

The Future of Progressive Education

by William Hayes

What David J. Ferrero has called “the Hundred Year’s War between ‘progressives’ and ‘traditionalists’” continues unabated in the twenty-first century. Undoubtedly, current initiatives in public education favor those who support traditional approaches, yet many critics believe inflexible state curricular standards enforced by high-stakes tests are restricting teachers’ flexibility in employing methods other than teacher-centered direct instruction. Teachers at all levels worry about “covering” state standards. Likely they are also concerned about losing class time when they undertake projects, debates, or field trips. Lagging U.S. scores on comparative international tests continue to create pressure to concentrate on the type of instruction that traditionalists believe will be most effective in raising test scores.

At the federal level, President Bush has proposed extending mandatory testing beyond grade eight into high school. There are also renewed discussions about establishing national curricular standards and tests, which would replace the current objectives and examinations prepared for the state level. Supporters of the federalized plan point to differences in the specific state standards required in every basic subject and to wide variations in the mandatory tests each state administers. National standards outlining what students should know and be able to do in every subject area, combined with national tests based on those standards, would make it much easier to compare every school district in the country and specify remedial measures for states with poor results. The fact that many countries with national curricula and tests have done well in international tests is another argument for nationalizing the process.

Although attempts during the Clinton years to develop a national social studies curriculum failed, the federal government may undertake new efforts to counter frustration over inadequate international test results. If so, schools and teachers might retain even less flexibility in using progressive education theory and methods. Looking ahead, it is easy for progressives to become discouraged.

Still, it certainly would be premature to declare the final decline of progressive education in the United States. The growing popularity of the Montessori method, especially at the preschool and primary levels, signals that schools emphasizing creativity and “learning by doing” have a market.

School choice in all its manifestations is also allowing parents to consider schools established in the progressive tradition. Unfortunately, many parents selecting Montessori and progressive schools can be described as white, middle- or upper-class liberals. Although their number is still relatively small compared to the entire population, many of these parents tend to be active and vocal members of their school districts. There is also evidence that growing numbers of urban minorities are considering choice as a way to escape schools they perceive as failing their children.

Perhaps even more important in the survival of progressive education is the role of teacher-education programs. Almost every class and textbook for future teachers discusses a variety of teaching techniques. The inclusion of special education students in regular classrooms, along with the decline of academic grouping, has increased student diversity in most classrooms. Approaches such as nongraded classrooms, diversification of instruction, cooperative learning, and the use of projects are commonly discussed in teacher-education programs. Such undergraduate training should have at least some impact on the teaching methods used by graduates.

Middle school theory, which has been popular during the past fifty years, also calls for a more student-centered program designed especially for this age group. Middle school advocates call for more active learning methods as opposed to teacher lectures. Curricular and extracurricular programs, according to theory, should be based primarily on the children’s developmental levels. True, many middle schools still resemble traditional junior high schools; the current emphasis on testing may push others in that direction. Even so, most educators have accepted the idea that middle school students differ from high school students and that their educational programs should be more student centered.

Opportunities for gifted and talented students often emphasize academic freedom. An example would be the Odyssey of the Mind program, which stimulates students’ creative problem-solving skills. The current initiative to develop additional scientists and engineers may also infuse additional and imaginative laboratory exercises into science classes.

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Although no twenty-first-century John Dewey has emerged, a number of vocal individuals continue to criticize the current direction of education. It should be noted that some of these critics are outside education. The most common criticism of the current initiatives comes from those concerned about high-stakes testing. An article that appeared in the liberal magazine *The Nation* in June 2000 noted:

Despite the political popularity of the testing “solution,” many educators and civil rights advocates are suggesting that it has actually exacerbated the problems it sought to alleviate. They claim that these policies discriminate against minority students, undermine teachers, reduce opportunities for students to engage in creative and complex learning assignments, and deny high school diplomas because of students’ failure to pass subjects they were never taught. They argue that using tests to raise academic standards makes as much sense as relying upon thermometers to reduce fevers. Most compellingly, they maintain that these tests are directing sanctions against the victims, rather than the perpetrators of educational inequities.¹

In 2003, the magazine *Educational Leadership* summarized a research project conducted by Audrey L. Amrein and David C. Berliner, who had found negative results in high-stakes testing:

- Rather than increase student motivation, the tests cause students to “become less intrinsically motivated to learn and less likely to engage in critical thinking.” Teachers, on the other hand, choose to “take greater control of the learning experiences of their students,” which denies them the possibility of directing “their own learning.”
- High-stakes testing is one factor exacerbating the dropout rate in the United States. That in turn is leading more students to seek alternative diplomas such as the so-called GED (General Education Diploma). That degree is based entirely on passing tests.



