

Ravitch

# THE TROUBLED CRUSADE

American Education,  
1945-1980

1983

DIANE RAVITCH

Basic Books, Inc., Publishers New York

## CHAPTER 2

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### The Rise and Fall of Progressive Education

**D**ESPITE the objective problems of American schools in the immediate postwar years—the teacher shortage, the low salaries, the need for buildings, and the uncertainty of future funding—American educators took pride in the fact that they shared a common philosophy about the role and the purpose of the schools. They knew what they needed—more money—and they knew why—to educate all American youth. By the 1940s, the ideals and tenets of progressive education had become the dominant American pedagogy. If one were to judge by the publications of the U.S. Office of Education, the various state departments of education, city school boards, and professional education associations, as well as by the textbooks that were required reading in schools of education, progressive education was the conventional wisdom, the lingua franca of American educators. Whether progressive practices were equally commonplace is another issue, but there can be little doubt that the language and ideas of progressive education permeated public education.

The triumph of progressive education consisted largely in the fact that by the mid-1940s it was no longer referred to as progressive education but as “modern education,” the “new education,” or simply, “good educational practice.” The education profession’s view of itself, its history, and

its aspirations had been shaped during the 1920s and 1930s by progressive ideology. The teacher-in-training learned of the epochal struggle between the old-fashioned, subject-centered, rigid, authoritarian, traditional school and the modern, child-centered, flexible, democratic, progressive school. The regional accrediting agencies and state evaluators judged schools by progressive criteria: Were the classrooms teacher-dominated or was there joint pupil-teacher planning? Were pupils too involved in acquiring facts or were they actively solving problems? Was there undue stress on the distant past or were "learning situations" based on the present and future? Was the school relying too heavily on books or was it moving beyond the walls of the school to find learning experiences? Was the high school curriculum for all youth or only for those with academic ability?<sup>1</sup>

While there was never a clear-cut definition of progressive education—other than to say that it was an attitude, a belief in experimentation, a commitment to the education of all children and to democracy in the school—what progressive education was not was abundantly clear by this time. Among the features of traditional schooling that progressive educators rejected were: the belief that the primary purpose of the school was to improve intellectual functioning; emphasis on the cultural heritage and on learning derived from books; the teaching of the traditional subjects (like history, English, science, and mathematics) as such; the teaching of content dictated by the internal logic of the material; adherence to a daily schedule with specific subject matter allotted specific periods of time; evaluation of the school program by tests of the mastery of subject matter; competition among students for grades and other extrinsic rewards; traditional policies of promotion and failure; reliance on textbooks; the use of rote memorization or drill as a teaching method; the domination of the classroom by the teacher, either as a source of planning or as a disciplinarian; corporal punishment.

While educators differed in their conception of its necessary features, "modern" education generally emphasized: active learning (experiences and projects) rather than passive learning (reading); cooperative planning of classroom activities by teachers and pupils; cooperation among pupils on group projects instead of competition for grades; the recognition of individual differences in students' abilities and interests; justifying the curriculum by its utility to the student or by the way it met identifiable needs and interests of students; the goal of "effective living" rather than acquisition of knowledge; the value of relating the program of the school to the life of the community around it; the merging of traditional subjects into core curricula or functional problem areas related to family life, community problems, or student interests; the use of books, facts, or tradi-

tional learning only when needed as part of students' activities and experiences. In the pedagogical literature, the new education was consistently described as democracy in action, because it substituted teacher-pupil cooperation for teacher authoritarianism, stressed socialization to the group instead of individualism, and championed an educational program that was for all children in the here-and-now rather than for the minority that was college-bound.

Both its admirers and detractors acknowledged that progressive ideas had transformed the American public school during the first half of the twentieth century. Progressive concepts proved to be particularly appropriate in easing the transition to mass secondary education. At the opening of the century, about half a million students (about 10 percent of the age-group) attended high schools, where the curriculum was strongly academic, though only a minority graduated or went on to college; by midcentury, high school enrollment was over five million (65 percent of the age-group), and the secondary curriculum was remarkably diverse. Progressive education offered a rationale to include vocational and other nonacademic studies, thus enabling the high schools to retain an ever larger proportion of youth and to fulfill what the education profession believed was its special role in a democratic society.

Armed with the conviction that their philosophy was a democratic faith and that history was on their side, educational leaders were taken by surprise when attacks on their ideas and programs mounted in intensity in the late 1940s. The critics, said the educators, were reactionaries who objected to the cost of good schools, enemies of public education, apostles of hatred linked to the anti-Communist crusade of Senator Joseph McCarthy, know-nothings who wanted to return American schools to the dark ages and the three Rs. Schools hired public relations specialists and engaged in community relations to rebut the critics, but the debate continued. It was not understood, initially, that what Dean Hollis Caswell of Teachers College called "the great reappraisal" of American public education was aimed not at a particular progressive administrator or program but at a generation of educational thought.<sup>2</sup>

In his classic history of the progressive education movement, *The Transformation of the School*, Lawrence A. Cremin describes progressive education as "the educational phase of American Progressivism writ large." As such, Cremin says, the movement was "always closely related to broader currents of social and political progressivism"; it "had its origin during the quarter-century before World War I in an effort to cast the school as a fundamental lever of social and political regeneration." While he notes

that it is impossible to write "any capsule definition of progressive education . . . for throughout its history [it] meant different things to different people," nonetheless he identifies progressivism in education with the following purposes:

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 within the purview of the school. . . . 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.

