, twenty-three instructors, and ten assistants. Dr. Dewey served as director, Mrs. Dewey as principal, and Ella Flagg Young, later to be Chicago's first woman superintendent of schools, as supervisor of instruction.<sup>8</sup> By the

<sup>7</sup> Parker: *Talks on Pedagogics*, pp. 23-4.

<sup>8</sup> The letter, undated, is among the papers of Mrs. Emmons Blaine at the Wisconsin State Historical Society; see also Heffron: *Francis Wayland Parker*, p. 39. In 1890 Mrs. Blaine gave Parker a million dollars to endow a private teacher-training school to be called the Chicago Institute. The Institute subsequently became part of the new School of Education of the University of Chicago. A second gift of a million dollars launched the Francis W. Parker School with Flora J. Cooke as principal.

<sup>9</sup> These data are taken from a conversation between Flora Cooke and A. Gordon Melvin reported in Melvin: *Education: A History* (New York, 1946), p. 323.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Dewey reported in her 1939 biographical sketch that her father regarded Mrs. Young “as the wisest person in school matters with whom he has come in contact in any way.” It was she who suggested the name *Laboratory School*, and it was she who helped crystallize Dewey's ideas

time Dewey left Chicago for Columbia in 1904, the school had become the most interesting experimental venture in American education; indeed, there are those who insist that there has been nothing since to match it in excitement, quality, and contribution.

Whereas Parker had begun in the realm of practice and only later moved to theory, Dewey began with a set of leading ideas—hypotheses, he called them—and devised methods and curricula to test them. The purpose of the Laboratory School, in Dewey's words, was "to discover in administration, selection of subject-matter, methods of learning, teaching, and discipline, how a school could become a cooperative community while developing in individuals their own capacities and satisfying their own needs."<sup>9</sup> The initial hypotheses, later elaborated in *The School and Society*, were that life itself, especially those occupations and associations that serve man's social needs, should furnish the ground experience of education; that learning can be in large measure a by-product of social activity; that the main test of learning is the ability of individuals to meet new social situations with habits of considered action; and that schooling committed to cooperative effort on the one hand and scientific methods on the other can be a beneficial influence on the course of social progress.<sup>1</sup>

Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, two sisters who actually taught at the school during its early years, into practice. See her own interpretation of the theory of the Laboratory School in *Isolation in the School* (Chicago, 1900), a doctoral dissertation done at Chicago. Mrs. Dewey's role in the founding of the school is told by Max Eastman in "John Dewey: My Teacher and Friend, II," *The New Leader*, April 6, 1959, pp. 22-3. She herself wrote in an unpublished sketch: "The trustees of the University had felt the need of a laboratory of Psychology, but they were suspicious of a laboratory of Education. It so happened that in Octo. of 1895 a sum of one thousand dollars had been appropriated for a Psychological laboratory. As no room or other facility for utilizing that fund could be provided, it was likely to revert. Influence upon the president at that moment brought him to consent to its use for Education, thus officially sanctioning the Educational phase of the new department."

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards: *The Dewey School* (New York, 1936), pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>1</sup> *University Record*, I (1896), 417-22; and *The University of Chicago School: School Record, Notes, and Plan*, October 23, 1896.

have written a detailed and engrossing account of the venture between 1896 and 1903. Generally, as with Parker's school, the work of the youngest children—four- and five-year-olds—was seen as an extension of the activities of the home. The watchword was "continuity," the effort to avoid breaks in the child's experience that might "retard, hamper, or frustrate the spontaneous expression of his intellectual life—his thought in action." Thus, a normal day might consist of conversations, constructive work, stories, songs, and games, all representing an attempt to begin with the familiar and steadily enlarge its meaning. Mayhew and Edwards report the activities of one group of four- and five-year-olds as follows:

. . . the child's many kinds of food, articles of clothing, and large and complicated house required many questions. Many of the answers to the latter seemed to open paths into one main avenue which led back to the farm. They made a trip to a farm and saw the orchards, the harvesting of the fruit, and the fields with their shocks of corn. This visit was the beginning of many activities which varied, of course, with teacher, children, and circumstances. Part of the group played grocery store and sold fruit and sugar for the jelly-making of the others. Some were clerks, some delivery boys, others mothers, and some made the grocery wagons. The clerks were given measuring cups with which to measure the sugar and cranberries and paper to wrap the packages to take home. This led under guidance into a discussion of the large storehouse. It was considered as a roomy place where a great deal of fruit could be kept. From time to time it supplied the grocery store which held only enough for a few days. A wholesale house was constructed out of a big box. Elevators would be necessary, a child volunteered, for storehouses have so many floors; and these were made from long narrow corset boxes, a familiar wrapping in every household of that day.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> From Mayhew and Edwards: op. cit., pp. 64-5. Copyright 1936 by D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc. Reprinted by permission of Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc.

