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Bank Street College & Progressive Education

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Searching for Meaning:

A Personal and Historical Exploration of Progressive Education

by

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Mentor: Bernadette Anand

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

of the degree of Master of Science in Education

Bank Street College of Education

2008

Searching for Meaning: A Personal and Historical Exploration of Progressive Education

by

Molly M. Lippman

Abstract

In this study, the author seeks to better understand the meaning of progressive education. This study does not attempt to answer the question *What is progressive education?,* but rather it seeks to bring the question to the forefront of the minds of fellow thoughtful, reflective, progressive educators who, like the author, struggle with the contradictions and discrepancies present among progressive educators, both historically and contemporarily. Utilizing Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's style of portraiture (1997, with J.H. Davis), the author writes in the narrative style, sharing with the reader three conversations with progressive educators whose work has informed her own educational philosophy. Themes of freedom, community, and social justice are woven throughout the portraits. A full review of relevant literature is also included, touching on these and additional themes, such as the importance of reflection, the individual versus the democratic group, and the teacher's role in the progressive classroom. While a study of this nature does not seek to provide definitive conclusions, the author does share her newfound belief, as a result of this study, in the importance of being able to articulate one's educational beliefs in an historical context, as well as to begin to reclaim or more clearly define some key terms used to describe one's educational philosophy and practices.

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Children Learn What They Live

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.
If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.
If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive.
If children live with pity, they learn to feel sorry for themselves.
If children live with ridicule, they learn to feel shy.
If children live with jealousy, they learn to feel envy.
If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.
If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.
If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.
If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.
If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.
If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.
If children live with recognition, they learn it is good to have a goal.
If children live with sharing, they learn generosity.
If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.
If children live with fairness, they learn justice.
If children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect.
If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them.
If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live.

– Dorothy Law Nolte, Ph.D.

The Roots of My Struggle

Introduction

To the average American, or even to the average traditional-minded American educator, there is one "version" of progressive education, whether you are in favor or not, and it goes something like this: children sit at tables instead of desks in rows; teachers give up their authoritarian power to include the voices of their students in the decision-making process; the social curriculum has a place beside the academic; and the academic curriculum, taught with a hands-on approach, is influenced by current events and by new or formerly overlooked perspectives.

While this broad description could accurately be applied to my own pedagogical beliefs, I have come to find out – to what could be described as my growing horror – that from the inside, "progressive education" is not a fixed concept. The Utopian view of progressive education that led me to leave my first teaching job in suburban Connecticut after three years in a bold move to work and study at New York City's Bank Street College of Education and its School for Children, in search of a life where I would be surrounded by like-minded colleagues, parents, and children turned out to be indeed Utopian. Prior to my move, I had truly believed, like those hypothetical average Americans described above, that there were basically two ways of viewing education; that despite my college professors' insistence on the "continuum" between traditional and progressive education, you were really either with me or against me.

I can trace this sense to several sources. The most recent was my experience student teaching at Flanders School in East Lyme, Connecticut, in the fall of 2002. From the outside, a "regular" public elementary school not all that different from the one I had attended twenty

minutes up the shoreline, Flanders was a truly remarkable place where I learned what good teaching was, and where I felt what it was like to be surrounded by colleagues and administrators whose educational philosophy not only mirrored, but continually influenced and deepened my own. Every school I have entered since then has been scrutinized against the legend of Flanders. The other impetus for my search for the "perfect" progressive school, I think, is connected with my own childhood and family experience. On the wall between their bedroom and mine, above the bookshelves filled with my books, my parents had hung the poem "Children Learn What they Live." In talking with them last year about my early language development and educational experiences, my dad remembered, "We were always talking to you, and not like you were a little baby; we told you what was going on. Right from the start, we had respect for you." My mom described for me the process she went through in choosing which of the four or five local preschools I would attend; the reason she gave for choosing the Montessori-based nursery school where I would go on to spend three happy years was that "they spoke to children like they were humans there." Without naming it, my parents were, and are, progressive educators at heart, so it would make sense that I would seek out a similar environment of respect and democracy in a school.

Once I arrived at Bank Street, however, a self-proclaimed institution of progressive education and also my first experience with a private, or "independent," school, I really began to notice the wide and varied definitions and practices of progressive education. Among a long list of personal notes after my first week of working as an Assistant Teacher at the School for Children were a number of troubling observations about what seemed missing to me, based upon my preconceived notions of progressive education. For example, I noticed that teachers seemed to expect children to walk in the door on the first day of school knowing

the expectations for "how to be" in their new classroom, rather than teachers modeling or engaging the children in brainstorming about, for example, how we will listen to each other during meetings, or how we will line up quickly and safely, or what to do if you need a material, such as scissors or an eraser. Along the same lines, there was no proactive discipline, such as creation of class rules, so it followed that there was no reasoning for reactionary statements that teachers delivered to children, such as, "Ooh, that's not going to work here." The subtle sarcasm built into statements such as this one bothered me perhaps more than anything else.

As I observed the academic curriculum as it unfolded, I was impressed with the depth and integration possible within a social studies-based school. Yet, with each passing day, I became more uneasy with how often teachers seemed to be missing the chance to help children make those wider connections, and instead presented close-ended activities – often to be done at one's seat, one one's own worksheet, and then turned in so that the teacher could check it, rather than building in chances for reflection and sharing with the group. On the surface, this was a progressive school, which valued children as individuals, had an interesting curriculum, and employed many teachers who had been trained at the beacon of progressive teacher training, Bank Street Graduate School, just three floors above, in the same building. To borrow from Chalmers (1997), "Bank Street College, with its laboratory setting in the School for Children, seemed to me to be ideally situated to explore what it takes to create an equitable school" (p. 68). *Where had they gone off track?* I asked myself. *Why aren't more people talking about this sad day in the history of a great institution?* And then it dawned on me: perhaps this *was* it: perhaps they had not changed, so much as I had been wrong in my expectations, and – gasp – even in my understanding of what progressive

education really is! Well, if this is progressive education, I thought, then what do you call what *I* believe in?

It was from this inquisitive stance that I began to contemplate the historical context of the progressive movement in a way in which I had never done before, having taken for granted the fact that there were thinkers, learners, and educators out there who thought like me and who had done the work that made places like Flanders School possible. As I got to know Bank Street and other New York City progressive schools that I visited as part of my fieldwork, I became increasingly less convinced that I knew what I was doing. My internal struggle was further complicated when I joined the faculty of City & Country School, another longstanding model of progressive education, in the Fall of 2007. I began my work as a Sevens teacher at City & Country from a skeptical vantage point, following my eye-opening year at Bank Street School for Children. I remember a meeting in August with a consultant to the school in which I struggled to ask, with fingers crossed, how she thought my teaching philosophy and practices would fit in at the school. Trained in the Responsive Classroom approach to teaching and learning, I knew that I had some pretty specific rituals (such as Morning Meeting) and practices (such as packing the first six weeks of school with a ton of proactive measures in order to ensure that all of my students feel safe, capable, and successful) that I was not prepared to give up, but which might not completely jive with the structures –or lack thereof, as I imagined—at the school. While she was unable to put me at ease at the time, I was pleasantly surprised over the next few months as she and other administrators observed in my room and commented to me on what a strong community I seemed to be helping the children to build: "Your students look so *strong* and independent" was a remark I heard often. At the same time, they also had a lot of questions for me about

some of these structures, but I came to trust that their questions were from a thoughtful place of truly wanting to get to know me and my pedagogy. As I got to know fellow colleagues, I noticed a similarly warm, thoughtful, and reflective quality. And of course, there were my students and their families: children are, for the most part, just children, so I hadn't been too worried about them. While I did observe a fair amount of negotiating behavior at the start to the year, I had expected this based upon my experience teaching at Bank Street and also in the public school in Connecticut where I got my start, which served a similarly white, middle-to-upper-class community, and upon my understanding of this sort of child-adult dynamic that is part of many children's experience in such a community (Lareau, 2003). The families that I have worked with in my first year at City & Country have been, collectively, the warmest, most supportive and involved group that I have yet encountered.

Why do I go on and on, gushing about how happy I seem to be at this progressive, independent—and some might say "elite"—New York City school? The answer is that my happiness there has been a major factor in the ever-present internal turmoil I have felt over what progressive education really means, what I believe, and where I truly "belong." In seeking answers to these questions, I discovered a kindred spirit in Harriet Cuffaro, who has a long history with both Bank Street and City & Country. In her book, *Experimenting with the World: John Dewey and the Early Childhood Classroom* (1995), she shares her own struggle, her need to ask questions and understand what she believed as a teacher. "The habits of mind and heart with which I came to teaching, attitudes rooted in my life, family, and culture, predisposed me to wanting to know *why* I did *what* I did" (p. 99), she writes, but, as I have also encountered, "A bit unsettling to my need for certainty and approval was the variety I found in interpretations" (p. 4). It is interesting to note that this variety she noticed

was within the context of her work at City & Country School. My own identity as a reflective, inquisitive person who has strong beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning, both as a result of my education and of my personal experience, has put me into a category with Cuffaro and others—and there are, as I would discover, *many* others—who seek to better understand their own values in education, especially in relation to the history and meaning of "progressive education" as a movement and philosophy.

Barbara Biber, another famous name from Bank Street's past, and for whom the annual convocation lecture series is now named, was another one who opened my eyes to the at-once reassuring and mind-boggling fact that I'm not the only one who has noticed that we lack a clear definition of progressive education and that therefore one encounters many different opinions and examples of what it is. She describes a "schism" among those educators who rejected traditionalism: some, she said, were interested in "giving first priority to freeing the *individual* for creative, spontaneous living," while "others had their sights primarily on educating the individual for rational, socialized living in a *democratic society* [emphasis added]" (1972, n.p., para. 2). Here, however, as has been true in various other places where I have encountered educators, theorists, and historians who recognize the differences among those who would call themselves "progressive educators," it is almost as though this "schism," thus acknowledged, can be set aside to dig into some more specific point now that that's out of the way. I find myself in a position now to argue that we must more adequately address it, as thoughtful and reflective teachers, not as a means of answering the question of which is more important—the democratic group or the individual child—but as a means of further refining and understanding our own beliefs as teachers – and those of

our colleagues – so that each decision we make around teaching and learning is truest to our aims as educators.

This project, for me, represents a shift from the practical back to the theoretical. My preparation at Connecticut College was very much theory-heavy, which I valued and understood even back then; knowing what you believe and why is a much more critical step than learning, say, how to plan a math lesson, because if you have the former, the latter will come easily, which cannot be said for the reverse. This focus on forming a personal philosophy of education through reflection, practice, and in-depth conversations with professors and peers served me well as I strove, in my first three years or so of teaching, to figure out exactly what my pedagogical beliefs would *look* like in my classroom. Now, thanks in part to my move to New York and my experiences at Bank Street and at City & Country School, the pendulum has begun to swing back the other way. It is time to re-examine my beliefs in relation to what I now know and understand—and what I now *question* and do *not* fully understand—about progressive education.

Within this re-examination, I will not attempt to answer the question *What is progressive education?*, but rather seek to bring the question to the forefront of the minds of fellow thoughtful, reflective, "progressive" educators. When I first began thinking about this paper, I naively thought that it would be, indeed, an attempt to more clearly define progressive education. I remember an attempt, in my first semester at Bank Street, to do just that. In my final paper for a course that had introduced a number of questions concerning the nature of progressive education and well-meaning but misguided teachers who think only in terms of "developmentally appropriate practice" or "progressive education" rather than considering the child's perspective or social justice, I felt the need to try to turn all of my

questions into an answer, and I thought I had found that answer in one word: structure. While I still believe that structure is a key element that is not always well-understood by these well-meaning "progressive" educators, as I will discuss later, such an attempt to answer my question, to rid myself of the disequilibrium I was feeling in relation to my personal pedagogy, was not nearly as powerful as an *examination* of the question and all of the pieces that it brings up, such as the historical context of progressive education, class, race, inequality, the state of the world today and the needs of children, real active learning, and the nature of freedom.

My exploration has taken a number of paths, including personal reflection and writing; informal conversations with any number of fellow educators and friends who would listen; reading and re-reading books and articles from my own shelf and then those I was drawn to as a result of familiar readings or the directions that conversations took; and most importantly, formal "interviews" or conversations with three of the people whose own pedagogy and work in education have influenced my own philosophy and practice over the years: Mike James, a teacher educator; Ruth Charney, founder of the Responsive Classroom approach; and Andy Dousis, a teacher and consulting teacher for Responsive Classroom. I must be honest and disclose the fact that I initially sought these people out because I thought that talking with the people with whom I share common assumptions about teaching and learning would help me to clarify what it is that we have "right" about progressive education, and in turn what others—especially these "so-called" progressive educators in New York City's independent schools—have "wrong." Throughout the course of my exploration, but particularly within the course of the three interviews, my thinking about progressive education became so much more complex, and in a way I moved even further from being

able to answer my initial question regarding a precise definition of progressive education. It is my hope that this leaves me not further from where I started but instead on my way towards a deeper understanding of what I believe and what that means for the choices I'll make in terms of my teaching.

In seeking a way to convey accurately and on a personal level the beliefs and experiences of the three educators with whom I spoke, I struggled to find a way to interweave the qualitative data from the interviews with my own personal context and with the relevant context as uncovered through literature. My devoted advisor for this project, Bernadette Anand, suggested I look into Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's style of portraiture, "a genre of inquiry and representation that seeks to join science and art" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. xv), and I was immediately sold. Lawrence-Lightfoot uses the style herself in a number of works, including an exploration of respect (2000) that even further convinced me of the rightness of this style of writing for my particular project. Inquiring into the various meanings of respect, Lawrence-Lightfoot "paints" portraits of a number of people and the various lives they lead and work they do, connecting the common threads to illustrate what she comes to see as the multiple definitions and layers of respect.

Although Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) states that "Unlike many other empirical investigations, portraits are not usually prefaced with a traditional review of the relevant literature" (p. 66) – a fact that was initially thrilling and freeing to me, as I have always preferred the narrative style to that of empirical writing – it seemed, as I sat down to write, that I had collected so *much* literature that was so *immensely* helpful to me in beginning to wrap my head around progressive education's historical context and ever-changing definition, that I knew I wanted to include enough of it that it would hopefully help fellow

answer-seeking educators along in their own quest for meaning. I was drawn in a multitude of directions, partly as a result of my initial scan of literature from my own shelves, but mostly as a result of the three interviews I conducted and the topics, people, and themes that were suggested within those conversations. Therefore, it was tempting to embed all of the connections to literature within the portraits, but I worried that the portraits would quickly become saturated and that my reader would lose the opportunity to get to know the educators as well as they might. Thus, I made myself the promise to include only the most relevant and poignant connections to literature within the portraiture section, and offer below an overview of the major themes that have come up for me, along with links to relevant thinkers and theories.

There is one additional aspect of my writing that I feel requires mentioning, and that is the fact that, due to both the narrative style I have chosen and the particular content of my work as a journey in exploring and shifting my understandings, the language I choose to use might sometimes appear to be attempting to indict educators who do not think or act as I do. I have allowed myself to use the original words with which I first attempted to describe some of the practices I observed that were the impetus for this project in the first place: I use words such as *seemingly*, *so-called,* and *self-proclaimed* not to put down the people and institutions to which I attach them, but instead with the hope that I might offer my reader a truer vantage point from which to understand where I was, and how far I have come.