As the educational arm of the larger progressive reform movement, progressive education was "a many-sided effort to use the schools to improve the lives of individuals." As Cremin demonstrates, progressive education in its formative years was enriched by the thought and work of a wide variety of pioneers in social work, psychology, politics, philosophy, and education; its forebears included Jacob Riis, Lincoln Steffens, Jane Addams, John Dewey, William James, and scores of others who participated in the larger progressive reform movement.<sup>3</sup>

But something happened to the larger progressive movement, as well as to progressive education, in the aftermath of World War I. The larger movement, which had played a robust part in American life since the 1890s, did not survive the war. The progressive education movement, however, took on a new life even as the larger movement subsided. As it separated from the social and political reform movement of which it had been a vital part, the progressive education movement was itself transformed. In its new phase, the progressive education movement became institutionalized and professionalized, and its major themes accordingly changed. Shorn of its roots in politics and society, pedagogical progressivism came to be identified with the child-centered school; with a pretentious scientism; with social efficiency and social utility rather than social reform; and with a vigorous suspicion of "bookish" learning. That the tendency of these trends veered away from the original meaning of the progressive education movement was not at once apparent, since the pre-war movement and the postwar movement shared, at least rhetorically, a reverence for John Dewey and a spirit of antiformalism. It was a long while before it was recognized, even by Dewey himself, that the form of progres-

sive education seized upon by the emerging profession was a bastard version, and in important ways, a betrayal, of the new education he had called for.

Dewey was a prolific author whose prose style was dense and difficult. His inaccessibility as a writer did not prevent him from attracting followers and disciples, however, for he understood better than anyone else of his generation that education was changing decisively, both in its pedagogy and in its social function. By philosophical conviction and by his own experience as director of an experimental school, Dewey rejected the rigid, lockstep practices that typified public schools in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the uniformity of curriculum, the stress on passivity, and the teachers' excessive reliance on rote memorization and drill tended to suppress the child's powers of interest and engagement. In his philosophy of education, the school took on many of the socializing functions that had once been performed by the family, the workplace, and the community. He believed that the school might become a fundamental lever of social progress by virtue of its capacity to improve the quality of life for individuals and for the community. In Dewey's conception, children should learn through experiences and activities that were carefully selected as starting points from which the teacher would direct them to higher levels of cultural, social, and intellectual meaning. Teachers in a progressive school had to be extraordinarily talented and well educated; they needed both a perceptive understanding of children and a wide knowledge of the disciplines in order to recognize when the child was ready to move through an experience to a new understanding, be it in history or science or mathematics or the arts. Because Dewey's ideas were complex, they were more easily misunderstood than understood, and his disciples proved better at discrediting traditional methods and curricula than at constructing a pedagogically superior replacement.

The publication of the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* in 1918 launched pedagogical progressivism into the mainstream of the organized education profession. This report, which represented the best thinking of the leaders of the profession, initiated "a pedagogical revolution" and ushered in "a whole new age in American secondary education" by redefining the role of the high school. In terms of both its authors and its educational philosophy, the *Cardinal Principles* contrasted sharply with a document issued twenty-five years earlier by the NEA's "Committee of Ten," which recommended that all secondary students, regardless of whether they intended to go to college, should be liberally educated and should study English, foreign languages, mathematics, history, and science. The Committee of Ten included five college presidents (its chairman

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was Charles Eliot, president of Harvard University) and the U. S. Commissioner of Education, William T. Harris. The *Cardinal Principles* pamphlet, which was circulated by the U.S. Bureau of Education and sold in the tens of thousands, was written by the NEA's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (CRSE). In contrast to the academically oriented Committee of Ten, the CRSE was chaired by Clarence D. Kingsley, State Supervisor of High Schools in Massachusetts, and consisted of professors of education, secondary principals, educational bureaucrats, and a college president who had been a professor of education.<sup>4</sup>

The cardinal principles of secondary education, by which educational offerings were to be judged, were: "1. Health. 2. Command of fundamental processes. 3. Worthy home-membership. 4. Vocation. 5. Citizenship. 6. Worthy use of leisure. 7. Ethical character." The objectives of secondary education should be determined, said the report, "by the needs of the society to be served, the character of the individuals to be educated, and the knowledge of educational theory and practice available." So little did the commission think of traditional, school-bound knowledge that the original draft of the report failed to include "command of the fundamental processes," its only reference to intellectual development, as a main objective of secondary education. The final document stressed that schools should derive their goals from the life activities of adults in society. That this was a tricky business was revealed, for instance, by the commission's statement that college-preparatory studies were "particularly incongruous with the actual needs and future responsibilities of girls," which led them to urge that homemaking be considered of equal value to any other school work. The social efficiency element of the *Cardinal Principles*, which inverted Dewey's notion of the-school-as-a-lever-of-social-reform into the-school-as-a-mechanism-to-adjust-the-individual-to-society, became the cornerstone of the new progressivism.<sup>5</sup>

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