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The Struggle to Continue (Review)

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REVIEW: PATRICK SHANNON'S THE STRUGGLE TO CONTINUE: PROGRESSIVE READING INSTRUCTION IN THE UNITED STATES

by

Brenda Engel

A teacher, recently back from an educational tour of New Zealand, described to me, with wonder in her voice, schools she had visited in New Zealand: the care and attention given to children's art, the independence and self-discipline shown by the children, the authentic atmosphere of inquiry, the sense of community among both adults and children. I listened with interest although with a strong sense of *deja vu*, a simultaneous exhilaration (it's back again!) and exasperation (I've been here before!). The qualities so widely admired in the New Zealand schools in 1990 are virtually one-for-one the same as those extolled by travelers to England (I, among them) over twenty years earlier.

That was the era of Open Education, a reform movement based on the British Integrated Day, which supposedly failed. I say "supposedly" because, in fact, Open Education, although not usually identified as such, continues alive and well today in many private and alternative public schools. Its continuing influence is visible in such classroom characteristics as flexible scheduling, informal arrangements of furniture (e.g. tables or grouped desks), use of concrete materials, recognition of the value of experience, and the structuring of the classroom as a democratic community. We lose sight of the genesis of the ideas behind these changes. Joseph Featherstone, one of the first proponents of the Integrated Day, once referred to the "United States of Amnesia" and it's true, perhaps particularly in education, that we seem to have a short memory for our own history.

Patrick Shannon's The Struggle to Continue serves a useful purpose for the everyday, i.e. non-scholarly, reader in remedying that shortness of memory as it concerns progressive education. The Struggle to Continue brings up to date, in briefer and more summary form, Lawrence A. Cremin's The Transformation of the School, a book which serves as one of Shannon's basic references. Like the word "liberal" in national politics, the word "progressive" in education has suffered from a bad reputation -- essentially political in genesis -- which the progressive movement itself has done little to deserve. Through imputation more than evidence, progressivism is vaguely associated in the public mind with romanticism, lack of rigor, elitism, even un-Americanism.

Shannon comes out strongly and unabashedly for the practical, political and moral value of progressivism in education. He sets out to validate progressive education, to establish its pedigree, and connect the past with the present. He reminds us of progressivism's long, honorable history of discovery, courageous experiment, commitment and social struggle in the United States and points to its earlier roots in Europe.

The Struggle to Continue begins with a contemporary description from 1883, of a literacy lesson in a Quincy, Massachusetts, elementary school at the time of the

revolutionary superintendency of Colonel Francis Parker. Unlike almost everywhere else in the country at that time (or, for that matter, now), literacy was taught in a meaningful context, as an extension of children's natural language. In explaining why an educator like Parker was able to take an independent, against-the-stream position, Shannon points out that there was little consensus on the aims or methods of literacy education in American schools in the late nineteenth century. Four groups, whom Shannon links to their contemporary counterparts, were "vying for control": "the humanists (personified [sic], for example by William Torrey Harris then and championed by Diane Ravitch now); the child-centered proponents (e.g., G. Stanley Hall then and David Elkind today); the scientific managers, (e.g., John Franklin Bobbitt then and Madeline Hunter now); and the social reconstructionists (e.g., Lester Frank Ward then and Henry Giroux today)."

After going back to describe briefly some of the European roots of American progressive education -- the work of Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel -- Shannon returns to Colonel Parker's Quincy Method as an illustration of child-centered philosophy. Parker's beliefs have a strikingly contemporary ring, many of the same issues still (again?) prominent in discussions about education: freedom and self-discipline as social goals, the concept of natural learning, the balance between student and teacher initiative, and education as preparation for democratic political participation.

Public concerns were also strikingly contemporary: "Working-class parents worried about the expense of the superintendent's salary, the lack of standards, and the lack of discipline. Moreover, they worried that their children were being denied the information they needed to improve their social and economic position, the information that well-to-do children already knew."

The middle sections of Patrick Shannon's book contain an account of Joseph Mayer Rice's sharp critique of public education in the last decade of the nineteenth century, then give a fairly detailed description of John Dewey's contributions to both theory and practice -- his vision of schools as democratic institutions which had widespread, although often controversial, influence.