The individual vs. the democratic group

A hunch I had, and which was fully confirmed by a search of both the historical and contemporary literature on progressive education, was that some progressive educators focus

their efforts on helping each individual to reach their potential, while others seek to consider the development and needs of both the individual and of the class as a democratic group (e.g. Bagnall, 2000; Tzuo, 2001; Weiler, 2004). Cuffaro speaks of the role a teacher plays in guiding a group toward a "shared perspective" (1995, p. 51), indicating that children can come to understand concepts in new ways through the experience of hearing their peers' ideas and making connections (with a teacher's guidance) to their own experience. This belief echoes theories of two of the "big names" in education: Piaget and Vygotsky, both of whom believed in the key role of social interaction in children's construction of knowledge. Yet Piaget believed this process of constructing meaning through exploration of one's social and physical environment to be an individual one, even as it necessarily includes interaction with others (Berk & Winsler, 1995). On the topic of "new," "progressive," or, in his terminology, "active" schools, Piaget writes that in comparison with the "traditional" school, "The active school...presupposes working in common, alternating between individual work and work in groups, since collective living has been shown to be essential to the full development of the personality in all its facets—even the more intellectual (1973, pp. 108-109). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory likewise points to the role of social interaction in learning, but adds the assumption that learning is *not* an individual undertaking, but instead a process which occurs in concert with others. In other words, it is not up to the individual mind to form understandings, but rather it is the collective work of meaning-making which occurs through social interactions (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Vygotsky believed that in their planning, teachers should consider this fact, and thus should offer their students community-oriented experiences, whether pertaining to the social or academic curriculum.

Both Piaget and Vygotsky speak of considering the individual as well as the group in the interest of children's social and intellectual development, but others would take it a step further and state that an equally important purpose for consideration of the group is to help children learn how to live and work in a democratic group. Dewey, like Vygotsky and Piaget, believed (and perhaps stated it most succinctly) that "all human experience is ultimately social" (1938/1997, p. 38). Lucy Sprague Mitchell, founder of Bank Street, stated that " 'It was the impact of John Dewey's thinking that made the study of...the interaction between human beings and their environment seem imperative to me' " (1935, in Nager & Shapiro, 2000, p. 119). Yet it seems that Dewey was not thinking only of the individual child. Chalmers (1997) speaks of Dewey's "challenge that schools be structured to promote democratic values through scientific problem solving and social interdependence" (p. 66). The real difference here seems to be between *teachers* being aware of the group and its effects on individuals, and teachers also helping *children* to consider the group in which they "live." One of the most startling and seemingly out-of-place behaviors that I noticed within the progressive independent schools in which I spent time in New York was that of children running and yelling in the hallways. They were apparently unaware of the effect of the noise they created with their bodies and voices on other children and adults in the building, either trying to pass in the hallway or at work within classrooms. In relation to this very question, Dewey says that such a "lack of manners...represents a failure in education, a failure to learn one of the most important lessons in life, that of mutual accommodation and adaptation" (1938/1997, p. 60). Interestingly, he couches the need for this lesson in terms of what learning children might miss out on in the future if they are not adept social communicators (1938/1997).

Inherent to the question of individual in relation to group, then, is the notion of learning how to get along and to feel as though one is a part of the group. Denton (2007) referencing Deci & Flaste (1995), writes, "In addition to a sense of autonomy and competence, we all have a basic human need to feel a sense of belonging" (2007, p. 8). She goes on to make the connection to learning and to Vygotsky's notion of the "zone of proximal development" (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Denton, 2007): "When children feel safe with each other, they can engage in ways that stretch their academic skills and knowledge" (p. 9).

I have focused this section on those who advocate for close attention to both the individual and the group, though perhaps with varying aims and beliefs. A poignant quote from Caroline Pratt, founder of City & Country School, seems to stand in starker contrast to these views: "Far from insisting that all activities be group activities, we encouraged individual expression. They [the seven-year-olds] painted or drew or modeled with clay, dictated—later, wrote—their own stories and songs, went to library to read for pleasure" (1948/1970, p. 99). Dewey would be likely to question Pratt's intentions, based on his view that free choice activities should be means, in some way, towards a cooperative end, rather than an end within themselves (1938/1997).

The teacher's role, "freedom," and the meaning of *child-centeredness*

Even among those who agree with the importance of building community and helping children to develop socially and academically with and through their peers, there are subtle differences among the opinions on *how* to build community among a group of children. A simplified overview of the two opinions is that some educators believe that as long as we

place children at the center of our planning and thinking—what some would refer to as adopting a *child-centered* approach—children will work and play in harmony and thus act as a "community" (e.g. Pratt, 1948/1970), while others believe that building community takes a much more proactive approach on the part of the teacher, who does not necessarily abandon child-centeredness, but also does not rely solely on the whims and interests of the individual children in order to guide the group experience (e.g. Deblois, 2002; Dewey, 1938/1997; Tzuo, 2007).

Cuffaro seems to place herself in the former group when, speaking of her experience with children at City & Country school, she says, "The children achieved a sense of groupness through the community they created out of common interests and work they shared in the block area" (1995, p. 51). She is sure to add, "Community did not cancel individuality" (p. 52). Taking Cuffaro's example to another level, Pratt describes the Eights at work on any number of things at the same time: some children making maps; others doing work related to their class's job, the school store; and others painting (1938/1997). While all of their work relates to the shared curriculum, there is an implication here that community grows on its own as long as children are engaged in their learning; it is assumed that the teacher's role in building community relates to planning, or allowing for, activities that engage the children's interests and that require some degree of cooperative work. Pratt indeed states, "Children learn to work harmoniously with each other the more quickly and effectively if there is little or no adult interference" (p. 37). With the "interference" of external forces such as teacher or the school as a whole, Pratt argues, children lose the drive to learn. "To a traditional educator it was madness to turn children loose as I proposed to do. But to me it was criminal to bind them," she writes (p. 26).

Yet it is the opinion of a number of educators and theorists that simply giving children the "freedom" to pursue their interests does not necessarily accomplish what it might seem (e.g. Charney, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Dewey, 1938/1997; Greene, 1998). In fact, Dewey states:

> It may be a loss rather than a gain to escape from the control of another person only to find one's conduct dictated by immediate whim and caprice; that is, at the mercy of impulses into whose formation intelligent judgment has not entered. A person whose conduct is controlled in this way has at most only *the illusion of freedom.* Actually he is directed by forces over which he has no command [emphasis added] (1938/1997, pp. 64-65).

It is in this vein that Dewey poignantly offers his opinion about why all of this matters: "The ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control. But the mere removal of external control is no guarantee for the production of self-control" (p. 64). Interestingly, in describing Mitchell's beliefs and observations, as well as the early years of City & Country School, Cenedella writes, "Permitting children's growth did not mean a free-for-all" (1997, p. 133). So even within an institution whose founder (Pratt) seemingly eschewed adult-imposed structure in the name of children's freedom, there was not an altogether absence of organization. A number of authors seek to clarify Dewey's beliefs about freedom and structure; for example, Deblois (2002) asserts that to Dewey, "freedom" was not freedom *from* structure, but instead freedom *through* active participation. In supporting her view that progressive schools are not unstructured or lacking in discipline, as some opponents would believe, Weiler (2004) discusses Dewey's "binary of restriction and freedom" (n.p., para. 11), citing "the promise of freedom in the progressive school," and

adding, "for the Deweys, freedom there is closely tied to freedom in a democratic society" (n.p., para. 11). Greene (1998) quotes from her contemporary, Lisa Delpit, whom she compares to Dewey: " 'I suggest that students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life...within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors" (Delpit, 1995, p. 45, in Greene, 1998, p. 122). Hence, one begins to make a strong connection between the idea of democratic, or group, living and freedom in the sense of the ability to actively participate within that group.

A natural query, again, besides *How does this democratic group come about?*, is *How do children gain this freedom, this ability to participate fully, thereby learning as much as they can from their peers and also learning what it means to live in a democratic society?* It is a mistake, according to Dewey, to assume that the teacher must take a passive role, as seemed to be suggested by Pratt, in order to provide children with the freedom to learn. To the contrary, the teacher plays an active role in the learning and functioning of both the individual and the group. As Dewey asserts, "community life does not organize itself in an enduring way purely spontaneously" (1938/1997, p. 56). Counts (1932/1978) speaks to this same idea when he says, "There can be no good individual apart from some conception of the good *society*, and the good society is not something that is given by nature: it must be fashioned by the hands and brain of man" (p. 13). Whether in relation to building a democratic environment or simply in terms of ensuring the freedom of each individual student to learn and engage with the curriculum, it was and is the belief of an overwhelming number of progressive educators that it is the duty and responsibility of the adult to bring organization, careful planning, and overall structure to the learning activities of the group—not in an omnipotent or authoritarian manner, as might be observed in traditional

schools, but in an approach which involves a deep understanding of subject matter and careful consideration of curriculum and of both individual and group needs (e.g. Bruner, 1977; Charney, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Dewey, 1938/1997; Freire, 1998; Greene, 1998; Mirel, 2003).

The reason that most give for the necessity of an adult's active role is that cognition is a complex endeavor, particularly if it is your goal, as it is of most progressive educators, for children to achieve deep understanding versus surface-level knowledge. Beyond this, Bruner points out that "grasping the structure of a subject is understanding it in a way that permits many other things to be related to it meaningfully" (1977, p. 7). Even Cuffaro (1995), who, at the beginning of this section, seemed to favor a hands-off approach on the part of the adult, also recognizes the role of the adult in "clarifying, generalizing, focusing function, and through leading questions and comments" to "link personal worlds with the larger world" (p. 51; see also Nager & Shapiro, 2007, p. 32 for an account of the teacher's synthesizing role). Darling-Hammond (1998) echoes this sentiment when she writes, "Learners construct knowledge as they build cognitive maps for organizing and interpreting new information. Effective teachers help students make these maps by drawing connections among different concepts and between new ideas and learners' prior experiences" (p. 162).

As adults in general, and well-trained educators specifically, we have the ability to see the "big picture" and, to use Vygotsky's terminology, to *scaffold* the learning of each individual child by giving them the right amount of support (Berk & Winsler, 1995). "Since freedom resides in the operations of intelligent observation and judgment by which a purpose is developed, guidance given by the teacher to the exercise of the pupils' intelligence is an aid to freedom, not a restriction upon it" (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 71). Dewey viewed this

guidance towards freedom as being integral to each child's individual development. In explaining Dewey's viewpoint, Cremin writes,

> Far from being hostile to the principle of individuality...some systematic organization of activities and subject matter is the only means for achieving individuality; and teachers, by virtue of their richer and fuller experience, have not only the right but the obligation to assist students in the enterprise (p. 235).

Again, as with most of the content of this literature review and this paper as a whole, there are contradictions and differences, both subtle and not-so-subtle, in the way that educators weigh the competing factors of curriculum, individual, and group. It is here that the term *child-centered* tends to come up, though to be sure, those who bring it up can sometimes have wildly different understandings and aims (Chung & Walsh, 2000). Perhaps in response to attacks by traditionalists who have had occasion to claim that progressive schools are so focused on the *child* that any thoughts toward subject matter go out the window, much has been written from the viewpoint that we cannot think *only* of the child, but that we must also consider the curriculum (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 1998; Deblois, 2002; Dewey, 1938/1997; Lazere, 2006; Mirel, 2003). In fact, related to their shared belief that freedom comes from a carefully structured school environment which takes into account the individual, the democratic group, and the curriculum, both Dewey and Counts opposed purely "child-centered" schools (Cremin, 1977 and Counts, 1932/1978, respectively). The difference for many of these "progressive" educators who would oppose an interpretation of the term *child-centered* as meaning a classroom which follows only the child's interests is that, as discussed earlier, this assumes that the teacher has only a passive, or reactionary, role, when in fact the nature and the structure of the curriculum—as actively and thoughtfully

constructed by the teacher based upon a number of important factors—matters a great deal (e.g. Dewey, 1938/1997; Lazere, 2006; Wilson, 2000).

Social justice

The fact that adults play more than just a passive role in schools is one that forms the absolute core of the beliefs of some progressive teachers. These are teachers who view the building of a democratic society within the classroom as being critical to the role the schools can, and should, play in affecting change in the wider society. In fact, some have even gone so far as to advocate for a shift in the direction of a more teacher-centered approach in the interest of ensuring a social justice curriculum—encompassing the academic and the social—within the classrooms (Lazere, 2006), versus simply helping individuals to "reach their potential" (e.g. Bagnall, 2000; Weiler, 2004) or reinforcing the status quo in terms of who holds the power in our society (e.g. James, 2005; Mirel, 2003; Nager & Shapiro, 2007; Weiler, 2004). Counts (1932/1978) went perhaps further out on a limb than most were willing to support when he suggested that the public worry less about "imposition and *indoctrination* [emphasis added]" in the face of the real social justice work that needed to be done "if progressive education is to be genuinely progressive" (p. 7).

In regard to the thought and care that need to go into shaping the curriculum, Cuffaro yet again surprises us with her thought on the matter: "Does the social atmosphere of the classroom invite all stories to be told? And, in learning about the world, which complexities, which issues, do *we* bring into the classroom? Taken together, the two questions speak to the partnership between children and teachers in the development of curriculum" (1995, p. 102). Nager & Shapiro (2007) likewise advocate teachers' work with children in constructing

curricula that will help them not only to construct meaning, but also to conceive of a truly democratic society. They take this position due to their belief that "classroom routines and school structures have direct implications for how children of any age experience issues of fairness, opportunity, and the sense of being a person who matters" (p. 12).

The central goal of social justice education might be stated as "'full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs'" (Bell, 1997, p. 3, as cited in Hytten, 2006, p. 223). This definition relates to Dewey's notion of freedom as the ability to actively participate (Dewey, 1938/1997; Hytten, 2006). Rather than reaching towards this goal, however, progressivism has a history of overlooking this more global concern in favor of thinking only about individual children's development, specific subject areas, or the economic costs and benefits to the education of certain groups of children (Bagnall, 2000). Bagnall describes progressivism as "substantially lacking in critical concern, social vision, and any commitment to social justice and equity" (abstract, p. 20). Several authors point out that, from the start, progressive education has lacked a social justice perspective (e.g. Greene, 1998; James, 2005; Mirel, 2003; Newman, 1980; Weiler, 2004). In order to truly care about the implications of such a statement, one must consider the position of schools as institutions embedded within a broader society (Ayers, 2007). With this, one must also approach issues of racism and inequality as being structural in nature, based upon a dominant arrangement of racial and/or social groups (Connecticut College, n.d.; Sleeter, 2003). It is due to these two assumptions that teachers who advocate for social justice believe in the possibility that classrooms can be transformed "into sites of social justice and mobility," and that such an undertaking is "central to a democratic society" (Connecticut College, n.p., n.d.).