For the staff such activities were pregnant with possibilities for learning. The children began, however naively, to grasp the connection between their homes and the productive and commercial activities of the wider community, and hence to perceive the essential interdependence of an industrial society. Moreover, in conversation lay the seeds of reading, writing, and correct speaking; in the farm trips lay the sources of physics, biology, chemistry, and geography; and in the construction of the "wholesale house" lay the beginnings not only of manual training but of measuring, counting, and more general number work. For the resourceful teacher, all activities and occupations had an instrumental as well as an intrinsic value; they afforded opportunity for social and intellectual growth as well as more immediate satisfaction to the children.

But there is a point to be made here, one that Dewey argued for the rest of his career but never fully communicated to some who thought themselves his disciples. A teacher cannot know which opportunities to use, which impulses to encourage, or which social attitudes to cultivate without a clear sense of what is to come later. With respect to character, this implies a conception of the kind of individual who is to issue from the school; and with respect to intellect, this implies a thorough acquaintance with organized knowledge as represented in the disciplines. To recognize opportunities for early mathematical learning, one must know mathematics; to recognize opportunities for elementary scientific learning, one must know physics, chemistry, biology, and geology; and so on down the list of fields of knowledge. In short, the demand on the teacher is twofold: thorough knowledge of the disciplines and an awareness of those common experiences of childhood that can be utilized to lead children toward the understandings represented by this knowledge. As Dewey himself pointed out, the demand is weighty indeed, and easily side-stepped. For simple as it is to discard traditional curricula in response to cries for reform, it is even simpler to substitute for them a succession of chaotic activities that not only fail to facilitate growth but actually end up miseducative in quality and character.

The principles governing the work of the subprimary group pertained throughout the work of the school.<sup>3</sup> The six-year-olds—or "sixes" as they were called—moved on to "occupations serving the household." After constructing a model farm in their classroom, they actually planted and raised some winter wheat in the school yard, following its progress from seed to bread, which, of course, they baked themselves. The "sevens" concentrated on "progress through invention and discovery," working with a science teacher on the historical development of fundamental occupations in the preliterate period. The "eights," building on the theme of "progress through exploration and discovery," moved from the trading activities of the Phoenicians to the larger topic of world exploration and commerce. The "nines" emphasized American history, concentrating on the settlement and early growth of Chicago. The "tens" took "colonial history and the revolution" as their theme, while the "elevens" emphasized the "European backgrounds of the colonists."

Along with these theme activities, specific work in languages, mathematics, the fine and industrial arts, science, music, history, and geography progressed in well-planned fashion, and always with the social motive in mind. History became a vivid picture of why and how men have come to their successes and failures; foreign languages were introduced easily and appropriately along with the study of European cultures; while literature was used as a record of the hopes and aspirations of men living under specific social circumstances. Indeed, as the

<sup>3</sup> The published records of the school are more voluminous and detailed than for any similar venture of the time. See especially the nine monographs published monthly through 1900 as *The Elementary School Record* and successive issues of *The Elementary School Teacher and the Course of Study* for 1901 and 1902. The June, 1903, issue of *The Elementary School Teacher* was devoted in its entirety to the Laboratory School. Mayhew and Edwards have done an admirable job of preparing a readable account from this mass of data. All of the manuscript material they used, including mimeographed syllabi, typewritten reports, letters from former teachers and students, photographs, examples of student work, and comments by Dr. Dewey, is in the possession of the Teachers College Library through the courtesy of Mrs. Mayhew and Professor William Heard Kilpatrick.



youngsters reached early adolescence, the faculty noted that their viewpoint gradually shifted "from the psychological approach of the learner or mere observer of facts to the logical one of the adult, who observes to an end and classifies what he has observed with the purpose of its further use."<sup>4</sup> Hence, the twelve- and thirteen-year-olds were encouraged to devote themselves to specialized projects in one or another of the academic disciplines instead of giving the burden of their time to some cooperative year-long problem.