After World War I, progressive educators divided along lines anticipated by Dewey himself: proponents of child-centered education like William Kilpatrick of Teachers College, Columbia, who invented the "Project Method" and influenced schools like Caroline Pratt's Play School (later City and Country and the Bank Street School), Margaret Naumburg's Walden School (attended briefly by this reviewer), and the Lincoln School, among others; and advocates of community-centered or Social Reconstructionist educators like Harold Rugg who, arguing for political relevance, influenced schools like The Little Red Schoolhouse and, through their writings, the social studies curriculum. Shannon describes both the individuals and institutions which reflected each of these dominant schools of thought.

After bringing his discussion of literacy up to date with accounts of a number of both schools and schools of thought "from free schools to the Whole Language Umbrella," Patrick Shannon makes a strong case for establishing common ground on which the enterprise of progressive education can move forward: "The progressive educational agenda may be set

as the development of 1) the individual and social knowledge necessary to construct a better world; and 2) the moral and political courage to act on that knowledge."

A major deterrent to progress is, in Shannon's view, the mainstream positivist belief in scientific method inherited from the nineteenth century advocates of "scientific management." This tradition is evident particularly in "teacher-proof" curricula, reliance on basals and, for evaluation, on standardized tests. It is also the informing belief behind the various "efficiency" models of school organization currently being promoted. Despite pockets of progressivism, the ideal of "scientific management" still dominates thinking about education in the United States.

In regard to literacy, Shannon hopes that "reflective teachers will see how critical literacy can be useful in their efforts to gain control over their work and lives and that they will share the same vision with their students." He looks, for the future of progressive literacy, to Whole Language theory's grounding in classroom practice informed by the political consciousness of critical literacy -- in short, he hopes to reunify the progressive agenda which became divided after the first World War. Renewed knowledge of the major figures and institutions from the past, in Shannon's opinion, would give teachers more courage and confidence to carry on the progressive tradition.

The book's technical errors and literary faults mar, although don't destroy, its message. The text is in need of proof-reading, it is sprinkled with typos and/or misspellings ("beligerent," "testamony," "recepticle," "chastized," to cite just a few). It is also particularly dismaying to find words used incorrectly, not once, but over and over, such as "perseverate" which Shannon commonly uses when he means "dwell on" or "emphasize." Lisa Delpit, for example, may not be happy to know that "she perseverates on the teachers' role in the lesson." Shannon uses the word "dialectic" at times correctly, at other times incorrectly, and certainly much too frequently. He also occasionally and unnecessarily makes up a word: "planfully," "liberatory," "expressivism," for instance. The last quarter of the book, in general, shows signs of haste and the writing is often awkward.

In regard to content, I found the chapter on the European roots of progressivism too limited and cursory -- not detailed enough to enable the reader to understand the importance of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century European philosophers and teachers Shannon writes about to public education in the United States. I wondered why Tolstoy and Montessori were not included. In the account of contemporary educators, I missed mention of Patricia Carini, Marie Clay, Don Holdaway, and Mike Rose -- all of whom made important contributions to Patrick Shannon's subjects of interest. Nor did Shannon recognize the substantial twenty-year contribution to progressive thinking of the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation.

The Network of Progressive Educators, something of an heir to the Progressive Education Association, may have been organized after Shannon's book was written (although not after its publication). In any event, its existence, of significance to both the author and his readers, might be added as a postscript in future printings.

In general, I am grateful for Patrick Shannon's work. Literacy is an area which has seen dramatic advances over the last twenty years. New knowledge about language acquisition in all its forms is beginning to affect deeply how reading and writing are taught in classrooms all over the country. This recent knowledge is basically consonant with and therefore a logical extension of, progressive theory from the past. The Struggle to Continue makes these connections clear.

Consistent with his own criticism of "scientific management," Shannon makes no claims to "scientific objectivity." His beliefs and commitments are "out there," visible, unabashed and persuasive. By shedding light on the past of progressive literacy, The Struggle to Continue should help all of us see more clearly the possibilities for the future.

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Note: The Struggle to Continue: Progressive Reading Instruction in the United States, by Patrick Shannon, was published in 1990 by Heinemann Educational Books, Portsmouth, New Hampshire.