

Education Week

Commentary

# Progressive vs. Traditional: Reframing an Old Debate

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I've spent many years working in progressive schools, the chief characteristic of which is that they are not traditional.

Or so we say. In fact, the schools I have worked in and admire are mislabeled. And so, too, are the “traditional” schools with which they are unceasingly compared. It's time to set the record straight: So-called progressive schools are the legacy of a long and proud tradition of thoughtful school practice stretching back for centuries, while so-called traditional schools are the mostly unintended consequence of decades of politically driven and often misguided school reforms that have accumulated like layers of wallpaper on old plaster.

The schools we call progressive are nothing new. They have appeared again and again in the history of American schooling. What is ironic is that each time they emerge, they are termed (sometimes, and unfortunately, by their advocates) as innovative, experimental, break-the-mold, or, well, progressive—and are frequently dismissed on those grounds. But if we extend our historical memory far enough back, what emerges is the unavoidable conclusion that the institutions we commonly call “progressive” are actually schools steeped in tradition. The

features of schools that share this tradition are widely known: a curriculum driven by questions, respect for the mind and imagination of the student, a focus on intellectual skills and habits, and the driving conviction that students are not merely empty vessels into which knowledge is poured (the test-prep vision of the federal No Child Left Behind Act), but powerful thinkers whose abilities are best nurtured through artful teaching and thoughtful assessment.

What we call progressive is actually a very traditional education, and what we call traditional is largely the result of outdated policy changes that have calcified into conventions.

Consider just a few examples that happen to be from the Boston area, where I live. In 1834, Bronson Alcott (father of Louisa May, the author of *Little Women*) launched the Temple School, on Tremont Street in downtown Boston. Alcott's school did not stand "for the inculcation of knowledge, but for the development of Genius—the creative attribute of spirit," wrote Elizabeth Peabody, an early advocate of Alcott's work. The children kept reflective journals and were encouraged to express their opinions. Unfortunately, such encouragement of original thought proved too much even for the Boston Unitarians who ruled the city's intellectual life. Alcott was increasingly criticized by William Ellery Channing, the great Boston preacher, for encouraging "too much analysis" among his pupils. The critics grew louder, pupils withdrew, and soon the Temple School was no more, a casualty of "innovation."

A generation later, in nearby Quincy, Mass., a Civil War veteran and New Hampshire schoolmaster named Francis W. Parker was hired as the superintendent. Shortly, Parker won over the town and the school committee with his child-centered approach to education. School committee Chairman Charles Adams wrote in a widely distributed article in 1879: "In place of the old lymphatic, listless 'school marm,' pressing into the minds of tired and listless children the mystic significance of certain hieroglyphics, ... young women full of life and nervous energy found themselves surrounded at the blackboard with groups of little ones who were learning how to read almost without knowing it." Parker's notoriety grew, and his work in Quincy was soon described as "newfangled," an innovative "method." Parker vocally and wisely resisted such characterizations, insisting that what his teachers were doing in Quincy was simply common sense. But critics managed to sway public opinion through fear of "experimentation," Parker left Quincy, and the schools eventually returned to a sad normality.

A third example, one generation hence, is the Beaver Country Day School, founded by activist mothers in the Boston suburb of Chestnut Hill. The prospectus of the school from 1923 reads like a manifesto of progressive ideals: "The teacher will guide and use the interests and impulses of childhood rather than repress them. Much of the work will be founded on the pupils' real or imaginary participation in each situation, rather than on an assignment of rote lessons to be subsequently heard in formal recitations." The school flourished under the control of wealthy and influential Boston families, and by finding allies among prominent educators and within universities. But it fell on hard times during World War II, as anything perceived as experimental gave way to more conservative demands for rote learning. The school survived by moderating its approach. A *Time* magazine article of 1945 called the school "not quite so 'progressive' as it once was." Another casualty, it said, of "innovation." (Admirably, in modern times, the school has reasserted its original mission.)

This is just a sampling of schools in one part of the country. There are many others elsewhere, as well as influential movements past and present that advance the same core convictions: Montessori; the kindergarten movement; Waldorf Schools; the Progressive Education Association of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s; and contemporary beacons of hope such as the Coalition of Essential Schools. Examples abound; the tradition is long. The impulse for thoughtful schooling goes back at least to the Enlightenment (consider Rousseau's *Emile*) and, fundamentally, to the marketplace of Athens, where Socrates led his pupils by asking them provocative questions.

In contrast, consider the so-called traditional schools of the contemporary mainstream. The bell schedules that drive them are a holdover from the industrial era. The standardized tests by which they grade and sort students are an innovation of the U.S. Army, intended for recruits during World War I. The graded classroom is a Prussian invention introduced to America by Horace Mann in the 1840s. The Carnegie unit came from a desperate effort by college presidents a hundred years ago to standardize high school education. And the sad isolation under which so many talented teachers labor is the consequence of endeavors to make schools more like assembly lines, where workers fasten on their one bolt a thousand times each day and dare not talk to the laborer on either side.

Far from traditional, such schools represent the almost random accumulation of practices intended for industry, Army procedures, educational "innovations" of the early 1800s, and political maneuvering by elites a century ago.

Of course, schools are not simply one or the other. There are mainstream schools infused with pockets of thoughtful practice. Many teachers and school administrators labor to realize so-called progressive ideals within such places and are continually thwarted by the system. At the same time, many, if not most, so-called progressive schools are forced to contend with layers of distracting convention in the form of regulation, testing mandates, college-admission requirements, and more.

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So why do we persist in calling schools that have a long tradition "progressive"? Partly, it's because Americans love the idea of innovation. But it is due, also, to the fact that anything experimental or innovative is by definition not mainstream, and thus is doomed to occupy the fringe of society. Perennially labeling such schools experimental is the dominant culture's way of marginalizing the tradition of thoughtful education. And it works, as is clear to see in all three of the examples above.

It is time to reframe the debate. No longer should we inaccurately compare schools as "progressive" or "traditional," when what we call progressive is actually a very traditional education, and what we call traditional is largely the result of outdated policy changes that have calcified into conventions. I suggest that we speak in terms of traditional practices and conventional practices. Traditional practices are grounded in the wisdom of thoughtful educators with a long history of serving children well. Conventional practice? Well, I would first want to

explore its origin and purpose, as well as the evidence of the convention's value, before I risked my child in any such experiment.

Choosing the right words matters, and the ideas behind those words matter even more for the rising generation. That is why, after many years of toiling happily in traditional schools (rightly defined), I am leaving for a university job in which I will teach and write about them to help set the record straight.

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