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Viewpoint

The resurgence of progressive education

The Progressive Education Association was officially disbanded in 1955 and except for the briefest mention in newspapers of record there was little evidence that anyone cared. Yet now, twenty-five years later, the ideals and philosophy that inspired more than three generations of American educators are experiencing something of a resurgence.

The reasons are obvious enough. After more than a century of increased specialization and fragmentation in American life, and intellectual life in particular, the loss of community and a meaningful sense of direction both for individuals and society as a whole has become painfully clear. The strength of progressive education was always that it could mediate the extremes of thoughtless and uncritical conformity to group standards, on the one hand; and on the other, the insane conviction of radical individualism that truth and reality are purely personal and subjective.

This is not to say that anyone is seriously suggesting that progressive education was perfect, or that it should be resurrected and applied intact to our present situation. Rather, the resurgence is one of vision, it represents a challenge to complete the task of earlier progressives and to critique and improve upon their achievements. Simply put, the task is to define and promote the idea of social democracy. The seminal contributions of earlier progressives to the design and institution of a system of public education that could help attain this goal have been well documented. But we can no more afford to canonize this work than to reject it categorically as wrongheaded or obsolete.

Earlier progressives had a tremendous faith in reform. They believed that if people could only get together and act collectively with intelligence to solve the specific social, political and moral problems of their age, there would be no need to choose between blind loyalty to tradition and the equally irrational alternative of wholesale no-holds-barred revolution. A stronger endorsement of public education would be hard to imagine. Not only did the progressives demonstrate a commitment to intelligence within the educational process, but to the belief that education must be conducted democratically, i.e., within a public setting where different types of people can meet in meaningful dialogue and critically discuss their interests and perceptions.

Unfortunately the voluntary and enlightened associations of social democracy envisioned by progressives were never fully realized. What developed instead was a world of factions and self-serving elites, a corporate and bureaucratic nightmare over which individuals, intelligent or otherwise, exercise little or no control. The 20th century has, indeed, been the age of the manager. To a significant degree we have lost both the will and the right to determine what is normal or desirable.

Are the progressives to be blamed for this? Was their insistence on competence as a precondition for responsible decision-making a casual factor which led to the emergence of the expert who now rules our lives so ruthlessly? I think not. It is not social democracy and public education which have produced our present problems, as some would have us believe. Quite the contrary. Here is where the ideals and philosophy of progressive education can once again be of great value. Social democracy must be created anew by each generation. The public schools with their emphasis on intelligence and inquiry are precisely the arena within which this process is best germinated. That recent generations have failed to maintain the integrity of our schools is beyond debate. But the fact remains that democratic processes are learned. They are not instinctive and, therefore, do not flower automatically. Either they are acquired through shared struggle and hard work, or they do not exist at all. Without a viable system of public education where the children of bankers and the children of plumbers learn to respect and communicate with each other, to work with each other for common ends that are mutually agreed upon and intelligently selected, a democratic society is impossible. John Dewey's faith should be our faith. Society can formulate its own purposes, organize its own resources and shape its own destiny only through effective education. The public schools remain our best bet.

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