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III: The Progressive Tradition

Adherence to a general set of beliefs has kept the North Dakota Study Group together and ongoing for more than thirty years—beliefs about what constitutes worthwhile, relevant education for a democratic society. Like most beliefs, however, they were not born yesterday. The pedigree of progressive education can be traced back at least as far as the mid-seventeenth century. Between then and now, thinkers and practitioners, although living in radically different societies and under very different circumstances, came up with ideas that have strong implications for the present and that are still being argued over, played out, credited, and discredited.

There are two strands to the story: First, the relatively recent recognition that childhood is a distinct phase of life, not simply preparation for adulthood but worthy of respect and study in its own right; Second, the change in view of what is proper subject matter for education—a breaking away from the strict confines of the academy and becoming engaged with the surrounding physical, social, and moral world.

I will refer briefly to the work of a few of the thinkers who are the most interesting and seem to be significant to the history of the NDSG, to set the stage for the chapters that follow.

In the 1600s, John Amos Comenius was one of the first to record on paper some of the values still current among progressive educators. In his
emphasis on learning as developmental, progressing from concrete experience to abstract thought, Comenius anticipated some of Piaget’s discoveries by several centuries. His guiding image for appropriate curriculum was the natural growth of the tree, its form becoming increasingly complex as the trunk divides into branches, the branches into twigs.

Comenius also expressed remarkably modern, democratic views on access to education, recommending the use of the vernacular instead of texts available only in Greek and Latin and seeing education as a universal entitlement (to inject a contemporary term): “Not the children of the rich or of the powerful only but of all alike, boys and girls, noble and ignoble, rich and poor, in all cities and towns, villages and hamlets, should be sent to school” (1896/1657, 218).

In the following century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was also concerned with issues of equality, railing in his writings against social and political injustices. In *The Social Contract* (1756), Rousseau laid down his precepts for a democratic society, opening with the poignant and ever-resonant statement: “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.” In his best-known work on education, *Emile* (1762), Rousseau, like Comenius, turns for guidance to natural forms of development and growth. He contrasts the benign influence of nature to the pernicious one of corrupt man-made institutions, society in particular being deemed unnatural.

The child, Emile, was to learn from direct observation of nature and through experience with concrete objects in his immediate environment. He would thus build not only knowledge and understanding but would develop enough inner strength to enable him, later on, to resist the temptations and corruptions of society. Rousseau saw human intelligence as a development from the earliest stage of feelings, through those of the senses and intellect to the final stage of conscience or soul. Eventually Emile would emerge from the woods and join society, but as a strong, wholesome, resistant man.

Although evaluation as such was not then an issue, both Comenius and Rousseau emphasized the logic and efficacy of intrinsic motivation for encouraging learners—interest in the world and its workings—as opposed to negative motivation through punishment. In the late eighteenth century, Pestalozzi, a Swiss schoolmaster, put the theories of Comenius and Rousseau into practice, adding his own interpretations.

Pestalozzi’s ideal curriculum was based on the use and observation of ordinary objects in the home and the activities of everyday domestic life. All children, no matter what their social station, were children of God and deserved the power-giving benefits of education. He recommended manual work to cultivate students’ attention span, memory, and powers of observation. Although primarily a practitioner, Pestalozzi wrote several books on education that have had a wide influence in Europe and America (1781,
1801). His emphasis on immediate experience and observation as sources of understanding put Pestalozzi in the same general tradition as Comenius and Rousseau. (Pestalozzi’s strict pedagogical methodologies—for instance, prescribed steps in reading instruction—now seem rigid, however, more like Hooked on Phonics than Whole Language.)

Friedrich Froebel, the inventor of the kindergarten (“children’s garden”) in the nineteenth century, also starts his educational agenda with the senses and immediate perception. He echoes his antiestablishment, romantic precursors in seeing nature as the ultimate teacher, cautioning schoolteachers against trying to interfere with the natural growth of children.

We grant space and time to young plants and animals because we know that, in accordance with the laws that live in them, they will develop properly and grow well; young animals and plants are given rest, and arbitrary interference with their growth is avoided, because it is known that the opposite practice would disturb their pure unfolding and sound development; but the young human being is looked upon as a piece of wax, a lump of clay, which man can mold into what he pleases. (Froebel 1900, 8)

One of the most important enduring, longtime benefits of Froebel’s pedagogy is the strong case he made for the educational and human value of play. “Play is the highest phase of child development—of human development at this period” and “the germinal leaves of all later life” (1900, 55). Beginning at home, then further cultivated in the “children’s garden,” play is at the center of the child’s “natural life.”

For Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel, God and Nature are almost indistinguishable. The good life—the moral, spiritual life—is the natural life; although how that was interpreted depended of course on the place and the period as well as on the personal experience of the writer. The natural life implies an organic curriculum, one adapted to the child’s broadening awareness and capabilities.

What struck me while reviewing the work of these four theorists of education is their persistent, focused, and central concern with the child, his or (occasionally) her welfare, happiness, and growth. Their recommended practices would now be called child-centered. Traces of Froebel’s influence and, from further back, the writings of Comenius, Rousseau, and Pestalozzi can be seen in the 1967 document known as The Plowden Report issued by an official British government commission on education:

At the heart of the educational process lies the child. No advances in policy, no acquisitions of new equipment have their desired effect unless they are in harmony with the nature of the child, unless they are fundamentally acceptable to him. (73)
This document provided the rationale for the integrated day in the early grades, in England, and, indirectly, for open education in the United States.

The most immediate influence on progressive education, John Dewey, lived (and wrote for much of) a phenomenal ninety-three years, from 1859 to 1952. Relatively early in his life, when still in his thirties, he opened an experimental school in Chicago as a laboratory for his theories about education. (It later became, and in fact still is, the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago.) During this time, Dewey published “My Pedagogic Creed,” which laid out, in brief form, his then current thinking about schooling.

This education process has two sides—one psychological and one sociological and neither can be subordinated to the other, or neglected, without evil results following. Of these two sides, the psychological is the basis. The child’s own instincts and powers furnish the materials and give the starting point for all education. (1897, 77)

Education of the “psychological side” begins at home and develops in accordance with the child’s nature—his “powers, interests, and habits.” The school, as community, then represents “present life”—life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground.” Although Rousseau, in *Emile*, exalts nature in dramatic contrast to society and is bitterly critical of the latter, Dewey sees education itself as inseparable from social (or community) knowledge. In a later work, he takes this issue on directly:

The seeming antisocial philosophy [of the eighteenth century] was a somewhat transparent mask for an impetus toward a wider and freer society—toward cosmopolitanism. . . . The emancipated individual was to become the organ and agent of a comprehensive and progressive society. (Dewey 1944, 91–2)

Dewey’s attempt to reconcile his theories of progressivism with those of his predecessors, particularly Rousseau, came from an apparent wish to integrate them into the thinking and practices of his own times, the industrial age. Dewey, like them, writes about the child’s nature being the touchstone for instruction but gives equal urgency to the cause of educating for a progressive society. Like them also and along with his belief in science, Dewey affirms a belief in God. “My Pedagogic Creed” ends with a description of the teacher as “the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God” (1897, 80).

Dewey’s Chicago Lab School virtually defined progressive education. It was created specifically to test his theories of education (and, almost equally
important to Dewey, to provide good schooling for his own children). On November 1, 1894, he wrote this to his wife, Alice:

I sometimes think I will drop teaching phil [sic]—directly & teach it via pedagogy. When you think of the thousands & thousands of young’uns who are practically being ruined negatively if not positively in the Chicago schools every year, it is enough to make you go out & howl on the street corners like the Salvation Army. There is an image of a school growing up in my mind all the time; a school where some actual & literal constructive activity shall be the centre & source of the whole thing, & from which the work should be always growing out in two directions—one the social bearings of that constructive industry, the other the contact with nature which supplies it with its materials. (Menand 2001, 319)

Louis Menand, in The Metaphysical Club, further explains Dewey’s view:

By “unity of knowledge” Dewey did not mean that all knowledge is one. He meant that knowledge is inseparably united with doing. Education at the Dewey School was based on the idea that knowledge is a by-product of activity: people do things in the world, and the doing results in learning something that, if deemed useful, gets carried along into the next activity. In the traditional method of education, in which the things considered worth knowing are handed down from teacher to pupil as disembodied information, knowledge is cut off from the activity in which it has meaning and becomes a false abstraction. One of the consequences (besides boredom) is that an invidious distinction between knowing and doing—a distinction Dewey thought socially pernicious as well as philosophically erroneous—gets reinforced. (2001, 322)

This idea, the inseparability of “knowing and doing” is, I believe, at the heart of the matter. In the penultimate sentence of Part II of this introduction, I wrote, “The values of the NDSG stem from the conjunction of two visions: the political one of true participatory democracy, and the related educational one of child-centered, progressive practice.” All the theories, experiences, and practices described by the authors in this book can be accommodated within this conjunction—or, in Dewey’s words, “experiential continuum” (1963, 33).