Thus considered, the view of progressive education as being mainly concerned with the development of individuals is particularly troubling. As Weiler (2004) writes, "progressive education can serve the ends of those who control and benefit from existing arrangements of society by teaching middle-class children to be self-directed, to prepare them for future dam positions, and to encourage them to believe in the goodness of their society rather than be critical and questioning" (n.p., para. 33). For children in marginalized or non-dominant groups, then, education for individual empowerment serves simply to reinforce the myth of individual mobility inherent in the American Dream: "Even if the classroom encourages their 'freedom,' in the wider world these children were hardly free—in fact, powerful forces were willing to take violent action to prevent their freedom" (Weiler, 2004, n.p., para. 24).

Much has been written about John Dewey's perspective in regard to social justice with, not surprisingly, varying conclusions; but in general, it is agreed that Dewey did not pay enough (if any) attention to issues of race and class, and that even though he did acknowledge education's tendency to reinforce the status quo, his writings did exactly that. For example, Weiler (2004) writes, "John Dewey's commitment to democracy and his respect for the capabilities of children is unquestioned. But his envisioning children of different class, race, and gender locations through different lenses [in terms of the positions they were to hold within society], his vision of educational change was compromised from the outset" (n.p., para. 34). Kozol (2005) speaks in terms of this same historical context by which Dewey was likely influenced:

> The efficiency agenda and the notion that our public schools exist primarily to give the business sector what it asks for, or believes it needs, are anything but new; and the

> racially embarrassing beliefs by which these notions were accompanied a century ago, although widely disavowed today, are with us still (p. 214).

One does catch glimpses of Dewey's recognition of the sometimes unjust aims of schools. Mirel (2003) quotes Dewey, who, along with his daughter Evelyn, wrote in *Schools of To-Morrow* (1915), " 'traditional education was designed for people who did not earn their own livings, for people who wished to be accomplished, polished, and interesting socially, so the material was abstract, purposefully separated from the concrete and useful'" (p. 163, as cited in Mirel, 2003, p. 480).

If traditional education came from a place so far from the goals of democracy, equity, or social justice, one would assume that progressive education has a very different sort of history; but despite appearances or even best intentions, those working towards progressive education over the years have in turn justified segregation for efficiency (Mirel, 2003), reinforced the status quo (Weiler, 2004), and aimed to " 'fix' "or "remake 'the others' into model citizens who hopefully know their place, and more important, stay there without complaint" (James, 2005, p. xvii). Even Piaget must be questioned in his call to help "underprivileged" children make up for the "shortcomings of their family life" (1973, p. 5). *Shortcomings according to whom?*, social justice educators would have us ask. *Whose definitions of success, power, and education are we abiding by?*

A danger that a number of authors touch upon in relation to the social justice perspective, or the lack thereof, is what can happen when teachers adopt progressive *methods* without acknowledging the "wider social context," as Weiler (2004) puts it (n.p., para. 35). Without the theory behind it, teachers might use a progressive practice such as project-based learning, for example, only to continue "manipulating students into mastering material from

the traditional lock-step curriculum" (Mirel, 2003, p. 484). A tragic example of the paradox that can come from such a practice, Weiler (2004) goes on to share, is the fact that progressive methods were employed within the schools in Japanese-American internment camps during World War II.

So, if we are to learn from the mistakes of progressive education in the past, and stay truest to its democratic aim, we must examine the structures of our society, including those that are responsible for our own personal position of power or submission (Ayers, 2007; Sleeter, 2003), and to play an active role in shaping the curriculum to include all voices and to help children to question and challenge norms that they might otherwise take at face value. Numerous voices call on us to do something *now* (e.g. Connecticut College, n.d.; Greene, 1998; McLaren, 2007; Weiler, 2004). Cuffaro (1995) is also among these voices, stating that "Accepting the spirit of Dewey's vision, we are challenged to attend to whatever diminishes the growth of a democratic society and to whatever silences voices, voices needed for participation and communication and vital to a growing community" (p. 103).

This is indeed a challenge, because, as Kohn succinctly puts it, "progressive education is inherently subversive, and people in power do not always enjoy being subverted" (2008, p. 26). Progressive education that achieves Dewey's calling is duly difficult due to the very nature and history of progressive education; "for it may in fact be the case that progressivism, conceived and constructed as it was in whiteness, may never work equitably for children of color" writes Chalmers (1997), who, it is important to note, was a past head of the Bank Street School for Children. "It is up to us," she continues, "to work with staff, parents, and children to imagine new postprogressive possibilities beyond the domination of whiteness" (p. 78).

The appropriateness and success of progressive education in public and private schools

Directly related to Chalmers' position on progressive education, particularly in light of her experience as head of a private school known as a model for progressivism, is a multifaceted debate regarding whether progressive education "works" in every setting, private or public, and what role race, power, and privilege play in the occurrence or success of progressive schools within a variety of communities. Chalmers addresses these issues head-on when she describes a situation in which she tried to reach out and give a voice to the families of color at the School for Children by holding an invitation-only potluck supper. She writes, "Race and status loyalty is a requirement of a private school head, and I was disloyal to white people, exposing them and the school of their choice to the possible influence of disorderly people of color" (1997, p. 77).

Of the early years of progressive education, specifically, the 1920s, Greene (1998) writes, "progressive schools were largely private, developed by and for a liberal middle class. The problems of social class, ethnic differences, discrimination, and exclusion scarcely entered the ongoing debate" (p. 121). Here, Greene touches on one of the main differences, according to the literature, between progressive education within private schools and public schools: composed as they are of a majority of students, families, and teachers from communities of power and privilege, the progressive private schools—unlike the public schools, serving, as they do, marginalized communities—tend to have the ability to abandon thoughts of the inequities of the larger society in favor of a more romanticized emphasis on individual development (Weiler, 2004). As discussed in the previous section on social justice, Dewey has been largely criticized for his inattention to issues of inequity, and, worse, for his advocacy for certain aspects of progressive education that would actually serve to

maintain the status quo (e.g. Greene, 1998; Weiler, 2004). An example of the latter is Dewey's embrace of the Gary schools, which "juxtapose[d] the freedom of privileged children to learn through play with the mastery of manual skills for the working class children" (Weiler, 2004, n.p., para. 28).

Dewey was not alone in embracing the Gary schools project, and, as is true of many large-scale public school initiatives, many of those who supported the effort did so on the basis of its simplicity, efficiency, and overall "administrative" progressiveness (Kozol, 2005; Newman, 1980; Weiler, 2004). The New American Schools initiative, or NAS, is an example of a more recent reform effort on the part of the U.S. government to "fix" failing public schools. The plan called upon a number of progressive ideas that the administration believed were a sure way to turn around many of these failing public schools, most of which—and there were over 3,000—were located in "low achieving, poor, urban districts" (Mirel, 2003, p. 494). Several authors suggest that it is the generalizing on the part of the reformers—who are often government or corporate authorities—the oversimplification, cookie-cutter approach to reform, and the lack of attention to the complexity of what it means to implement progressive or democratic approaches to education within urban settings that keeps schools like those in the now-abandoned NAS project from succeeding (Carlson, 2005; Mirel, 2003; Newman, 1980). Progressive education, again, is much more than a collection of practices; to be successful, it requires implementation by people who truly understand the theory behind the practices.

Some, however, would posit that schools such as many of those involved in the NAS reform failed indeed *because* of their situation within those "low achieving, poor, urban districts" (Mirel, 2003, p. 494). It is true, Darling-Hammond points out, that carefully

scaffolded progressive education is more difficult within communities in which children may not be receiving such scaffolding at home, "a distinction that reifies existing inequities in access to powerful knowledge" (1998, p. 163). This fact has not stopped a number of educators from attempting, sometimes successfully, to infuse public schools with opportunities for progressive and social justice oriented teaching and learning (e.g. Ayers, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Greene, 1998; Nager & Shapiro, 2007), but for the most part, "the practices they embrace remain marginalized" (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 151). From this viewpoint, James (2005) writes, "I want to address the nagging question that is part of the public debate over schooling. Why have our public schools, especially those in poor and working-class communities of color, failed to live up to the promises contained in the American dream?" (p. xvi).

One example of an urban public school infused with progressive and social justice methods and aims which *has* succeeded is Central Park East in New York City (Bensman, 1994). This school emerged from "an effort by teachers who believed that the 'progressive education' that worked for the children of the wealthy and privileged in many private and suburban schools could work equally well for poor and working-class children" (p. 6). The school, situated in East Harlem, appears to work because of its care for students and their interests, as well as the support and buy-in on the part of the parents who choose to send their children there.

A final reform effort worth mentioning here is that of the small schools movement, which, initially at least, borrowed from the progressive tradition its emphasis on teaching children to question and to construct their own meaning out of their experiences. Why do some of the small schools seem to enjoy more success than those schools that are the

products of other efforts? In part, says Greene (1998), because "none of them fall prey to old notions of romantic progressivism or libertarian ideals of unfettered freedom" (p. 122).

The importance of reflection

For teachers to truly engage in progressive practice, they themselves need to become active problem solvers as they construct knowledge of students, curriculum, and their own pedagogy (Charney, 1997; Nager & Shapiro, 2007; Tzuo, 2007) just as many progressive educators seek for their students. "Although not always explicit, theories of knowledge inform and guide how teachers provide opportunities for children's learning" (Nager & Shapiro, 2007, p. 30). Therefore, we must, as Tzuo (2007) urges us to do, engage our minds to "observe/interpret/reflect the children's behaviors and learning in the classroom" and "reconceptualize multiple theories into practice" as we construct [our classroom] without losing the foundation of child-centeredness" (p. 39).

Indeed, this element of reflection is suggested as a key part of a teacher's job by multiple parties (e.g. Ayers, 1991; Connecticut College, n.d.; Cuffaro, 1995). Cuffaro places this charge in relation to morality. She writes, "The 'moving force' of all ideas means that actions taken must be action-reflected on. And *must* appears because reflection is the assumption of responsibility for the consequence of actions taken, their effect upon self and others" (p. 53). The Connecticut College Education Department, in its "Critical Framework" for teacher preparation, describes its aim to help teachers develop "critical and analytical practice that brings theoretical frameworks to bear on real world strategies" (n.d., n.p.). Far from memorizing a laundry list of methods, then, reflective teaching involves an active and ever-present engagement of the mind. This sort of work inevitably makes teaching a more

complex endeavor, and sometimes means that one is less comfortable than would be the case without the element of reflection (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Kohn, 2008; Nager & Shapiro, 2007). "Thinking is messy," Kohn writes, "and deep thinking is really messy" (2008, p. 26). Discussing teacher candidates involved in this sort of thinking, Nager & Shapiro note that "students tend to move from a belief of knowledge as simple, certain, and handed down to a view of themselves as active makers of meaning in a world of relativism and uncertainty" (2007, p. 30).

It is this same sort of "messy" work of reflection that enriches a teacher as a professional that we, as progressive educators, need to be doing with our students, many believe (e.g. Dewey, 1974; Greene, 1998; Nager & Shapiro, 2007). Dewey asserted that reflective thinking must be an educational aim, due to the role that reflection plays in the development of thought and of moral character (Archambault, 1974). On Dewey, Greene (1998) writes, "If education was to mean anything at all, it had to involve a heightened reflectiveness with respect to lived experience, a more conscious and thoughtful way of being in the world. Without such an approach to experience, it was highly unlikely that a pursuit of knowledge could begin" (pp. 119-120).

In describing an American government project in which adolescents took on the roles of Senators—a Bank Street-inspired, hands-on approach to learning about the government, Nager & Shapiro point out the role played by the teacher in providing opportunities for children to reflect and make meaning of these hands-on experiences: "Throughout, Franklin [the teacher] provided assignments to help students step out of the role and more dispassionately consider the complexity of the legislative process they were living" (2007, p.

32). Relating back to the balancing act of a good "progressive educator," beyond simply espousing child-centeredness,

> the teacher's guiding framework integrated a thorough knowledge of American government, a demonstrated commitment to democratic process, active engagement in learning, and a sophisticated understanding of children's cognitive, social, and emotional needs and her own role in helping children achieve a set of skills and understandings (Nager & Shapiro, 2007, p. 32).

Finally, several authors suggest that through a reflective approach to teaching and learning, teachers are able to "alter (rather than merely follow) pedagogical theory and guidelines" (Tzuo, p. 207). " 'Reflective practitioners,'" according to Carlson (2005) are "professionals engaged in inquiry of some sort,...reflecting on their own practice, and...engaging in reconstructing their practice in light of their inquiry and reflection" (Carlson, 2005, p. 23).

Definitions of progressive education

I made a deliberate decision in leaving this section for last within the review of the literature; I realized that in order to follow the rationale of the various educators and theorists that offer up their viewpoint as a definitive meaning of progressive education, one must take them in the context of history and of the various themes and facets of the longstanding debate on progressive education.

The first major theme that arose out of the literature regarding the existence of a singular definition of progressive education is that there *is* no definition; many people and groups have used the term over the century-or-so-long history of the term to mean so many

different things and towards so many different aims, that a singular definition is not possible (Kohn, 2008; Mirel, 2003; Newman, 1980; Reese, 2003; Weiler, 2004). This lack has been cause for conflict, as referenced in Reese (2003): "Few ideas in pedagogical thought and practice have generated more passion and debate than 'progressive education'" (p. 415). This debate is a result of the strength of the individuals' and groups' beliefs in their version of "progressive education." Discussing the "progressive era," the time in American history between about 1890 and 1920 that coincided with industrialization, Reese notes:

> Many Americans with varying shades of belief about the nature of the child, the school, the curriculum, and education broadly considered, identified themselves as progressives, as forward-thinking individuals concerned with the individual's welfare as well as the common good. And so a capsule definition of 'progressive education,' or progressivism generally, will never gain universal acceptance (2003, p. 415).

Newman is a bit more succinct in stating, "One paradox of progressive education is that educators with widely divergent interests and priorities could believe in the same plan for different reasons" (1980, p. 175). An example of this is the reaction to the Gary schools, as discussed earlier.

Kohn (2008) also speaks of progressive education in terms of its paradoxes, explaining that "some people focus on the unique needs of individual students, while others invoke the importance of a *community* of learners; some describe learning as a process, more journey than destination, while others believe that tasks should result in authentic products that can be shared" (p. 19). In fact, Kohn states, the very nature of progressive education as having a "reputation for resisting conformity and standardization" (p. 19) could be to blame.

What Kohn is getting at here is the history of progressive education, or the multiple contexts within which and as a result of which it has developed its paradoxical meanings. Biber unknowingly provides a clear example of the importance in understanding context when she attempts to clear up the problem of whether education should be for the individual or for group democratic living: In 1972, she wrote "The controversy of earlier days...has lost much of its validity in the face of increasing conviction among psychologists that fulfillment of self in the early years of childhood can be a most advantageous condition for social commitment in maturity" (n.p., last para.). It seems here that the context of the growing field of child psychology could be at least partially responsible for progressive education's focus on the individual. Without this context, one might simply see progressive education as lacking in democratic or social aims, rather than as deliberately working towards them *through* an individual approach. Weiler (2006) provides the example of Dewey's lack of attention to gender-related issues except within the historical context of the roughly 10-year suffrage movement. And of course, one cannot discount the racial and power-laden aims of some early "progressive" movements (e.g. James, 2005; Weiler, 2004). "It is hard to believe that Dewey himself would have recommended separating the text from its social, cultural, and psychological frameworks," Greene writes (1998, p. 126).

