

**A Brief Overview of Progressive Education** During most of the twentieth century, the term "progressive education" has been used to describe ideas and practices that aim to make schools more effective agencies of a democratic society. Although there are numerous differences of style and emphasis among progressive educators, they share the conviction that democracy means active participation by all citizens in social, political and economic decisions that will affect their lives. The education of engaged citizens, according to this perspective, involves two essential elements: (1). *Respect for diversity*, meaning that each individual should be recognized for his or her own abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identity, and (2). the development of *critical, socially engaged intelligence*, which enables individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good. These elements of progressive education have been termed "child-centered" and "social reconstructionist" approaches, and while in extreme forms they have sometimes been separated, in the thought of John Dewey and other major theorists they are seen as being necessarily related to each other.

These progressive principles have never been the predominant philosophy in American education. From their inception in the 1830s, state systems of common or public schooling have primarily attempted to achieve cultural uniformity, not diversity, and to educate dutiful, not critical citizens. Furthermore, schooling has been under constant pressure to support the ever-expanding industrial economy by establishing a competitive meritocracy and preparing workers for their vocational roles. The term "progressive" arose from a period (roughly 1890-1920) during which many Americans took a more careful look at the political and social effects of vast concentrations of corporate power and private wealth. Dewey, in particular, saw that with the decline of local community life and small scale enterprise, young people were losing valuable opportunities to learn the arts of democratic participation, and he concluded that education would need to make up for this loss. In his Laboratory School at the [University of Chicago](#), where he worked between 1896 and 1904, Dewey tested ideas he shared with leading school reformers such as Francis W. Parker and Ella Flagg Young. Between 1899 and 1916 he circulated his ideas in works such as *The School and Society*, *The Child and the Curriculum*, *Schools of Tomorrow*, and *Democracy and Education*, and through numerous lectures and articles. During these years other experimental schools were established around the country, and in 1919 the Progressive Education Association was founded, aiming at "reforming the entire school system of America."

Led by Dewey, progressive educators opposed a growing national movement that sought to separate academic education for the few and narrow vocational training for the masses. During the 1920s, when education turned increasingly to "scientific" techniques such as intelligence testing and cost-benefit management, progressive educators insisted on the importance of the emotional, artistic, and creative aspects of human development--"the most living and essential parts of our natures," as Margaret Naumburg put it in *The Child and the World*. After the Depression began, a group of politically oriented progressive educators, led by George Counts, dared schools to "build a new social order" and published a provocative journal called *The Social Frontier* to advance their "reconstructionist" critique of *laissez faire* capitalism. At [Teachers College, Columbia University](#), William H. Kilpatrick and other students of Dewey taught the principles of progressive education to thousands of teachers and school leaders, and in the middle part of the century, books such as Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938) Boyd Bode's *Progressive Education at the Crossroads* (1938), Caroline Pratt's *I Learn from Children* (1948), and Carlton Washburne's *What is Progressive Education?* (1952) among others, continued to provide a progressive critique of conventional assumptions about teaching, learning and schooling. A major research endeavor, the "eight-year study," demonstrated that students from progressive high schools were capable, adaptable learners and excelled even in the finest universities.

Nevertheless, in the 1950s, during a time of cold war anxiety and cultural conservatism, progressive education was widely repudiated, and it disintegrated as an identifiable movement. However, in the years since, various groups of educators have rediscovered the ideas of Dewey and his associates, and revised them to address the changing needs of schools, children, and society in the late twentieth century. Open classrooms, schools without walls, cooperative learning, multiage approaches, whole language, the social

curriculum, experiential education, and numerous forms of alternative schools all have important philosophical roots in progressive education. John Goodlad's notion of "nongraded" schools (introduced in the late 1950s), TheodoreSizer's network of "essential" schools, Elliott Wigginton's [Foxfire project](#), and Deborah Meier's student-centered Central Park East schools are some well known examples of progressive reforms in public education; in the 1960s, critics like Paul Goodman and George Dennison took Dewey's ideas in a more radical direction, helping give rise to the free school movement. In recent years, activist educators in inner cities have advocated greater equity, justice, diversity and other democratic values through the publication *Rethinking Schools* and the National Coalition of Education Activists.

Today, scholars, educators and activists are rediscovering Dewey's work and exploring its relevance to a "postmodern" age, an age of global capitalism and breathtaking cultural change, and an age in which the ecological health of the planet itself is seriously threatened. We are finding that although Dewey wrote a century ago, his insights into democratic culture and meaningful education suggest hopeful alternatives to the regime of standardization and mechanization that more than ever dominate our schools.

***For further reading:***

*The Stone Trumpet: A Story of Practical School Reform* by Richard A. Gibboney (SUNY Press, 1994).

*Democracy, Education, and the Schools* edited by Roger Soder (Jossey-Bass, 1996).

*Progressive Education: From Arcady to Academe* by Patricia Albjerg Graham (Teachers College Press, 1967)

*Progressive Education for the 1990s: Transforming Practice* edited by Kathe Jervis and Carol Montag (Teachers College Press, 1991).

*Schools that Work: America's Most Innovative Public Education Programs* by George Wood (Dutton, 1992).

*The Struggle to Continue: Progressive Reading Instruction in the United States* by Patrick Shannon (Heinemann, 1990).

*The Story of the Eight-Year Study* by Wilford M. Aikin (Harper, 1942).

*John Dewey and American Democracy* by Robert B. Westbrook (Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

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