

SCHOOLS: Studies in Education
Fall 2005

The (Progressive) Schools Our Children Deserve

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[This is a transcript of the keynote address for a conference on progressive education sponsored by the School in Rose Valley and held at Swarthmore College on October 7, 2004.]

I'm delighted to be with what I will presumptuously assume is a friendly crowd, such that the kinds of criticisms I offer of traditional schooling are not seen as offensive or even terribly surprising. That creates a dilemma for me because I feel that if people just nod the whole time then I haven't done my job. That is, I have to make you a little uncomfortable, to push you a bit, to disorient you, or I needn't have come. Sure, it's nice to have something that sounds validating and affirming, but it's also good to be asked to gulp periodically.

But my generally critical sensibility mystifies some people, not just adults, but kids as well. About ten years ago, I took time out from life in Boston to live for 444 days in New Jersey. It was a bit of a disorienting experience for me. I had lived in Cambridge where there's a bookstore on every corner. And now I was in a place with a nail salon on every corner. It took some getting used to.

While I was living there I got a letter from a teacher who said he had assigned excerpts of an article I'd written about grades to his fourth grade class. He sent me some of his students' reactions and invited me to come and talk with them. So of course I did. After the talk was over, I got another manila envelope in the mail with the kids' thank-you notes. There's one that I saved and take around with me wherever I go, just to keep myself on track. It's from a young man named James Ball, who's probably college age now:

Dear Mr. Kohn,

I'm glad you came in because it helped me understand your theory. I was wondering though why you disided to spend you[r] life time doing this[.] I mean I disigrie with somethings, but I wouldn't spend my lifetime disigrying.

So I read that periodically to make sure I know why I'm spending my lifetime disagreeing and to make sure that I'm being clear enough about the things I want to affirm, the things with which I agree. You have to oppose what gets in the way of the things you want to affirm, and that's why I do oppose a number of things that I think are terribly problematic for kids and for our schools in general.

Not-So-Progressive Parents at Progressive Schools

I'm so honored to have been asked to open this conference and to speak to some of you who are not even part of the conference. It's appropriate, I guess, to be at Swarthmore, given that not only did people who were here help to found The School in Rose Valley, but I understand they also lent what was then a considerable amount of money to kick off the school. I was looking at the history, *The School in Rose Valley* written by Grace Rotzel, and came across this sentence talking about parents when the school was founded in 1929: "Some people were bothered by the obvious differences between our school and conventional ones. We spent 'too much time walking around outdoors.' We called teachers by their first names. There isn't any respect. We were too permissive. The children aren't learning anything. The children can't wait to get to school. There must be something wrong."

This certainly rings true with my experience and represents what I've come to call the Listerine theory of education, which continues to be prominent. You remember this mouthwash, which tastes vile, had an ad campaign to try to turn its taste into a reason you should buy it. If it's this disgusting, it must work well—and that's basically our understanding of education. If it's unpleasant, it must be effective, and conversely, if kids are having a good time, they can't be learning anything.

Anyway, "I was always curious as to why the school seemed to be a personal insult to some," she writes (this is Grace Rotzel, who helped found the school and was its principal for many years), "even those who had no children to educate. But gradually I came to accept the fact that any deviation from tradition is seen by some people as a threat."

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même merde.

The question then, for me, becomes not just what can we do about parents who have this view, who ask, "Why no standardized tests?" or "Where's the gifted program?" or "How come no letter grades?" but why such parents would send their children to a school that has articulately, even eloquently, taken a stand against these sorts of traditional practices? I think it's an interesting question because it may help to explain why progressive schools have such a hard time hanging on.

If we were to survey parents who send their kids to avowedly progressive schools, I think we would find that many of them do so because some neighbor said, "This is a good school," which strikes me as very, very concerning, frankly. I mean, I don't ask people I don't know whether such-and-such is a good movie. What's the point? Nor should they ask me until we have some sense of what our criteria are for good movies. The same is true for schools. I live in a town that's reputed to have very good public schools, but what most people mean by that is not necessarily what I mean by that. Yet some people probably send their kids to such schools for that reason or move to that neighborhood.

Another possible reason is that the school is close to where they live. Or they think that it will help them in some way to get into the college of their choice—uh, their children's choice. Or they may like the facilities and enrichments that the school offers. There are any number of possible reasons. If it's a small school like The School in Rose Valley, for example, it may be that people want to send their kids there because they like the sense of community that comes from keeping the school fairly small. That's nice.

Those are all good reasons, some better than others, perhaps. Sometimes parents don't like standardized testing, so they send their kids to a school that doesn't have it. Or, this one took me a long time to figure out: both the parents and the school seem politically or socially progressive, so that seems like a match. The reality, though, is that even some schools with a tradition of political and social progressivism are not necessarily educationally progressive. I have certainly been at a number of schools where everybody hates Bush, and we all support multicultural education and are welcoming to people of all sexual orientations, and so on, but the place is filled with worksheets.