Despite a decided lack of agreement through history on the meanings of, and reasons for, progressive education, still some authors assert that there exist certain ideas or words that are commonly enough associated with progressive education that we can form a tentative, working definition. Kohn (1999) sees as a major "point of departure" from traditional education the fact that "kids should be taken seriously" (p. 3). Mirel (2003) attempts a generalization, phrased in terms of what progressive education is *not*: "In all, progressives

believed that curriculum- and teacher-dominated regimes represented the worst aspects of education: schools being organized around academic subjects rather than *children's interests*, teachers restraining children rather than providing them *freedom to learn*, teachers taking the initiative in the classroom rather than creating opportunities for children to do so, and students being passive rather than *active learners* [emphasis added]" (p. 482). Speaking in the positive, Kohn (2008) identifies what he sees as some common threads among progressive educators: *attending to the child, community, collaboration, social justice, intrinsic motivation, deep understanding, active learning,* and, harkening back to his earlier definition, *taking kids seriously* (section headings, pp. 20-21). The abundance of terms with multiple meanings (Chung & Walsh, 2000) clearly does not stop some from seeking to name the beliefs of themselves and others, in an attempt to more clearly articulate what is meant by "progressive education."

Many, though, would agree that it is in fact a good thing that we have no rigid, stagnant definition of progressive education. Dewey himself wrote that we should

> think in terms of Education itself rather than in terms of some 'ism about education, even such an 'ism as 'progressivism.' For in spite of itself any movement that thinks and acts in terms of an 'ism becomes so involved in reaction against other 'isms that it is unwittingly controlled by them (1938, p. 6).

Relating back to the earlier discussion of reflective practices and the complex nature of progressive education, Dewey added, "We shall make surer and faster progress when we devote ourselves to finding out what education is and what conditions have to be satisfied in order that education may be a reality and not a name or slogan" (1938/1997, pp. 90-91). Echoing this, Mirel (2003) believed that "rather than continuing the seemingly eternal debate

about which is better—traditional or progressive approaches—educators and education policy-makers should be asking a different set of questions" (p. 497). Cuffaro admits that abandoning the empty debate and admitting that part of the teaching process is to continually redefine one's beliefs is perhaps the harder road to take: "It is a struggle because what Dewey asks is our continued growth, reflection, intelligence, imagination, and the risk-taking and responsibility involved in creating both curriculum and our teaching self" (1995, pp. 99-100).

What Dewey suggests, rather than rules or recipes, are *principles* (Cuffaro, 1995). An example of this assumption in action is Charney's (1991) admission that "our best management techniques will not eliminate [all] issues from our classrooms. They will only help us deal with them in ways that promote self-control" (p. 13). This statement, of course, can be directly linked with Dewey's belief about the aim of education as being to help children create self-control (1938/1997). The sort of teaching suggested by both Dewey and Charney cannot be neatly defined. Tzuo (2007) reminds us that teaching is, in fact, an art, not a science; Darling-Hammond (1998) adds that when we try to oversimplify, we are not able to reach our intended goals. This truth can be seen within the large-scale reform efforts which, rather than being amended to serve a specific population of children within a specific community (Bensman, 1994), seek to simply offer "prescriptions for practice" (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 157). Dewey saw education as complex, yet people continue to oversimplify his ideas rather than refining their own (Deblois, 2002).

When we accept the complexity of learning and of the construction of knowledge, "meanings multiply and diversify in consequence" (Greene, 1998, p. 124). This sort of thinking is far from a simple rejection of traditional education (Darling-Hammond, 1998), and although it entails more work on the part of the educator, Greene believes that it is indeed a good thing that Dewey leaves us without a singular direction in which to journey as we create our own understanding of progressive education. "It is up to us in the present

day," she writes, "to rediscover the meanings of teaching and learning, education, and the school. Furthermore, it is up to us to reach beyond Dewey, expanding in the direction of social justice, equity, mutuality, and enhanced existence in a not always hospitable world" (1998, p. 129).

Throughout the literature review, Cuffaro's (1995) work has come up, partly because her examination of Dewey and the implications of his work is one of the most thorough and personal I encountered; partly because her work was in City & Country School and Bank Street, so I found it particularly pertinent to my examination of my own experiences; and partly, I think, because the pieces I have pulled from her work appeared at first contradictory, but upon closer examination, seem to stand out as a model for the acknowledgement of the complexity inherent in progressive education and the sort of flexibility Dewey himself calls on us to have, rather than regarding progressive education as a rigid 'ism.

One more layer of complexity exists within the theme of a definition for progressive education: even if no single definition exists, a number of authors note, this does not mean that we should simply do whatever comes to us in the moment within the classroom. We *do* need a philosophy to give us direction, and if we are to personally believe in a philosophy of education, we *do* need to understand our own beliefs. Dewey wrote, "Just because progressive schools cannot rely upon established traditions and institutional habits, they must either proceed more or less haphazardly or be directed by ideas which, when they are made articulate and coherent, form a philosophy of education" (1938/1997, pp. 28-29). Counts (1932/1978) agreed, stating, "If an educational movement, or any movement, calls itself progressive, it must have orientation; it must possess direction. The word itself implies moving forward, and moving forward can have little meaning in the absence of clearly defined purposes" (p. 4).

Cuffaro touches on the fact that the direction, or philosophy, that one constructs is intimately tied to oneself as an individual and as a moral being: "Teaching is a way of being who we are and a place where in our actions we make manifest what we believe and value" (1995, p. 99). Beyond simply considering how one's philosophy affects one's vision of oneself within the classroom, Nager and Shapiro (2007) describe a philosophy of education as something that "provides a synthesizing framework. Underlying decisions about all aspects of curriculum," they continue, "is a point of view about the nature of knowledge and knowing, teaching and learning, and a view of what children should know and be able to do, what kinds of people teachers and children can become, and what kind of society is possible" (pp. 32-33).

The absence of such a philosophy, even by teachers who are applying progressive *methods*, as we have seen, can be disastrous, as with the examples of progressive methodology used in Japanese-American internment camps (Weiler, 2004), project-based learning simply disguising traditional ways of thinking about curriculum (Mirel, 2003), or governmental efforts at school reform based loosely on progressive methods but lacking the involvement of educators who truly understand and can enact the philosophy behind these methods (Mirel, 2003; Weiler, 2004). Kohn (2008) would add to this discussion that while it is true that the methods do not work without the philosophy, it is likewise true that schools sometimes possess the progressive *beliefs* but lack the educational *practices* to go with them:

> A school that is culturally progressive is not necessarily educationally progressive. An institution can be steeped in lefty politics and multi-grain values; it can be committed to diversity, peace, and saving the planet—but remain strikingly traditional in its pedagogy.

In fact, we can imagine an old-fashioned pour-in-the-facts approach being used to teach lessons in tolerance or even radical politics (p. 22).

* * * *

Whether it is in the name of social justice (Hytten, 2006) or some other aim, the point is that a clear philosophy is critical, both for the individual teacher and for groups working toward a common goal. On this note, I felt reassured—especially since my inquiry into a definition uncovered so much complexity and ambiguity. I knew that it was up to each individual teacher to fashion a personal philosophy of education (looking back at the one I wrote at the end of college, I am actually impressed with my clarity and with its resonance, even now, five years into my teaching career). But looking back, I realize that I thought the purpose of such a process was to see where one stood along the progressive-to-traditional continuum, which, of course, I thought, involved fixed definitions. Kohn (2008) suggests that rather than one continuum, we should judge schools on a "series of continua reflecting the various components of [the traditional and progressive] models" (p. 24). Yes, this means that it takes more work and thought on the part of the teacher, but this seems to be true in general of the progressive mindset. And armed with research and an historical context, one is well on their way. For me, my journey became less and less about searching for a definition of progressive education, and more and more about exploring what progressive education has meant to others – historically, through the literature review, and personally, through the conversations I had with three educators who have influenced my philosophy – in my work of better understanding my own beliefs and letting myself question them more.

The Garden of Love

I laid me down upon a bank,
Where Love lay sleeping;
I heard among the rushes dank
Weeping, weeping.

Then I went to the heath and the wild,
To the thistles and thorns of the waste;
And they told me how they were beguiled,
Driven out, and compelled to the chaste.

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen;
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And 'Thou shalt not' writ over the door;
So I turned to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tombstones where flowers should be;
And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys and desires.

– William Blake

Freedom

Andy

Andy Dousis seems to invoke both William Blake and John Dewey in his statement, "Progressive education is about facilitating someone's freedom to *think* and to be *unbound*." Like Dewey, Pratt, Mitchell, and numerous educators between their time and ours, Andy sees schools as having the ability to either free or to bind children. When he made this statement, we were sitting down for a formal interview at my dining room table as part of my gathering of qualitative data around the meaning of progressive education. But over the course of the six years or so that I have known him, first as a colleague, then as a mentor and friend, I have come to understand Andy's philosophy of education not only through our conversations—of which there have been many, usually over coffee and a game of Scrabble—but also through the decisive actions he has taken towards ensuring that schools in fact do a lot more freeing than binding.

One of the most poignant examples involves his own daughter, who was attending Flanders School—the same school where Andy taught until the year before, when he made the decision to become a full-time consultant for Responsive Classroom, and also the same school where I first met Andy, when I was a student teacher in the classroom across the hall from his. Andy's daughter, Shawn, is a bright, active, inquisitive child who loves learning but who had never quite bought into learning on somebody else's schedule, with somebody else's rules—even at a school such as Flanders which sought to educate the whole child, and where learning how to learn was more important than any set of fixed facts; on the front of the school hung a quote by Eric Hoffer: "In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while

the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." Despite all of this, when Shawn entered third grade, she faced a new challenge to her already waning sense of excitement about learning: third grade in Connecticut public schools, as in every state now, thanks to No Child Left Behind, is the year that full-blown standardized testing begins. As the Connecticut Mastery Test approached, children's days were filled with review packets and lessons, designed to make children feel prepared for the test, but in actuality disrupting the normally active, dynamic flow of each day at Flanders. It was during this time period that Andy found it impossible to stand by and watch his daughter become ever more bound by school. With his wife and with Shawn herself, he made the decision to pull his daughter out of school before the test began. He was quoted in a local newspaper as saying, "I can't believe educated people would be sending their kids to school if they knew what the test was about" (Crompton, 2006, n.p.). "Real, organic learning has been replaced by instruction that teaches to the tests," he said in another article (Brensilver, 2006, n.p.). The matter was further complicated by the fact that Andy had recently been elected to the town's Board of Education, a position he sought as a result of his desire to bring child-centered decision-making to the forefront of the minds of a town embattled in talks over extending the school day in order to fit more in.

In the end, Shawn stayed out of school, electing with her family's support to remain a homeschooler. Although this all occurred two years ago now, Andy sees the residual effects of school on his daughter. During our recent conversation, he recounted an interaction that spoke to this effect:

Andy: Hey Shawn, whatcha doing today for learning?

Shawn: I don't know; what do you want to *teach* me?

Andy: Why do you ask what I want to teach you?

Shawn: Because you're my teacher.

He went on to paraphrase his response to his daughter, saying, " 'Well, I think it's more important for you to ask what it is you want to learn, and if there's some way that I can help you learn it, I'd love to help.' " He describes this as the "ideal situation, that the learner knows their role." Laughing, he adds, "If the learner doesn't know their role, it's because we as educators have bound them."

Andy himself was once bound by school. His memories of the classroom involve sitting at a desk, leaning over a workbook, while his teacher sipped coffee and corrected yesterday's stack of workbooks at her desk in the front of the room. When asked to stir up memories of his early learning, school is not involved as an active force on his life. Instead, he speaks of days spent at his grandfather's apartment and print shop, in his hometown of New London, Connecticut—a small city on Long Island Sound with picturesque views but with all of the problems that come with being an urban area, especially as compared with the neighboring rural and suburban towns. Besides watching and learning his grandfather work on the hand-press machines, Andy recalls a number of learning experiences that greatly affected him. Perhaps the simplest resulted from his grandfather taking a nap in the middle of each day, leaving Andy with a certain amount of time which he needed to occupy. While he describes his disinterest in "any of the reading that was going on in school," he found himself poring over *The Sporting News* each afternoon during his grandfather's naps. The difference? "They were of a topic that I was interested in."

In a similar recollection also involving his grandfather, Andy shares his memory of watching his grandfather write: "he had *beautiful* handwriting." Andy still remembers the

day that his grandfather taught him the secrets to that handwriting: "you should always use the highest quality pens, and you should never press down real hard, and you let the pen glide across the paper." Like Andy's newfound interest in reading, this serendipitous lesson in writing came at a time in Andy's schooling when he was, in fact, required to be learning cursive and practicing his handwriting. Although he felt ambivalent at best about the learning going on in school, he does remember taking what he had learned so far about cursive and practicing all day in his grandfather's apartment: "I remember spending one day just writing my name over and over and over, and changing the way I would do my first letter, like sometimes I would make my reverse circular A, and other times I'd make the triangular-type A." One can only imagine the discrepancy between the Andy Dousis his teachers knew and the one who would spend an entire day practicing to write as beautifully as his grandfather. These anecdotes seems to speak to the importance of engaging a child's interests, as well as to the development of self-control: in Ruth Charney's terms: "the power to attend, to wait your turn, to be patient, to amuse yourself if need be" (1997, p. 13).

But the learning didn't stop there. Andy speaks of "all kinds of subtle lessons" that his grandfather taught him. One centers around his grandfather's ongoing project in which he was building a model of New London out of cigar boxes, milk cartons, and other found materials, complete with approximated scale. For Andy, this project was a model for active, life-long learning. "I don't know if he woke up every day and said, 'Gee, what could Andy learn today?' I don't think he did. I think what he *did* was what I eventually learned was what progressive education is: he empowered and he freed. He allowed me the freedom to learn on my own."

A bit later down the line, like many young men from working-class communities struggling to find their way, Andy would join the Marine Corps. He himself is surprised to admit that looking back, he recognizes a certain element of progressivism in the learning he did in the Marines. The thread that seems to connect his early learning memories to his learning in the Marines is the element of learning through real-life experiences. As a Marine, Andy trained in computer programming, which he remembers right from the start as involving a lot of trial-and-error, real-world problem solving rather than learning second-hand. He recalls the routine of going into a piece of software and deliberately making errors, because "there's no better way to learn it than to try it, and make the mistake, and then try to figure out what the mistake was, and then you [realize], 'Oh, that's what you've gotta do when this happens.'" Later on, when he got a job in Hartford working for the Travelers Insurance Company as a programmer, he recalls feeling much more prepared and capable than some of the other men and women, several years his seniors, who were coming out of prestigious four-year colleges but had learned programming through books.