- Testing has caused increased grade retention, and this in turn, it is argued, has caused more students to drop out of school.
- Schools are spending valuable time teaching test-taking techniques and teaching only content likely to appear on tests.²

In the same issue of *Educational Leadership*, Monty Neill urged educators to repudiate tests that narrow the curriculum and to “focus instead on formative assessment practices that encourage skilled teaching and high-level learning.”³

Even before the passage of the No Child Left Behind act, several books also argued that our current reliance on testing is negative. In 1999, Peter Sacks asserted in *Standardized Minds* that “test-driven classrooms exacerbate boredom, fear, and lethargy, promoting all manner of mechanical behaviors on the part of teachers, students, and schools, and bleed schoolchildren of their natural love of learning.”⁴

The next year, in *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools* (2000), Alfie Kohn argued that

- high scores often signify relatively superficial thinking
- many leading tests were never intended to measure teaching or learning
- a school that improves its test results may well have lowered its standards to do so
- far from helping to “close the gap,” standardized testing is most damaging to low-income and minority students
- as much as 90 percent of test-score variation among schools or states has nothing to do with quality instruction
- far more meaningful measures of student learning—or school quality—are available⁵

A post-NCLB book that deals with the negative aspects of testing is entitled *High Stakes: Children, Testing, and the Failure in American Schools*. Its authors, Dale D. Johnson and Bonnie Johnson, recount their work during one year in a rural school district. For them, the experience demonstrated the “tyranny and oppression” that high-stakes testing and accountability created in a small, poor school district. The authors believe that there is “growing opposition to the accountability movement and especially to high-stakes testing” in schools all over America.⁶

No Child Left Behind continues to have many supporters, a significant number of whom associate any form of progressive education negatively. For instance, an article on one conservative Web site summarizes the legacy of progressive education by concluding: “We probably would be better off if Dewey and his ilk had peddled their intellectual wares elsewhere,

perhaps in Dewey's beloved Soviet Union."⁷ Another typical view is expressed in a Hoover Institution publication, which states that "school reformers today are still trying to put into effect the turn-of-the-century progressive ideas of John Dewey and others. These ideas were largely misguided one hundred years ago, and they are largely misguided now."⁸

With this type of angry opposition, and because so many of the current members of Congress voted for the No Child Left Behind law, change will be difficult. The law is not likely to be altered dramatically when it is considered for reauthorization. The most frequent criticism from Democrats for the past several years has been not about the initiatives created by the law but rather about the Bush administration's failure to fund it properly. As a result, it is difficult to envision the nation turning completely from curricular standards, high-stakes testing, and school accountability in this decade. Nonetheless, the current U.S. Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, has shown significantly more flexibility in enforcing the law. Unlike her predecessor, Rod Paige, she has been more sensitive to the criticisms of teacher unions, state legislatures, and individual school districts. With various provisions of the law currently under challenge in the courts, it is also possible that judicial decisions will affect enforcement. Still, it is likely that Secretary Spellings will bend only so far. She has been quoted as saying, "As we say in Texas, if all you ever do is all you've ever done, then all you'll ever get is all you ever got—and all we ever got is really not good enough."⁹

Undoubtedly fierce debates over the law will continue to affect education decisions at every level. Especially in Washington, one can expect that with the urging and support of the teacher unions, Democrats might increase public education funding now that they control Congress as a result of the 2006 election. A Democratic Congress is also likely to be less sympathetic to choice options, especially vouchers involving nonpublic schools. Whether the Democrats will attempt a major overhaul of the No Child Left Behind law is uncertain. There is no question that many in the education community have serious reservations about the initiatives created by the law, but the general public is not yet nearly as critical.

It is thus difficult to predict how politics will affect the future of progressive education. Chances are that school choice will continue to give parents opportunities to select progressive-education options for their children. Even if choice is expanded and progressive schools increase in number, only a small minority of students will be exposed to that approach. Another path would bring progressive methods into the mainstream of public schools. For that to happen, there must first be some kind of truce between traditionalists and progressives as well as acceptance of the idea that either approach can be used in any classroom.

The history of the decades-old struggle between those who support a traditional phonics-based reading program and the advocates of whole language provides a blueprint for such an accommodation. Today many elementary-school reading programs include methods associated with both approaches. In these classrooms, teachers use traditional basal readers and assign spelling words from a separate book. They also emphasize a phonetic approach to identifying and pronouncing words that are new to their students. At the same time, the teachers employ such whole-language techniques as using context clues to identify words, using classic childhood literature in the form of big books, utilizing a classroom library to encourage children to read on their own, and perhaps taking spelling words and vocabulary from the books being read in class. Such a combined approach appears to be popular in many schools.