By the conclusion of the thirteenth year the children had amassed a wide range of knowledge; they had developed a multitude of skills and sensitivities, manual and social as well as intellectual. They had learned to work both cooperatively and independently and could express themselves clearly and concisely. They had on countless occasions put new-found knowledge to the test, and they had made a clear beginning in all of the major fields of knowledge. In short, they were ready for secondary education, which Dewey and his colleagues defined as that phase of schooling marked by the dominance of distinctively intellectual interests organized along logically systematic lines.

Actually, there were few dramatic changes in Dewey's pedagogical theory as a result of the Laboratory School. Rather, he was able to state his initial hypotheses with ever greater confidence and specificity. In 1901, for example, he summarized his findings on the elementary-school curriculum as a whole in an article for the new *Manual Training Magazine*. In his view, three fundamental types of subject matter had emerged: active pursuits or occupations, such as carpentry, sewing, or cooking; those studies dealing with the background of social life, such as history and geography; and finally, those studies that provide command of the forms and methods of intellectual communication and inquiry, such as reading, grammar, and arithmetic. "Looking along the line of these three groups," Dewey concluded, "we see a movement away from direct personal and social interest to its indirect and remote forms. The first group presents to the child the same sort of activities that

<sup>4</sup> Mayhew and Edwards: op. cit., p. 223.

occupy him directly in his daily life, and re-present to him modes of social occupation with which he is thoroughly familiar in his everyday surroundings. The second group is still social, but gives the background rather than the direct reality of associated life. The third is social, but rather in its ultimate motives and effects—in maintaining the intellectual continuity of civilization—than in itself or in any of its more immediate suggestions and associations."<sup>5</sup> In an ordered progression from the first through the second to the third, Dewey saw the main line of a curriculum that was scientific in its view of the child and progressive in its effect on society. It was a view that he generalized the following year in *The Child and the Curriculum*, and subsequently embodied into *Democracy and Education*.

One cannot peruse the records of the Laboratory School—the published accounts, the teacher diaries, the scrapbooks, the few extant examples of student work, and such photographs as remain—without sensing that here was a first-rate school run by a first-rate staff.<sup>6</sup> True, in the ordered progression of theme activities from preliterate man to modern Chicago there were patent vestiges of the very recapitulation theory Dewey had attacked before the National Herbart Society.<sup>7</sup> And there was

<sup>5</sup> John Dewey: "The Place of Manual Training in the Elementary Course of Study," *Manual Training Magazine*, II (1901), 193-4.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the excellent full-time staff, there was a distinguished group of consultants from the University. Thus, Mayhew and Edwards point out: "At that time Thomas C. Chamberlain was elaborating his planetesimal theory of the origin of the solar system and came to talk about it to the children. John M. Coulter planned and guided the experiments on plant relations. Others who cooperated were Charles O. Whitman in zoology, Jacques Loeb in physiology, W. I. Thomas and George Vincent in sociology, Frederick Starr in anthropology, Rollin D. Salisbury in geography, Albert Michelson in physics, Alexander Smith in chemistry, and Henry C. Cowles in ecology. The school was indebted to numerous persons in other departments of the University especially to Mr. and Mrs. William D. MacClintock, to G. E. Hale, Wallace Atwood, and to the members of Mr. Dewey's departments for continuous cooperation particularly to George H. Mead, James H. Tufts, and James R. Angell." Op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> See John Dewey: "Interpretation of Savage Mind," *Psychological Review*, IX (1902), 217-30, and "Interpretation of the Culture-Epoch Theory," *Public School Journal*, XV (1895-6), 233-6.

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undoubtedly an overemphasis on liberty in the early years—Dewey himself remarked that the school was overweighted on the “individualistic” side in consequence of the fact that in order to get data, “it was necessary to give too much liberty of action rather than to impose too much restriction.”<sup>8</sup> But there is ample evidence that most of the children learned and learned well. More importantly, perhaps, Dewey sought to substitute for the older curriculum he so roundly criticized a new program that was better planned, better designed, better organized. Convinced that his own innovations were far from final, he saw the continuing quest for further improvement as the central task of a science of education. He was destined for disappointment; and a quarter-century later he pronounced progressive education a failure, a movement that had destroyed well but too soon abandoned the more difficult task of building something better to replace what had been done away with.