Andy makes no attempt to pretend he taught himself programming, or reading, or writing. Instead, he believes that this learning occurred as a result of the freedom he had to learn according to his own interests and out of that real-world need or desire to know. In the Marines, as one made their way through the trial-and-error of learning programming, when you got to a point where you needed to learn something new in order to move forward, you would "[seek] a mentor here and there,…[ask] a question here and there,…and [go] back to the text" as need be. It is this same sort of learning that Andy now connects with his experiences with his grandfather, as well as that of his daughter now. Speaking of the golden days of teaching at Flanders, when he felt part of a dedicated group who together inquired

continually into education in order to provide children with an optimal learning environment, he says, "really the ultimate goal of ours was to *free* children to learn, to empower them to become lifelong learners." Andy is a confident and charismatic speaker, and he often makes statements to this effect. During our interview, he stated, "Progressive education is about facilitating someone's freedom to *think* and to be *unbound.*" And just recently on the phone, he remarked, "Learning is about an individual becoming a thinker." If one took such statements at face value without learning more about Andy's definition of freedom, it would be easy to make the same mistake that so many make with Dewey (Deblois, 2002) in oversimplifying his ideas and assuming that "freedom" means a total lack of structures that bind. Yet Dousis and Dewey are in fact on the same page, as evidenced by Andy's remark on the importance of structures: "I think a lot of progressive people who consider themselves progressive educators, in their efforts to unbind, actually bind. In their lack of concentration on hidden structure, by not *providing* structure, they *bind* a child to a lot of things that get in a child's way."

Like all of the best learning in his life, this last point was learned as a result of Andy's own experience, early on in his teaching career. Having student taught at the Integrated Day School in nearby Norwich, while attending Connecticut College, Andy had seen what he believed to be true progressive education at work: children were engaged in independent inquiry projects of their own choosing, coming together as a group to work on skills that would benefit everyone, to support each other in their work and problem-solve together, and to just enjoy being a group. Yet when he began working at Flanders School the next fall, Andy realized that that progressive environment, which had seemed so effortless and natural, actually took a lot of work on the part of the teacher. On his first year of teaching, he says,

"I didn't have the skills yet to really manage a progressive classroom in the way that I wanted to; it was too loose." He recalls staying late into the afternoon, cleaning up messes and trying to figure out how to "establish the systems and structures" that were necessary in order to truly give children freedom. Andy identifies three areas that the progressive teacher needs to attend to, putting into place those "hidden structures" that make progressive education possible: the *environment*, the *materials*, and most importantly, the *humans.*

If there's one thing Andy is good at, it's the human aspect of life. He loves people, and they love him back. He is the kind of person who always has a story to tell, sometimes telling the same story on numerous occasions—but as one of Andy's many friends who has been witness to this tendency, I can honestly say that as much as I might joke with him that there's not a story he hasn't told me, it is hard to think of somewhere I'd rather be than to be sitting at Andy's kitchen table, hearing the same story for the third or fourth time. During any time spent with him, it is not unusual for him to receive multiple phone calls from friends and acquaintances who usually have a favor to ask of him or need somebody who they know will listen. They, like I, know that he is truly somebody who cares, and this quality is one that has had a profound effect on his ability to reach children. If the learning environment is not a place where children feel both physically and emotionally safe and taken care of, Andy believes, children are bound to anxiety and fear, and no matter what progressive methods of teaching are occurring, no progressive learning is going to occur. A "safe and friendly" environment, Andy believes, is the result of a number of factors that constitute good progressive teaching. It all begins with really knowing the children in your care—developmentally, individually, and as a group: "I mean, [for] those of us that really know progressive education, it's a lot less about blocks and paint; it's more about humans."

Andy recalled a frustrated student teacher in one of his later years of classroom teaching (he taught at Flanders for a decade): he had developed a pattern of asking student teachers to spend their first several weeks closely observing *him* rather than the students, which was a practice so different from what the student teacher's peers were experiencing in their placements that the young woman who was working with Andy was frustrated at first. "We would have our afternoon meetings and I would [ask] her what she noticed about what I was doing, you know, and she said at first 'It was hard to really tell *what* you were doing, because a lot of times it looked like you weren't *doing* anything!'" Andy would then take the opportunity to explain, "we had set structures up and I was looking to see what—where instruction needed to go next." Andy attributes the eventual success of his student teacher, once she did take over the class, to her understanding of that role of observer that a progressive teacher must be able to take on, in order to take cues from the children as to what skills they need in order to move their learning forward—to free them to continue learning, rather than impede their progress.

Once the teacher understands what skills children need—social or academic—the responsibility then becomes figuring out the best way in which to make that learning happen. "If you're going to dig a hole," Andy explains, "then there are many ways to go about that: you could do it with a spoon, you could do it with your hands, you could do it with a shovel, you could do it with a steam shovel. And so…part of that underlying structure is for the facilitator of that progressive environment to figure out what tools best fit that developmental stage of that learner." This careful scaffolding often takes shape in the form of modeling, a critical practice in Andy's pedagogy. Discussing those early years of teaching, when he struggled with putting into place those critical structures, Andy said,

> It took me a while to figure out what that would look like, and a lot of it had to do with modeling, and learning how to model the different – the *basics* of, you know, how do we use materials, how do we get around the room, how do we talk to one another…so that children *could* work freely on topics of interest.

Some of the best modeling, according to Andy, is the kind that occurs organically, such as that which Andy's grandfather provided to him. Some, though, needs to be more explicit or deliberate, based upon certain skills that the teacher determines the learner needs in order to achieve success and to go on to additional learning. Either way, the position of the learner as being actively involved in observing and then practicing is essential. Andy's reflection on his learning in the Marine Corps serves as an example for him of the power of this sort of modeling. While he recalls a variety of learning modalities that the Marines "tapped into" in their training, such as hands-on practice, trial-and-error learning, reading, role-playing and cooperative learning, modeling stands out as being particularly powerful in his mind. He recalls large gatherings of all three hundred twenty Marines in training, in formation on all four sides of a square, where somebody would model different combat movements while Andy and the rest of his fellow soldiers would watch and then repeat what they saw. After this large-scale modeling, he recalls, they would break up into pairs and again practice the movements that had just been demonstrated. "That's interactive modeling," Andy says.

Few Marines would have recognized the decision-making that must have gone into the structures for learning that made Andy feel so competent; in fact, Andy's own recognition of the elements of progressivism involved would not come until over ten years later when he began working at Flanders and was asked, as part of his training in the

Responsive Classroom approach, to reflect back on his own learning. His process of reflection had begun shortly before this time, when he began his coursework at Connecticut College. Up until this point, he had taken only the militaristic side out of his Marine Corps experience. He knew that he wanted to be a teacher, but envisioned himself teaching high school math in a highly teacher-centered sort of way. It was at Conn, though, that he encountered one of his greatest mentors, Bud Church, who advised him to observe at the Integrated Day School, where Andy saw children "performing all the skills you want kids performing, with *freedom*, with *choice*." At that point, Andy's conception of the highly organized, teacher-centered classroom changed: "I just fell in love with it and I knew that that's what education should look and sound like." With this new perspective of what learning *should* look like, Andy was able, at Flanders, to reflect back on his early learning and to begin to make sense out of his experiences: those that fit his new definition, and those that were contrary to progressive education as he now knew it: "It wasn't until I was *exposed* to progressive education," he says, "that I began to think back on my *own* learning."

In talking with Andy about both his own learning and education in general, the importance he places on reflection comes through loud and clear. As I struggled to grasp where the differences lay between my own understanding of progressive education and some of the practices I was seeing in the outwardly "progressive" schools I was encountering in New York, I asked Andy what he thought: was it just one's particular set of experiences that determined their definition of progressive education? Was I not seeing eye-to-eye with some of these folks because they did not have the same parents and mentors as me along the way? Andy agreed that one's experience in the world—as Dewey would agree—does have a lot to do with it, but, like Dewey and others, he believes that the critical element that is missing in

the practice of a lot of would-be terrific teachers is that of reflection. "They have not examined themselves," he says. This sort of personal knowledge, coupled with the careful observation of one's students, leads to the sort of reflective process that informs great teaching. In order to run a truly progressive classroom, Andy believes, one is engaging in this type of reflection both in long-term and short-term planning and problem solving. Good progressive teachers, he says, "have reflected, they know themselves, and they know that at any second they could do something that could get in someone's way, that—you know, the…doctor's creed, the Hippocratic Oath to do no harm, that should be the teacher's oath, to do no harm, and to make sure that *all* actions of the teacher are [those] that *increase* the likelihood of learning to occur, and never decrease the likelihood."

There is one more ingredient that Andy believes is crucial to the best progressive practice, and that is the role of mentors and colleagues who will act as mirrors and will help in the process of reflection. If a learner knows what they want and is intrinsically motivated to achieve a higher level of learning or understanding, seeking out mentors is a natural part of the process. As a computer programmer in the Marines, this was a commonplace part of Andy's experience. It is what he has encouraged, through the structures he set up for learning, in his own students along the way, as well as in his own daughter. And he recognizes the role that mentors have played in his own life: Bud Church at Conn College, all of the folks he has worked with in his work with Responsive Classroom, and his colleagues at Flanders with whom he delved into the inquiry process in their journey to create a school that empowered children to become lifelong learners who were self-directed enough to then seek out their own mentors in life to further their learning. If it is true that empowered learners seek out mentors, then I certainly sought out and found one in Andy. On my own

journey towards better understanding myself and my practice, he is one that I would not want to be without.

From *Wandering Around an Albuquerque Airport Terminal*

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought,
This is the world I want to live in. The shared world.

Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped
– has seemed apprehensive about any other person.

They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too.
This can still happen anywhere.

Not everything is lost.

—Naomi Shihab Nye

Community

Ruth

The snow is melting on a sunny day in early February. As I step out of my car into the gravel driveway, I try to get a closer look at the color of the shutters: Ruth had told me her house was the fourth on the right, light gray with gray trim. Birds perched high up in skeletal trees, out of my sight, sing a hopeful song to the sun. The groundhog saw his shadow yesterday and went back into hiding, but the birds know that despite the seemingly endless cold of a New England winter, spring is on its way. The glare of the afternoon sun off the snow is so bright, I can't be sure, but somehow I know I'm at the right place: this *looks* like a place where Ruth would live: warm, homey, old but well kept-up. Still, it's reassuring when it's she who comes to the door, immediately offering me a hug. As we chat while I take off my boots, I realize something that I could not have realized while sitting alone in the car for the three hour drive up to northern Massachusetts: after feeling a cold coming on for the past few days, I have now just about lost my voice. Still, I keep talking, the best I can. I have no way of knowing that it would turn into pneumonia in the coming week, and even if I did, there still would not have been anywhere I would rather be than in the home of an educator who I so look up to, somebody whose books I clung to in my first years of teaching and continue to read for inspiration and clarity. This is Ruth Charney.

As founder of the Responsive Classroom approach to teaching and learning, and author of what I and others I know refer to as the "Responsive Classroom Bible," a rich and beautiful book called *Teaching Children to Care* (1991), Ruth's work has affected the teaching of countless individuals and entire schools across the country and around the world.

While I have been lucky to have known her personally, through week-long Responsive Classroom workshops in the summer, she had remained an immortal to me: somebody who has such a masterful understanding of progressive education and how to implement it, how to navigate any tricky situation with an individual child or a class, how to remain true to one's educational philosophy within the structures that we face within our schools, districts, states, and country. It was not until we sat down for a formal chat that I truly came to know Ruth as the mere mortal that she is—though to be sure, a deeply thoughtful, intelligent, experienced mortal at that. It is only an experience such as the conversation that Ruth and I would have, spanning over two hours and covering a wide range of topics relating to progressive education and our own beliefs, that could lead me to a deeper understanding of Dewey's belief that progressive education is—and should be—*messy*, in a sense: that the true progressive educator does not subscribe to some *'ism*, but instead practices deep thinking, reflection, and flexibility, while staying true to her (or his) core beliefs.

While Ruth indeed contends that there is no simple definition of progressive education, she, if anyone, has certainly done enough thinking around the topic to come up with a set of core of beliefs that she holds close, and which she feels most other progressive educators do as well. These beliefs would come through as we tackled some huge topics. Ruth has been party to my personal struggle with finding a setting that is true to my beliefs for years now, beginning when I was struggling to run a Responsive classroom within an altogether traditional school without much of a common philosophy to hold it together, finding my nourishment during Responsive Classroom workshops each summer (and plenty of evenings spent talking with Andy); through to the time I chose to leave the school in Connecticut to move to New York and attend Bank Street; and especially once I arrived at

Bank Street to find my vision of Utopia just about shattered. It was therefore not surprising that recurring throughout our chat were questions relating to my struggle—particularly: Where do the philosophy and practices of Responsive Classroom fit into a working definition of progressive education? Is progressive education right for every child? Should it look the same everywhere it exists? Ruth is the most apt person I can think of with whom to discuss these impossibly broad issues, not only because of her work with Responsive Classroom, but also because of a fact about which I was aware but learned much more during the course of our conversation: Ruth, too, went to Bank Street. In fact, long before that, she went to City & Country School—as a preschooler. She has had plenty of experience with both public and private—or "independent"—schools, including one that she founded and many that she consulted with until her retirement last year.

Just after I arrived at Bank Street and had written her with a subject line reading "Help!", Ruth wrote to me, "A lot of what eventually became Responsive Classroom was in reaction to things I saw and struggled with at Bank Street." Unlike me, Ruth attended Bank Street prior to any classroom experience. She went from Bank Street into public school in nearby Harlem as a first-year teacher, and felt that, although she had been inspired by a number of great thinkers at Bank Street and was beginning to form a philosophy of her own, what she lacked were the management tools to put that philosophy into practice, especially in a community that, unlike those served by the progressive independent schools, like Bank Street and City & Country, did not necessarily groom its children to fit a certain mold, to speak a common language about learning. Ruth's experience was a more extreme case of Andy's struggle to implement his vision of progressive education as a beginning teacher at Flanders. Unlike Andy, Ruth did not have a critical mass of colleagues, administrators, and

families working with her, especially not at first. If she was going to stick with teaching, she needed to find a way to enact her beliefs about teaching and learning without going crazy in the process.

Responsive Classroom, then—which began before it was named, at Greenfield Center School, founded by Ruth and likeminded public school colleagues in 1981—became the key to how Ruth connected her progressive philosophy with the methodology that she found could make progressive education work for all children. While we covered so much ground in terms of the meaning of progressive education, one element that stands out as being central to Ruth's conception of both progressive education in general, and Responsive Classroom in particular, is a respect for children. *If children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect,* goes the line in Dorothy Law Nolte's poem. For Ruth, respect is multi-faceted, but begins with a deep knowledge of the children in our care. One of the guiding principles of Responsive Classroom that I have long since committed to memory is "Knowing the children we teach— individually, culturally, and developmentally—is as important as knowing the content we teach." Ruth calls this respect, this knowledge, "the core science of it, the core art of it." She goes on to say that "taking that knowledge and translating it into curriculum…not a scope and sequence *imposed* on children, [but]…how children *belong* in that scope and sequence" is a practice that any progressive educator would likely hold sacred: "The core values of respecting children and respecting their way of learning…is essential." She speaks of "teachers and kids being on the same side," working together to accomplish great things.