Compromise can also occur in the field of social studies. There is little argument that students need to know key names and dates in history or that they should be acquainted with the major provisions of the Constitution. At the same time, if teachers are accorded adequate flexibility, an American history teacher could give his or her students the opportunity to research the arguments prevalent when the Constitution was being ratified. The class could be divided between the Federalists and Antifederalists, and following individual and group research, students could hold a town-meeting simulation to debate whether the community should favor ratification. Obviously, not every controversy studied in social studies class can involve individual research and formal debates, but students engaged in such active learning experiences might better remember what they learned and find school more interesting.

Of course, allowing teachers to use progressive teaching techniques would necessitate making the assessment instruments used by schools more flexible. There would have to be less reliance on factual objective tests and more opportunities for creative answers to essay questions. An example of a question that allows a student to use his or her experience in the debate described above is: "Using a conflict situation in American history, identify the problem, give the primary arguments dealing with the issue, and explain and justify your own position on the problem." Social studies classes can also include experiences in service learning, which allows students to spend volunteer hours engaged in useful community work. Such activities can be assessed using something other than tests. Students can develop portfolios or journals that record their reactions to their learning experiences. In choosing projects, students can follow their own interests, which is another important goal of progressive-education theory.

Similar progressive techniques could also assume more prominence in other classes. Educators serious about developing truly creative problem

solvers must include science and math lessons and laboratories that give students the opportunity to solve problems creatively. Students will have to do more than memorize their math and science textbooks to pass short-answer tests. At least some science labs should enable students to solve problems creatively.

English teachers can also utilize student interests in written exercises and research topics. At all ages, children should have the opportunity to act out plays and write creatively about the literature they encounter. Schools can also encourage multidisciplinary projects in which the students combine several subjects, including technology, while problem solving. Teachers assigning such projects would act in the progressive tradition as advisers or facilitators of learning rather than just information providers.

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All such approaches are possible if educators can make the appropriate accommodations with ultraspecific curricular requirements, high-stakes testing, and accountability. Even traditional educators should be able to accept Herbert Berlak's progressive goals—to “engage the learner, nurture imagination,” to stimulate “cognitive and artistic expression and foster social-emotional and moral development”—or George S. Counts's observations:

In the minds of most Americans, the Progressive Education movement, in spite of its complexity, does stand for certain rather definite things. Moreover, few would deny that it has a number of large achievements to its credit. It has focused attention squarely upon the child; it has recognized the fundamental importance of the interest of the learner; it has defended the thesis that activity lies at the root of all true education; it has conceived learning in terms of life situations and growth of character; it has championed the rights of the child as a free personality.¹⁰

Whether progressive education continues as primarily an option for a limited number of students or becomes increasingly integrated in the mainstream remains to be seen. Still, we can conclude that although progressive education's influence may currently be at a low ebb, it will continue as a force influencing U.S. schools. The final word in this review of progressive education will go to John Dewey, who ended his *Experience and Education* with his “firm belief” that

the fundamental issue is not of new versus old education nor of progressive against traditional education but a question of what anything whatever must be to be worthy of the name education. I am not, I hope and believe, in favor of any ends or any methods simply because the name progressive may be applied

to them. . . . What we want and need is education pure and simple, and we shall make sure and faster progress when we devote ourselves to finding out just what education is and what conditions have to be satisfied in order that education may be a reality and not a name or a slogan.¹¹

Notes

1. Gary Orfield and Johanna Wald, "Testing, Testing," *The Nation*, 5 June 2000, 38.
2. Audrey L. Amrein and David C. Berliner, "The Effects of High-Stakes Testing on Student Motivation and Learning," *Educational Leadership* 60 (5) (February 2003): 32-33.
3. *Ibid.*, 43.
4. Peter Sacks, *Standardized Minds* (Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 1999), 256-57.
5. Alfie Kohn, *The Case Against Standardized Testing* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000), back cover.
6. Dale D. Johnson and Bonnie Johnson, *High Stakes: Children, Testing, and the Failure in American Schools* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), xix.
7. Jerry Jesness, "The Legacy of Progressive Education," available at <<http://www.speakout.com/activism/opinion/2971-1.html>>. Accessed 10 February 2006.
8. Williamson M. Evers, "How Progressive Education Gets It Wrong," Hoover Institution, available at <<http://www.hooverdigest.org/984/evers.html>>. Accessed 15 February 2006.
9. "Spellings More Flexible on NCLB Law," available at <<http://www.cnn.com/2006/EDUCATION/01/19/SPELLINGS.INTERVIEW.AP/INDEX.HTML>>. Accessed 19 January 2006.
10. Harold Berlak, "The *No Child Left Behind Act* and the Assault on Progressive Education and Local Control," available at <<http://www.pipeline.com/~rougeforum/PolicyandNCLB.htm>>, accessed 17 May 2005; George S. Counts, "Dare Progressive Education Be Progressive?" available at <http://courses.wccnet.edu/play/cls2002/counts.htm>>, accessed 15 February 2006.
11. L. Glen Smith and Joan K. Smith, *Lives in Education* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 294.

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