The educational enterprise itself can be seen as having two facets, one more inner—home-based, reflective, and in harmony with the nature of the child; the other more outward—in-the-world, communal, moral, and political. Both, constantly interactive, are essential to a progressive education. Learning starts at home, in the child’s immediate surround, and as the child enters school, she moves out, though not away from her beginnings. The
image is more one of an expanding circle than a road being traveled. When she enters school, she comes already equipped with her early interests, habits, knowledge, skills, feelings, and character (e.g., curiosity, playfulness, inwardness or outwardness, sense of humor).

Children (or adults) learn different things in different ways, some of them more “inner” some more “outer.” They learn through activities and experiences, observation and reflection, participation, imitation, social communication. These means of gaining knowledge and understanding blend together; at times, one (or a combination of several) dominates depending on the particular nature of what is being learned.

An example: My grandson, Will, has accumulated in his twelve years of life what seems to me an impressive knowledge of baseball. By a rough estimate I would say that Will is familiar with the facts about many (most?) of the players on most of the major league teams—their statistics, styles, professional and sometimes personal histories. He also knows a lot about the teams and their competitive records going back fifty or sixty years. He has a thorough grasp of the rules of the game and understands the subtleties of signals, strategies, and decision making, as well as the authority that goes with the various roles and positions in the baseball hierarchy. Complex stuff. And Will is by no means exceptional in his control over this extensive body of knowledge. They all seem to know it, Will and his friends.

So the question is, how did it happen? The answer: In all the ways I just listed, seamlessly blended. Will shares his intense interest in the game with his father (my son) who was equally involved as a child and continues to enjoy baseball now as a spectator sport. Will goes to baseball games and often watches games on television. He plays on a Little League team and does hours of batting and throwing practice at home with his father. Will and his friends talk endlessly about their favorite players and teams. They collect and trade baseball cards, analyze and find meaning in baseball statistics, read the sports section in the newspaper, read and discuss baseball novels. They have become experts—with no instruction. No one explained to Will why a runner has to touch first base before going on to second, the fact that there are three “bases” and one “plate” or what constitutes an “error.” In current jargon, this is called holistic learning. One might equally well call it “contextualized learning” or, when teacher-guided, even “progressive education.”

In considering the two facets of education, the personal and the political, the most urgent these days in both are questions of equity and access which include, of course, issues around racism. In John Dewey’s day, concern with social justice had a somewhat different focus—more on poverty and the status of immigrants, problems that are still urgent and unsolved. But in recent years the dramatic growth of minority populations, the legal empow-
The rising voice of the disenfranchised and underprivileged of all ethnicities—has changed the moral and political landscape and radically altered the terms of the discussion. Any words or actions of progressive educators must deal first with issues of diversity, access, and equity and with those who have traditionally been denied, or short-changed, on all three.

The chapters that follow are bound together by their authors’ general subscription to the values of progressivism. They have been somewhat arbitrarily grouped under six headings—“arbitrarily” because the same concerns tend to pop up throughout, ideas echo back and forth along with the names of certain hovering tutelary spirits cited by many authorial voices (John Dewey most often!).

Notes

1. Part II of this introduction goes more deeply into the beliefs and values held in common by these educators who eventually called themselves the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation.

2. The group included Patricia Carini, cofounder and researcher at the Prospect School—a small, independent school in Vermont; director George Hein and Margaret DiRiviera from Follow Through at the Education Development Center in Newton, Massachusetts; Shirley Childs from the University of Connecticut Follow Through directed by Vincent Rogers; Edward A. Chittenden and Anne M. Bussis, research psychologists in the early childhood unit at Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey; Lillian Weber, professor of Early Childhood Education at City College in New York and director of Advisory Services to the Open Corridors Program in the city public schools; Deborah Meier, an advisor in Weber’s program as well as coordinator of Open Education in District 2, New York City; Ann Cook and Herb Mack, codirectors of the Community Resources Institute, which also offered advisory services to the New York City public schools; Elizabeth Gilkerson, director of the Bank Street College Follow Through; Bob Gaines of the Follow Through program at Fort Yates sponsored by UND; Chuck Nielsen, Linda Harness, and Nancy Miller from the Center for Teaching and Learning, UND; Joe Grannis, professor at Teachers College, Columbia; and Michael Patton, doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin and consultant to the UND Follow Through.
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