How *do* teachers and children come to be on the same side? Where does this respect come from? For Ruth, an essential vehicle for creating a mutual respect that is advantageous

for learning is the element of language. Like my own parents, who from the start talked to me not like I was a "little baby," but instead like I was a "human" who had the right to know "what was going on," Ruth believes in talking to children with respect. One would be hard-pressed to find an educator—progressive or not—who didn't claim to subscribe to this view as well, but few have put as much thought into what this sort of respectful language actually sounds like. Unlike some progressive settings, Ruth says, where every last decision is talked about endlessly to the point that there is "no action level," only talk, Ruth believes in "respectful language that is also clear," no matter the situation. This is not to say that she does not believe in the occasional negotiation, or in sharing one's reasoning with children; in fact, she maintains that helping children to see the reason for things helps them to be able to "do the thing that is reasonable to do" in terms of their actions, both social and academic. But in a way, too much talk, even if it appears to be *between* the teacher and the children, eventually amounts to a teacher-centered classroom in which children's learning and engagement level suffer.

Ruth talks about language, too, in terms of pinpointing the subtle differences between my notion of progressivism (grounded as it is in Responsive Classroom) and that of others I have encountered – differences that I have been so intent on drawing out. "I think that you *live* in Responsive Classroom," she says, "that you embraced it, that it was a language that you began to talk, and I don't think that the *language* of…Bank Street or City & Country…these *bastions* of progressive education, is exactly the same language." Thus far, I assured her, while the differences are there, they promote more of a curiosity on my part than a moral dilemma. It is not so much that I do not speak the same language as my colleagues; it's more like we were raised in different regions, so speak different dialects.

Such a common language is important not only for teachers, but also for children, for groups, Ruth suggests. While the modeling of respectful, direct language is key, Ruth believes that there is something more to building a broader common language, a "way we do things in our community," and it centers around the proactive creation of rules. If a teacher has led a group through the process of coming up with several key rules (always involving at least one about how we take care of one another, one about how we take care of ourselves, and one about how we take care of our materials or environment) and has also engaged them in an exploration of what those rules really *look* like in action, then children start to live them. And when you have a group that feels that sort of ownership of the rules, then when a challenging situation arises for an individual or for the group, both teacher and child have a common language on which to fall back.

One of the observations I had shared with Ruth as she was making up some fresh ginger tea for us both, before we settled into her cozy living room to begin our conversation, was that I got the sense at City & Country that it was customary to wait until a situation arose in which a rule was needed, and then to sit down with the group and to have a conversation about it. While this process was not altogether foreign to me—I think it's a valuable method in moderation, especially for very specific situations that are new to the group—it did not match up with my previous experience of gathering as a group in the first or second week of school and discussing, proactively, what rules or guidelines we are going to need in order for everyone to be able to feel safe and comfortable, and to do their best learning every day. The resulting document—the "Class Constitution," or "Community Contract," as we named it this year—usually gets beautifully illustrated by the children, signed by all, and displayed prominently in the classroom as a reminder of the guidelines we have created together. This

makes it easy, throughout the day, for both teacher and children to reference the rules as needed. In a challenging situation, then, Ruth explains, "instead, your question isn't 'What should the rule be?' but 'What are the rules?' 'Are you taking care of each other when you're doing this?' 'Are you taking care of yourself?' They have, again, some sort of...common knowledge."

This "common knowledge," Ruth believes, comes about as a result of deliberate choices on the part of the teacher. Unlike some self-described progressive educators who believe that creating a "child-centered" environment requires a lack of interference on the part of the teacher, Ruth believes it is the responsibility of the teacher to engage in thoughtful, purposeful practice, and that this necessitates varying levels of teacher involvement, depending upon the needs of the group or individual children within specific learning contexts—if you read him closely, a very Deweyan ideal.

Stepping in to help children create and maintain rules, as described above, and rituals, such as Morning Meeting, help to create guideposts—structures that Ruth says give children "ways to be" in the classroom, and can then translate into "ways to be in the world." This notion of the translation of children's classroom experience into their sense of how to be an active member of the broader community is another of Ruth's core beliefs. Like Dewey, she believes in creating communities within schools in which the principles of a democratic society are enacted. There are guideposts and ways of behaving because that is the way a democratic community functions—a community in which everybody is able to participate actively. This notion of acting with "social interest," rather than the ability to do whatever one wants, is her definition of freedom within a progressive setting. Ruth gives the example of progressive settings she has seen in which it is a common sight to see a child get up to get

a drink, go to the bathroom, or sharpen a pencil while a classmate is speaking or the teacher is giving directions. Because the child misses the directions, in the latter case, she does not know what to do, and thus ends up disturbing the work of others. Such behaviors, Ruth believes, can end up defining a community when they happen regularly enough. While the act of getting up to take care of a need is not, in itself, negative—and in fact, when taken out of context, these behaviors would seem to *suggest* freedom—they actually end up taking *away* children's freedom because they are detrimental to the community.

When Ruth talks about the community experience within a classroom, she talks about "inviting" children to participate—whether in a group game or song during Morning Meeting, or an academic conversation or group project. This word, "invite," implies choice on the part of the child, which is in fact an important element in Ruth's core philosophy. She believes that central to a progressive curriculum is the "importance of somehow trying to *speak to* the curiosities of children, the things they wonder about, the things that are relevant to them, and use those in the day-to-day life of the classroom." As we sipped our tea and caught up on one another's lives, I shared with Ruth the story of my group's study of the Brooklyn Bridge this past fall, and their collaborative representation of their learning through a large-scale model of the Bridge, made from blocks. Later in our conversation, when we got into children's interests and their voice in the curriculum, I shared with her the recent conversation I had had with my class in which we reflected on the Brooklyn Bridge study, thinking about why it worked so well for us, and out of this, came up with a set of criteria for choosing a new study: it should be something that has an interesting story, something we can learn about through trips, and so forth. Ruth remarked on how different such a process is from the way curriculum is often created, without the participation or even the consideration

of the children for whom it is being developed. Yet, in a move that again triggered connections to Dewey and others, she was also quick to point out that simply offering children choices does not necessarily lead to deep learning or to that experience with democratic group living at the core of her philosophy. As so many thinkers point out, progressive methods without the philosophy to back them do not add up to progressive practice (e.g. Kohn, 2008). Without the structures that teachers put into place, Ruth suggested, choice-giving can easily go awry. Reacting to my anecdote about creating criteria for choosing a study, she commented, in a soft, intrigued voice,

> What an incredible thing to be learning, when you're seven years old! And where does it go next—I mean, it's brilliant." She went on, though, to note the difference between the approach I had taken and what it could have been, when "it's just 'So, what do you want to learn?' And there's *no* criteria behind it.

Helping children to become involved in thoughtful group decision-making is an important practice, Ruth believes, not simply because of the immediate results for that year's curriculum, but also because of the practice it gives children in becoming thoughtful decision-makers throughout their lives. In relation to the work we did in building criteria, Ruth comments, "I think of...those as tools for choosing a major, for choosing a class in high school you might want to take, for choosing a friend, for choosing a partner." In Andy's terms, such practice helps children to "become thinkers."

Returning to the notion of "inviting" children to participate, it is Ruth's belief that it is not enough that the teacher simply "invite" children to participate and then sit back and wait to see whether a child does anything. Instead, she believes in helping children to develop and practice the tools and skills they need in *order* to participate, in order to engage

in the democratic community of school and of life. Teaching children skills sounds like a pretty traditional way of thinking about school, but in the traditional view, those skills are ends in themselves. In Ruth's view, skills are means to any number of ends, and the more skills children master, the better able they are to apply them to learning of their own pursuit. The other difference is in the methodology the teacher uses to teach these skills. Ruth believes that we, as teachers, should apply our knowledge of children, both developmentally and as individuals, as well as our knowledge of content matter and of pedagogy, in order to carefully scaffold children's learning. She gives the example of the scaffolding that might be involved in introducing a new group activity during Morning Meeting, a guessing game called "Three Questions, Three Clues" that involves a number of both academic and social skills:

> When you are first teaching it, you might be going through, 'Who can tell me what a good question is?' 'Who can tell me what…a noun means?' 'Who can tell me what you do when you think you have a great clue and your hand goes up and nobody picks you?' I mean, there's *lots* of things that we're scaffolding there, that once kids have gotten that, we might just be saying, 'Remind me one thing we're going to do today that will make this game fun.'

This scenario is an example of Ruth's masterful sense of language, as well as of the basic definition of scaffolding, whether you ask Vygotsky or a construction worker: it changes. It goes away when it is not needed anymore, freeing up the learner to prove their own competence.

Although she now recognizes scaffolding as being "essential to how we implement our approach," Ruth recalls the beginnings of her understanding of the importance of

scaffolding. She had just begun teaching in Harlem: "I remember having gotten – a number of people gave me *all* these gorgeous books, because my classroom didn't have anything, and I set up this beautiful library in the room. And of course after the first week, it was trashed." Laughing, she describes her realization that the children were hoarding the books, grabbing as many as they could and then sitting on their piles, breaking the bindings. Herein also began Ruth's belief that as a teacher, you do not simply assume that children have certain tools or skills that they will need for their learning. "They didn't *know* how to take one book, how to look at it, how to decide if that was the book they wanted. They didn't believe the books would be there the next day—I mean, it was—it was so many things...I had never *seen* kids fight over books that way." In a situation in which some teachers would have reprimanded the children or punished them by taking the books away, Ruth instead thought about what these particular children in her care needed to learn in order to be able to manage themselves and this new material in a way that would make it possible for everybody to enjoy the books. This was the beginning of a process that would come to be known as Guided Discovery. "I [realized] that I had to *show* them how to open the book, how to look at pictures, how to find whether or not the book had pictures or words or subject matter that interested them, how to put it back beautifully, how to understand that, if that wasn't the book they liked, they could pick a different book." Again, while breaking down something as seemingly simple as choosing a book into so many different levels might seem counter to a sense of freedom, Ruth, like Andy, would argue that only through giving children the tools in order to accomplish such a task competently and with the group's interest in mind, could children truly be free.

Ruth herself recognizes the common belief she shares with Andy in scaffolding as a key ingredient to progressive education. She brought up the book he co-authored on doing research with children, *The Research-Ready Classroom.* In her introduction to that book, Ruth admitted her own puzzlement over how to facilitate independent research projects without either being driven crazy or having to pare down choices and lower expectations. She praised the book for showing teachers "how to construct a process that begins with the children, honors their individual interests, and scaffolds the skills" (Anderson & Dousis, 2006, p. ix). In our conversation, Ruth said "there were just *so* many steps that were added that allowed children to really *do* this, to really do a good job, and to be able to do an independent research project at the age of eight or nine."

In a recent article in the *Responsive Classroom Newsletter,* Andy describes the challenge of helping a child to overcome the feeling of "I can't," a skill that even more than those involved in independent research, some teachers might be likely to assume a child already has. He seems to borrow from Ruth's belief that there are tools that children need for learning and for democratic living that are "very learnable," but that need to be taught, or scaffolded for, when he says,

> I knew I had an opportunity to help one child get one step closer to a narrative of herself as a learner. My task was to teach perseverance. Perseverance, like so many other important life skills, is not simply a character trait that some have and others do not. I believe that like multiplication, classification, and long division, perseverance can be taught, not by stirring speeches or inspirational posters on the wall, but in the ordinary, everyday encounters that classroom life offers in abundance (Dousis & Kriete, 2008, p. 3).

Scaffolding is part of the messy process of progressive education, Ruth believes; it isn't a formula—as Andy would remind us, there are *humans* involved. Thus, it doesn't always work the way we hope it would, as evidenced by one of the many anecdotes Ruth shared with me involving her grandchildren. In this particular instance, her grandson—who has so many playdates, Ruth has become his "playdate pimp"—was going to have a classmate over for an entire day, much longer than the usual afternoon session. Furthermore, as Ruth tells it, "his chosen playdate was a kid who I knew was gonna be a little tricky." Drawing on the progressive teacher inside of her, Ruth went about scaffolding the experience for her grandson and his friend in the hopes of helping them to have a happy and successful day together: the day before, she and her grandson sat down to create a schedule for the day in the form of a story map. Ruth sees schedules as one of the structures that "give kids orientation"—again, that *allow* children to be successful and free. While some children might not have needed so much scaffolding for their day, Ruth used her knowledge of five-year-olds developmentally, as well as these particular five-year-olds individually, in determining that these two would need such a structure in order to stay in control. Self-control to Ruth, like Dewey, is a major goal of education. The humorous end to the story of this carefully scaffolded playdate is that, while Ruth's grandson proudly honored the schedule they had created and did his best to encourage his playmate to do the same, the other child "was not terribly inspired."

Ruth feels sure, though, that when scaffolding *does* work—and it usually does, if applied with the care and the thought necessary—children are able to construct a rich understanding of the world and of the learning process, and they develop tools that they will be able to use in future learning. She associates the cumulative growth in social and

academic skills within a classroom community with an increasingly vibrant, joyful, and productive school experience: "the more they assimilate the skills, the better children listen to each other, the more interesting sharing becomes, the better the sharing component, the more fun they have in Morning Meeting activity—and play, the more you *play*!" A recent incident in my own classroom serves as an example of the power that carefully placed structures can have on the way a group functions and the learning that occurs. We had already begun Morning Meeting when a prospective student arrived at the door, ready to spend the morning with us as his parents interviewed with the school. We had just finished up the sharing portion of the meeting and the group was silent, ready to move on the activity—that day, it was going to be a memory game—when I had to get up and greet the visitor at the door, introducing myself and helping him to find a spot to hang his coat and become acquainted with the room. When I rejoined the circle, it took me a moment to realize what was going on: one of my students had started up a round of Simon Says, and all eyes were on her. As I sat down beside her, she said to the group, in an even tone, "Simon Says be silent; Simon Says look at Molly." The really remarkable thing about this story, besides the leadership skills and confidence displayed by this seven-year-old, is that she is a child for whom school is not the easiest thing. She is a struggling reader and stays late several days a week to work with a tutor. In a classroom that lacked the structures that gave this child the social and emotional tools necessary for stepping in as she did, there might have been a very different picture: either chaos, or a set of children known to be the "best" or "most popular" being the ones to step up and command lead of the class.

In a similar anecdote from my own teaching that I shared with Ruth, I received an email this past fall from the parent of a child who had, before this year, always had a

painfully shy and anxiety-provoking start to each school year. Thanks in part to the routine of Morning Meeting and the modeling and practicing of social skills that took place there, this child had proudly introduced herself and shaken the hands of each and every one of her father's colleagues at a recent dinner party. The email ended, "By your kindness and encouragement and creating an environment which accepts mistakes as central to learning you are giving Irene great courage and a stronger more confident child is emerging. THANK YOU. THANK YOU. THANK YOU." It is moments such as these that keep me firmly planted on the same page as Ruth in terms of a teacher's role in helping children to build community and a sense of competence.

Due to the nature of my own struggle with defining progressive education, and to both of our experiences with both public and private education, as we discussed scaffolding, teachers' roles, and children's learning, we returned several times to the question of what children *need.* Ruth had already made clear her belief that a progressive approach is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and that all progressive practice exists along a continuum, depending on how it is implemented (the methodology, such as the degree of teacher scaffolding, depending upon the needs of the community being served). Yet she also spoke of her belief that *all* children need a certain degree of help in managing life, in acquiring the skills needed to "live in community," skills which she believes children are less likely to have developed, given today's historical context. Demonstrating, again, her flexible definition of progressive education, Ruth holds tight to her core values but recognizes the effect of *context* on that definition. "It's a participatory, democratic community that I think has been...the goal of progressive educators." She pauses, and in the background, the birds

are still singing. Ruth finishes her thought: “And I think it’s harder than ever to create that, but such an important thing to do.”

But when I looked at Anatole's wrinkled brown knuckles and pinkish palms, I pictured hands like those digging diamonds out of the Congo dirt and got to thinking, Gee, does Marilyn Monroe even know where they come from? Just picturing her in her satin gown and a Congolese diamond digger in the same universe gave me the weebie jeebies. So I didn't think about it anymore.

—Barbara Kingsolver, from *The Poisonwood Bible*

Social Justice

Mike

Mike James was, and is, the chair of the Education Department at Connecticut College (familiarly, Conn) in New London, Connecticut, just up the road from where Andy first experienced progressive education in his grandfather's apartment and print shop. My earliest memory of Mike places him in his role as the "gatekeeper" of the elementary education program, participation in which was my aim from the time I matriculated at Conn. After filling out our applications to the program, candidates were each called for individual meetings with Mike in the little ramshackle cottage at the edge of campus in which the Education Department was then housed. I might have met him once or twice before that time, but was not familiar enough with him not to be a little nervous in anticipation of this interview which would ultimately determine my future. Although I'm sure we spent some time discussing my resume and academic qualifications, the question that I remember as being central to the interview was a deceivingly simple one: "Why do you want to teach?" Mike asked me. Whether or not it was during that particular sitting I do not recall, but as I got to know Mike and his approach to elementary education, I understood that the answer he was looking for was something beyond a simple, "Because I like kids." When Mike led the seminar that I attended concurrently with my semester of student teaching at Flanders School, he pushed us to use the practical experience we were receiving, as well as the educational and developmental theory that we had studied throughout college, in order to develop and to be able to articulate our own specific educational philosophy.

As I began to inquire formally into my beliefs, then, it was only natural that I thought to ask for Mike's help, and he was more than willing to participate in my project. As I would

learn, he too was involved in an ongoing struggle to examine his own pedagogy. In a way, the tables were now turned: I was interviewing him, trying to understand *his* educational motivations and understandings. Our conversation, however, was not one-sided; in fact, at one point, Mike questioned *me* in a manner reminiscent of our initial meeting, asking me what *I* believe is the purpose of progressive education. In this collaborative manner, we would not ultimately come to a definitive meaning of progressive education, but luckily that was not the intention; we *would*, however, cover a lot of ground, connecting at points with the conversations I had had with both Andy and Ruth, but also expanding upon—and at times straying from—some of the opinions that they had offered in relation to the ultimate aim of education.

Within the first few minutes of our reunion, after Mike picked me up from the train station and before we arrived at Conn's campus, just a short drive up the hill from downtown New London with its narrow streets and waterfront piers, he had already shared with me a revelation that would shape the conversation: his definition of progressive education had evolved so much over the years, he was unsure whether he *had* a definition anymore. Once we sat down, he began to explain further. Slowly, thoughtfully, in his characteristic Southern Californian drawl, he began, "To be honest with you, I don't think that I—*have* a definition of progressive education any longer that would fit into some kind of—container." Still very much involved in my quest to try to somehow define progressive education, I was stunned and had trouble keeping up at first with Mike, as he launched into a much more quickly paced account of this evolution.

Mike's philosophy originates from the same place that most progressive educators would identify as being central to their approach: the work of John Dewey. "I thought of, for

a long time, of progressive education as that kind of Deweyan ideal where classrooms were constructed around the interests of children," he said. He believed in setting up a developmentally appropriate learning environment that would allow children to pursue those interests and also allow the group to engage in shared inquiry and problem-solving. While he recognized this sort of "progressive" environment as being "*fraught* with difficulties," he knew that "in the end, [it] was ultimately the best way of doing it." Mike strove for that "Deweyan ideal" in his first teaching position in a public elementary school in his native California. The school's philosophy was extremely traditional, using a scripted program – "just the *antithetical* model" to his own pedagogical beliefs. After several years of teaching in regular classroom settings, however, he had made the change to special education, and it was with this population of students that Mike felt he got closest to his initial model of progressive education. In the special ed classroom, which was ironically located in what Mike called a "bungalow on the corner of the campus," he felt better able to try out the methods that he felt would give children freedom and help them to grow both socially and cognitively. He saw that, in fact, that "ideal" might just be able to work.

At the same time as he began to develop his methodology, however, Mike was also working towards his PhD at nearby Claremont Graduate School. As he refined his philosophy and practice, his understanding of that idealized notion of progressive education began to change: a number of his mentors, as well as the political context of the 1960s, had gotten him thinking about equality and wondering about education's role in making change. What he had begun to feel sure about—that image of the perfect Dewey-inspired "progressive" classroom—was now replaced with more and more questions. These questions, Mike says, only intensified once he moved to the East Coast and began his work at

Connecticut College. Within Conn's liberal arts environment, he was focused on theory, rather than methods, and felt more in touch with other disciplines and with other faculty members. Some of the conversations he had with faculty members of color served to supplement his already growing unease with a pedagogy he once believed in. He recalls his struggle during this part of his professional life with Lisa Delpit's famous article, *Teaching Other People's Children*: "At first it was riveting because I disagreed with her," he says; "without even *realizing* it I was playing that kind of role of a white educator who was refusing to listen," Mike now explains. Delpit's paradigm was, he says, "in many ways, in direct conflict with the paradigm that I was increasingly becoming comfortable with, as one that could be operationalized, because I hadn't paid attention to it across race and class. So I started—these conflicts started to kind of just evolve for me." As an avid historian, Mike really began to look to the past to start to construct his new understanding of progressive education. He realized that most successful progressive settings had historically been located within communities of privilege, serving middle and upper middle class whites. "That just didn't sit well with me," he says, "because I was curious as to *why*."

Having looked into this phenomenon, Mike cites as one key factor the differences in some parents' expectations for schools. While he is aware of the generalization involved, he gives an example of the viewpoint of a working class parent of color who was opposed to a school set in a Boston tenement, whose purpose was to bring children from various communities together within a progressive setting. Paraphrasing her, Mike said, "I don't really care to have you teach my children how to love each other and how to be loving and take care of one another. I want you to teach my kid how to read and write…[so that] *my* child can have access to the things that you have." The white parents involved in the project,

Mike says, responded in a way not dissimilar from his own initial reaction to Delpit's article: "By denying that voice. Because that voice is such a contradictory statement, it's so oppositional to what they were advancing as a particular kind of idea." It was within this same time frame that Chalmers (1995) was finding similar silencing going on at Bank Street School for Children among white families, in reaction to her attempts at giving a voice to the families of color. An important point that Mike would make at several points in our conversation, however, is that race is not the only factor in parents' expectations for schools; in fact, class plays just as big, if not a bigger role in determining the viability of progressive education within certain communities. "The idea of putting kids together and letting them have free range and tinker with ideas" versus "Teach my kids how to read and write," Mike says, "is really a *class*-driven argument as much as a race-driven argument."

While most of the successful models of progressive education have been located within communities of privilege, Mike saw with his own eyes one school that seemed to defy this pattern. He describes his first visit to Central Park East elementary school in East Harlem, which, as part of the small schools movement, was housed within the same building as a very traditional school. As Mike and the group of students and colleagues he had brought with him navigated the large building in search of Central Park East, they suddenly turned a corner and, likening the experience to the film *The Wizard of Oz*, "when Dorothy steps out of the house from black and white to color," he describes what he saw as being true progressive education—steeped in those Deweyan ideals—at work: children and adults were sprawled all over the floor, engaged in rich activity and inquiry. What was going on here? Had he been wrong in wondering whether progressive education "worked" within working class communities of color? Central Park East seemed to be the model that could set his

mind at east; yet, as he inquired further, seeking to understand this idyllic setting, he noted two important factors that made Central Park East work as an individual school, but not as a model that could be replicated: the first factor involves the "*multiple* levels of buy-in" from families, teachers, and administrators who actively supported and advocated for the progressive approach. Bensman (1994) describes the strong support for the school and also recognizes that this sort of support cannot be manufactured. The second question that lodged in Mike's mind as he realized that Central Park East as a model might, in fact, be too good to be true was whether the school community truly reflected the community in which it was geographically located. Although it was a public school, he wondered if there was not some sort of filtering occurring in the admissions process—either purposefully or at a more subtle level—that led to the school community being so unified in its vision of the best education for its children.

Mike would learn the hard way the fact that, indeed, "certain families will put their kids in certain kinds of schools," when he became involved with a project in New London to establish a charter middle school, with the success of Central Park East fresh in his mind. As one of the parent-founders of the Interdistrict School for Arts and Communication, or ISAAC, and the only educator involved in the initial process, he realized that his understanding of progressive education was not necessarily the same as that of others, even that of the teachers who would become involved. When he suggested a fluid mixing of ages in all of the classrooms, Mike says, "it was as if I had just reported some idea from the other side of Mars" – and these were other self-identified progressive educators he was working with. From methodology to philosophy, finding common ground was "*very* difficult—very, very, very difficult." It was that "experience as a teacher educator, and as a parent, and as an

historian of education," Mike says, "that really began to cement my concern about progressive education as a model that is applicable to all communities." Beyond the initial difficulties, Mike noticed that many of the challenges to the curriculum would come from middle class parents, some of whom, it seemed to him, were using the school "to further advantage their already advantaged kids." Rather then being involved with the school because of a shared belief in the power of this sort of educational setting to truly make change in the community, these families saw it as something that would help their child to look unique on a college application. Mike brought up his concerns at the board level, asking others to address the questions on his mind: "Is this school becoming a place that further advantages the already advantaged—at potentially the expense of the kids that are least advantaged? Is this school operating in a way that really challenges inequality at a structural level?" The board members, a majority of them white, did not choose to engage in this line of inquiry. What Mike was getting at was the notion that in order for a school to be truly progressive, it cannot just be *politically* progressive; it must be *educationally* progressive as well (Kohn, 2008); in other words, you need both the philosophy and the methodology.

That methodology that Mike believes in is one in which the teacher plays a key role. Like both Ruth and Andy, his methodology is derived from the classic progressive ideals, from a place that is not far off from his original beliefs about the ideal learning environment: "To me, the kind of Deweyan ideal progressive setting is one in which whomever walks through the door, possessing whatever one possesses as they walk through the door, is welcomed and put into an environment—or immediately, not *put* into, *steps* into an environment—that recognizes that success comes from interests, and those interests are then…connected in such a way that it leads to purpose." Like Dewey himself, Mike believes

that it is the role of the teacher to bring that sense of purpose to the classroom; that while the learning environment is set up by the teacher to be child-*centered*, it is not child-*directed.* Nor is it teacher-directed, either, but the adult must play a more directive role if the classroom is going to move from being a place that educates individuals to being a model of democratic life in which issues of inequality are addressed and inquired into in ways that are carefully facilitated by the teacher. In discussing the social justice classroom, Mike spoke of the work he does each semester with student teachers as he takes on that somewhat directive role of guiding them towards deeper understanding. One of the major assignments during the student teaching placement is to create an interdisciplinary antiracist unit of study. Mike believes that teachers need to take a proactive role in planning for and bringing up issues that cause the group to struggle with and construct new understandings of issues of equality, and in order to do so, teachers must examine the social context of children—what they carry with them—as well as their own views and privileges. In a manner that mirrors the literature on social justice education, Mike has found that the teachers themselves tend to learn as much, if not more than, the students in this undertaking (e.g. Ayers, 2007; Sleeter, 2003). This is true in part because of the amount of work that goes into planning for and guiding children through such an exploration, but mainly because of the changes that teachers go through once they move from a "colorblind" view to having a structural view of racism, which in turn provokes teaching with social justice at the core of one's philosophy—a much more complicated undertaking, but an important one, in Mike's opinion.

It should be clarified that most of the student teachers that Mike works with are white and come from middle class or upper middle class backgrounds, as is true for the majority of the student body at Conn. It is crucial to him, then, to create opportunities for them to

engage with and struggle with issues of inequity such as those that inevitably come up as students plan their antiracist units. One student who formerly held a "colorblind" approach was shocked to learn through her study that her six-year-old students, from mixed backgrounds, already had developed a whole series of understandings related to race, including the notion that "Immigrants have dark skin; therefore immigrants are bad." Mike knows that if he does not take this directed approach, it is likely that many of the students would disengage from issues of race—because as white folks, they *can*; the community of color, on the other hand, does not have that option, and with *all* children developing opinions and understandings about these issues, such as the notion above, it is up to teachers to give space to, and build the curriculum around, helping children to think critically about inequality.

Mike recognizes that such an approach veers away from that completely open learning environment in which the children's interests are the sole guide to the curriculum and the teacher is merely an observer and a guide on the sidelines. He has struggled to decipher exactly what this means in terms of a definition of progressive education: "Dewey didn't pay much attention to social class; Dewey didn't pay much attention to race, if any, at all, but we can—so. So now does that traditional set of methods that go along with progressivism, does that then now work, in an environment that's focused on equity and equality? That's the question that I have yet to be able to resolve." It is due to this recognition of the differences between the classic progressive approach and that for which Mike and his colleagues advocate that caused the Education Department to move away from a progressive educational philosophy and towards what they now call a *critical* approach. In doing so, the department itself stands as a model of critical, or social justice, education: it

expects its students to do more than simply "explore" all of the different models of education across the continuum; with the help of the professors, students inquire deeply into themselves, into children's development, and into the world, on their way towards becoming teachers who will help their students to do the same.

In this critical approach to teacher education, Mike explains, theory trumps methodology. Students are not simply learning how to set up a classroom that uses progressive methods; they are learning to construct a progressive—or critical—philosophy that will then inform their methodology. This process is reminiscent of the transformation that Mike himself went through as he examined his initial philosophy. Teachers need to be clear, Mike says, on *why* they're doing *what* they're doing. He believes that historically, it is along these lines that progressive education has, in his words, "screwed it up": by focusing too heavily on processes and not enough on content – "And I don't mean content from a…conservative, traditional, knowledge-is-absolute [viewpoint]; so it's using, as *Dewey said!:* using the social conditions as your curriculum. *That's* what we ought to be doing. And then, through all those wonderful child-centered notions…then we're back to where I think schools ought to be."

Interestingly, Mike's example of a progressive practice that, without the proper reasoning or philosophy behind it, would not accomplish any of the aims of progressive education, comes from the Integrated Day Charter School, the very place where Andy first saw progressive education at work: at this school, as in a number of progressive schools, the children lead the parent conferences. It is Mike's belief that simply employing such a practice does not make a school progressive, nor does it serve as an educational experience for any of those involved, unless there has been careful planning and scaffolding of that

event. The same is true, he says, for curricular content. While he does not believe in "indoctrinating" children in democracy, nor, he says, did George Counts exactly, although that was certainly the impression that the public got at a time in our nation's political history when such a practice was particularly frightening to many. That social justice content *does* need to be there, though, deliberately planned for by thoughtful, reflective teachers. "So, what I meant earlier when I said that 'We've screwed it up,'" Mike explains, "is that too often, progressivism has been thought of as merely a set of kind of methodological structures, processes by which kids go into classrooms and do certain things. The *content* has been absent." As we discussed the role that teachers play in progressive, or critical, education, my current setting came up. I shared with Mike my observation that, despite City & Country's close historical ties to that interpretation of the "Deweyan ideal," which would seem to make it a place where critical practices could not necessarily exist, part of what has made me happy there has been the degree of reflection in which I have noticed my colleagues engaging. They honestly seem to want to continually inquire into each decision made, and to be willing to adopt new practices or pieces of curriculum if the change seems to make sense in terms of the benefits to the children in their care. Especially after hearing from both Andy and Ruth what value they place on reflection, I had been feeling especially positive about where my practice and philosophy fit in at my new school. What Mike said next, however, caused me to take pause and think in a new way about reflective practices: he acknowledged that while reflection has been part of most people's definition of progressive education throughout history, it does not mean that folks are reflecting about the same things: there is a big difference, he says, between reflecting about individual learning and reflecting about issues of equity. "That's been the history of progressive education," he says: "it's that that reflection

has been about self-actualizing individuals…Not using school as a place to rethink this idea of democracy." Mike encourages a metacognitive process in which teachers examine their reflective practice, asking, " 'What am I really reflecting about here? What am I thinking about? What's my purpose here?'" If you're doing this, he says, "Then you're OK. If you *stop* asking questions, if you *stop* reflecting about content and start reflecting merely about individual processes, then I think we start losing it." What he seemed to be getting at was that teachers who cling solely to "developmentally appropriate practice" and the cognitive, psychological and developmental theory that accompanies it, they are simply advancing the status quo rather than creating an environment in which that status quo is questioned by both teachers and students. While it had not been a new revelation to me to consider the debate between education of the individual versus education of the individual as part of a democratic group, it *was* an eye-opening moment when I realized where reflection fit into the picture. What an interesting new way to examine my own and my colleagues' practices, I thought. It was then that Mike added, "And those are the words *my* mentor gave me—40 years ago." Mike added his own words of wisdom on top of this:

> I think it's when we've abandoned this idea of education to confront inequality, when we've *abandoned* that and we see schools as ways in which we can further advantage our already advantaged offspring, then I think we fall prey to our own kind of ideological understanding of what schools are supposed to be, and we come back into contradictions, and then we just screw it up. And we have a history of screwin' it up. Big time.

While he recognizes the advances made since Dewey's time in considering race, class, and other issues of social justice, Mike does not believe that his vision of critical education is new or revolutionary: "I truly believe that, historically, progressive education

has *left* what its original kind of thinking was, which was...using schools as a place in which society is reinvented to become more democratic." Perhaps we can return to this democratic ideal by including it in our own ever-evolving definitions of progressive education.

Comforts, Questions and Contradictions

Final Thoughts

"It has been a politically useful code word giving loosely affiliated groups a common identity. But the term has masked complex and contradictory underlying assumptions about children and their learning and development that need to be brought to the fore if the education of young children is to be adequately addressed."

While the above quote was originally intended by its authors (Chung & Walsh, 2000, p. 229) to refer to the term *child-centered*, it should be clear at this point that it could just as easily be applied to that "politically useful" phrase, *progressive education.* The wide and varied use of these two words together throughout the last century has contributed to the now hazy definition that many—especially progressive education's opponents—point to as its fatal flaw (Lazere, 2006). While I am now more sure than ever that the definition is indeed a messy one, at the same time I feel the need to advocate for a certain tightening up of some of our definitions. The term *child-centered* itself is one of these; as Chung and Walsh (2000) point out, it has taken on so many different meanings that it cannot be used without an accompanying inquiry into the user's intentions. In this case, I would suggest that we consider adopting a term such as *child-directed* to connote the type of learning environment in which the child's interests and desires truly run the show, as a means of establishing a distinction between such a concept and the suddenly more specific phrase *child-centered,* which would describe an environment in which the child's individual and developmental characteristics are central but not alone among the teacher's considerations—which would also include curriculum and the wider picture of the democratic group, or social justice.

At the same time as I urge fellow educators to become more specific in their language, I am aware that it is impossible to come to such clarity in one's definitions without

engaging in the type of reflective practice that this study has afforded me and which Dewey himself would support (1938/1997). Kohn perhaps puts it best when he says, "The more we're influenced by the insights of progressive education, the more we're forced to rethink what it means to be a good teacher. That process will unavoidably ruffle some feathers, including our own" (2008, p. 32). Well, my feathers have been ruffled, and I feel more confident than ever that I understand what good progressive teaching is, although I would not quite say that my journey has left me without questions— but I suppose that's the point of this sort of reflective process. One lingering question for me relates to this contradiction between the complexity of progressive education and the need for progressive educators to be able to, as a number of authors urge, speak about what we believe with a unified voice and firm conviction (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 1998; Lazere, 2006). As with the contradictory nature of progressive education itself, I find it hard not to contradict myself now, as I jump back and forth between advocating for more specific language and suggesting that the very nature of progressive education prevents this from being possible.

For now, the best I can do is to continue my journey by pursuing this and other questions that will inevitably arise for me with each new experience-reflected-upon. My newfound embrace of progressive education as complex and essentially indefinable will allow me to do so without losing my grasp on those aspects of my practice and philosophy that I hold close. This will be critical especially as I apply this understanding to the way that I observe and interpret the work of my colleagues. When one is struggling to define and enact one's own educational belief set, it is tempting to look down upon any differences in the practices or beliefs held by others, however slight, as making that person's pedagogy somehow inferior to one's own. While decades separate us, Harriet Cuffaro could almost

have been a colleague of mine, and indeed my interaction with her—through the pages of her book, though I have met her in the halls of City & Country on several occasions—has been greatly influenced by my expanded notion of progressive education. Having read her description of children building community through block building (1995), especially when taken with Pratt's even more radical eschewal of teacher-imposed "community building" structures such as circling up (1948/1970)—a practice that I indeed hold near and dear— I might never have given her another thought. *Well, how are you* ever *going to have a social justice classroom when you're just sitting back and watching the children as they pursue their own ideas without you?* I might have asked. Now, however, as should be apparent from the numerous occasions on which I have cited the work of Cuffaro above, I can appreciate the complexity and the honesty with which she approaches her own practice in relation to her understanding of the work of Dewey. I see her not as an educator lacking a clear approach, but rather as an experienced educator who knows what I am just now beginning to understand in earnest: that progressive education is complex, and that the goal is not to somehow overcome that complexity but instead to continually work to understand it.

This realization is huge for me, because it will affect not only my educational philosophy, my practice, and my own understanding of my pedagogy, but also where I choose to work. I left my first school because of the lack of a common philosophy among my colleagues. I now find myself in a setting in which I seem to fit in pretty well, both in terms of the history of the school and among my colleagues today. But I cannot help but wonder, is it all right to *mostly* agree with the philosophy but to maintain one's doubts or questions? So far, the answer is yes. Only time and my continued meaning-making journey will tell me where I truly belong.

* * * *

I was recently asked by my advisor at Bank Street to come speak to her current group of advisees about Responsive Classroom in general, and Charney's *Teaching Children to Care* (1991), a book that she had required all of her students to purchase and read this year. Before she entered the room, I was conversing informally with several of the students and learned pretty quickly that nobody had, in fact, read more than a few pages of the book. It seemed as though they saw the assignment as just another reading amongst the many they were balancing for their coursework at Bank Street, in addition to trying to stay afloat in their first teaching assignments. They all did, however, seem extremely receptive to progressive education as a whole, and through their nods and smiles as I shared anecdotes and questions of my own, I got the feeling that this was a group of thoughtful, dedicated teachers who each possessed at least the beginnings of a philosophy of education.

What they were clearly struggling with, I learned from the multitude of questions they asked, were not the *whys* but the *hows*—as it should be, versus memorizing methods and "tricks" and learning how to put on an entertaining show without anything to back up for yourself or for others *why*. Their questions centered on how to set up the structures I spoke of as being key to establishing community and helping one's students towards freedom: routines like Morning Meeting, proactive discipline such as creating rules, how to handle children who "break" those rules ("Should I have a list of consequences posted beside the rules?"), and so forth. I think my answers assured them that it was perfectly normal to have so many questions, but also scared the hell out of them as I kept speaking of the complexity of it all (Dewey's influence, of course). In the end, I left them with an invitation to visit my classroom anytime, and with a thought that I would not have necessarily felt as comfortable

with even a few months ago: "Whether you choose Responsive Classroom or another approach that you feel helps you to achieve a classroom in which your students are freed to learn in a progressive way, make sure you're doing it because of what you believe and not because of what you heard me say works for me." With future aspirations to become a presenter for Responsive Classroom and clearly somebody who believes in the specific structures of this approach, I am proud of myself for the distance I was able to achieve from my 'ism, as it were, even for this one moment.

Initially, I wasn't sure that it was in my best interest to take time out from my writing to go down to Bank Street for this gathering. Yet, as I hope is obvious from my description above, I found myself able to explain more clearly than ever what I believe and why, what it looks like in practice, and—this is relatively new—really able to relate my pedagogy to history and theory. As I sat on the subway on the way back home, I was reminded of another time in my teaching career that I was asked to give a group of beginning teachers an overview of Responsive Classroom as they thought about classroom management. I was, myself, still a beginning teacher, in my second or third year, but apparently had made a big enough impression on the school district's administrators that they asked me to provide a short presentation during the district's new teacher orientation sessions in August. While I remember being well-prepared with engaging information, suggestions, and handouts, I distinctly remember finishing up my presentation expecting hands to be waving in the air—but not a single question.

Reflecting on that experience today, I realize that I was speaking from such a different place at that time. It is not as though I did not believe in my philosophy then, or wasn't able to explain or defend certain practices—in fact, it is just the opposite. I believed

too much in my own beliefs and felt *too* strongly about defending them (as I had had to do, on occasion, working within a traditional elementary school as I was). In fact, I was *clinging* to Responsive Classroom, to progressive education as I knew it; I was not able to take a step back and define my pedagogy within an historical or objective context. With Dewey's work so fresh in my mind as a result of this study, I cannot help but see my own growth in between that first experience of sharing my teaching with others and today in terms of the ever-growing complexity necessary if one is to truly understand something (Dewey, 1938/1997). I have stepped back and examined the wider picture of progressive education, I have made connections, I have questioned and inquired into my own pedagogy, and in the process have constructed a deeper, more multi-faceted understanding of both progressive education in general and of my own practice in particular.

A vital point to make is that I have not done so alone, and indeed I am sure it would not have been possible to navigate this process in isolation. As so many of the educators and theorists I have mentioned during the course of this study have reminded us (e.g. Dewey, 1938/1997; Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky in Berk & Winsler, 1995), true learning does not occur in isolation but within and through a social context. I am forever grateful to Ruth Charney, to Andy Dousis, and to Mike James, not only for their help on this project but for being the mentors that I needed, and continue to need, far after their official "duty" was done. I am thankful to my parents, who were my first models of progressive education, and to my sister Margo, who continues to remind me through her actions and attitudes towards school, towards learning, and towards the world that each student is truly an individual, and should be regarded as such. And finally, a world of thanks to Bernadette Anand, who, if she hadn't

been so kind to have accepted my invitation to be my mentor for this project, could just as easily have been one of the educators worthy of a portrait herself.

As a result of this exploration, I will be ever more aware of the fact that I bring my own meaning to terms such as "developmentally appropriate practice," "child-centeredness," and certainly "progressive education"—and, moreover, that it's not that others are wrong or just need to be exposed to a certain idea or experience in order to see things my way; there is simply no way to give each educator the same definition for progressive education because, to borrow one last idea from Dewey, each educator's *experience* is different (1938/1997). We just need to be aware of this and continue to do our best—to free and not bind, to help children make meaning, and to make our own meaning through continually reflecting on our practice and on our pedagogy within the cycle of teaching and learning.

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January 19, 2008

Dear Andy,

As you know, I am studying Childhood Education at Bank Street College of Education. I am in the process of completing my Integrative Master's Project (a.k.a. thesis), the final requirement for my Master's degree. For my project, I am writing an independent study around the theme of ***What does 'progressive education' really mean?***

In this study, I will write about my own personal path toward my current understanding of progressive education. I have asked *you* to participate because you have played a role in shaping my beliefs and practice.

My hope is that your participation in my project will be enjoyable for us both, and helpful to me in reflecting on the roots of my educational philosophy. My plan is for us to find time to get together and have an informal conversation about progressive education sometime between November 2007 and February 2008.

If this sounds like something you think you would like to do, please look over the checklist below, fill it out as you see fit, and return it to me. The extra copy is for you to keep.

You should know that the study that results from this project will be housed in the Bank Street College Library. It will have a catalogue number and will be available to students and faculty to use within the library or to borrow.

Thanks so much for your consideration.

Take care,

Molly Lippman

I have been informed about Molly Lippman's study and I agree to participate.

- Because of the personal nature of my study, I will be writing in the narrative form about my experiences and the people and places that I have encountered in my education. I would like to offer you the option of all identifying details, including your name, being changed to protect your anonymity. Either way, you will have the ability to read drafts of my study and to request any changes that you feel would more accurately represent your opinions or experiences.

  Please check one:
  -I give permission to use my real identity (name, professional affiliations, etc.). ✓
  or **-Please use a pseudonym and change any personally identifying details.** _______

- Finally, I ask that you consider whether you are comfortable with me recording the audio of our conversation so that I will be able to listen, transcribe, and take notes on it later.

  -I consent to our conversation to be recorded for Molly's personal use. Yes ✓ **No** ___

Name ____________ **Signature** Andrew M. Dovsis Jr.

February 3, 2008

Dear Ruth,

As you know, I am studying Childhood Education at Bank Street College of Education. I am in the process of completing my Integrative Master's Project (a.k.a. thesis), the final requirement for my Master's degree. For my project, I am writing an independent study around the theme of ***What does 'progressive education' really mean?***

In this study, I will write about my own personal path toward my current understanding of progressive education. I have asked *you* to participate because you have played a role in shaping my beliefs and practice.

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Please check one:

-I give permission to use my real identity (name, professional affiliations, etc.). ✓

or **-Please use a pseudonym and change any personally identifying details.** _______

- Finally, I ask that you consider whether you are comfortable with me recording the audio of our conversation so that I will be able to listen, transcribe, and take notes on it later.

-I consent to our conversation to be recorded for Molly's personal use. Yes ✓ **No** ___

Name Ruth Charney **Signature** Ruth Charney

February 1, 2008

Dear Mike,

As you know, I am studying Childhood Education at Bank Street College of Education. I am in the process of completing my Integrative Master's Project (a.k.a. thesis), the final requirement for my Master's degree. For my project, I am writing an independent study around the theme of ***What does 'progressive education' really mean?***

In this study, I will write about my own personal path toward my current understanding of progressive education. I have asked *you* to participate because you have played a role in shaping my beliefs and practice.

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<u>Please check one:</u>

-I give permission to use my real identity (name, professional affiliations, etc.). ✓

or **-Please use a pseudonym and change any personally identifying details.** _______

- Finally, I ask that you consider whether you are comfortable with me recording the audio of our conversation so that I will be able to listen, transcribe, and take notes on it later.

-I consent to our conversation to be recorded for Molly's personal use. Yes ✓ **No** ___

Name [signature] **Signature** MICHAEL JAMES