The problem with almost any of these criteria for sending kids to a school is that you end up with parents who are impressed by the wrong things. I was in a classroom recently at a progressive school where, during a parents' potluck breakfast, the Moms and Dads were glowing over the fact that their kids could spell "Australopithecus" or knew some obscure fact that the parents themselves didn't know. "Isn't that a wonderful education?" Of course, that's not necessarily very impressive at all. But if we haven't made a good match and helped to educate parents, as well as allowing them to educate us about what's good for kids, you end up with parents who are worried about the very best features and who start to exert pressure, especially as the kids get older, for a more traditional kind of education because they didn't come to the school for the right reasons in the first place.

I was at a progressive school recently where, in the third and fourth grade combined classroom, there were two math groups going on simultaneously. In both of them, they were reviewing worksheet answers having to do with place value. In one group, they were going through the kids' answers and one boy came up with this ingenious method for solving the problem that was clearly different from what anyone had suggested. Then the teacher says, "Well, we'll have to look into that," and that was the end of that. It was clear that he was not going to look into that, and the message not to just this boy but to everyone watching was that the priority here was getting the right answer rather than reflecting on how we invent notions of place value and challenge accepted algorithms for discovering those answers.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, the other teacher was framing her review of answers in terms of "what they want you to do to here." That's "they," the distant, anonymous authorities who created the worksheet; our job is to read their minds. Again, the message is not only that math is being taught in a remarkably traditional way in this progressive school, but that learning consists of conforming to the accepted models of thinking.

My point in telling this story is not that it disturbed me given that I had expected more from this school, but that there was no parent constituency to raise eyebrows, let alone questions, because the school was *groovy*. We educators need to be goosed occasionally by parents who ask, "Why did that lesson not encourage children to think deeply and critically?" and "Why were they doing worksheets at all in this school?" The occasional parent who does raise such questions finds that, if anything, there are more parents, even in progressive schools, who are pushing the other way. That's why it's such a mystery and such a challenge for schools to think about which families are being invited to come in and which families are able to help shape the school in the direction that makes sense.

What Is Progressive Education, Anyway?

Some of you, I know, have been immersed in progressive education for longer than I have, but for those of you who haven't, let me try to offer a kind of rough-and-ready sense of what I, at least, mean, by the term. There is considerable variation in the definitions of progressive education that have been offered—that's been true for some time, including sometimes-violent disagreement among people who are huddled together for warmth under this umbrella. More commonly, I find disagreements that are a matter of different emphases.

I want to offer about a dozen questions, roughly half of them for people at a school-wide level, and the other about practices in individual classrooms. My point is to invite us to push one another to revisit why we do things the way we do and believe what we believe. The point is to ask whether we in progressive schools may have, over time, been caught in the undertow of traditionalism without even realizing it.

But first, my bird's-eye view of what I mean by progressivism. First of all, the phrase "whole child" is not much in vogue anymore. I'm not sure it ever was, really, but it's not even spoken as often as it was. Progressive education says we're interested in not just the behaviors, but the motives and values that inform behavior. We're interested not only in academic expertise, but in the other intelligences, as we now say, following Howard Gardner, and the talents, the interests, the social, emotional, psychological, and physical considerations of the child. Our goal isn't just to promote multiplication skills.

Sometimes an emphasis purely on academic skills seems to be a marker for financial success later on. The smarter you are now and the more stuff you know, the better college you'll get into, and the more money you'll earn. Most schools spend most of the time focused on a narrow band of skills having to do with mathematical and verbal-analytic intelligences, and progressive schools say those are important but they're not the only things that matter. Indeed, we're interested in helping kids become good learners, but also good people, and we're unapologetic about that.

Second, a progressive school is one where the learning is active. Constructivism is not a *prescription* for how to teach, but a *description* of how people of all ages actually learn. From the time we're born, we are actively trying to make sense of the world around us. When my daughter was not even two years old, she developed a theory of the sky. It went like this: "The moon comes out at night." I just reflected it back to her. "Oh, you've seen the moon a lot at night." Then, one day came a shattering challenge to her world view out of the clear blue sky, literally, when she saw the moon one afternoon. That's not so different in terms of learning from what professional astronomers do when their understanding of the Big Bang leads to a prediction that this quadrant of the universe will be devoid of matter, and then they discover matter there and must go back and revisit their theories because there's a conflict between what they've believed and what they saw. That's how learning happens—not by molding clay or writing on blank slates or training pets or filling empty vessels.

The last of these metaphors is particularly popular. John Dewey talked about the cold storage model of education. The great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire talked about the

banker model where we deposit knowledge in students and then withdraw it on command at test time. I sometimes talk about giving kids a brick of information, followed by another brick, followed by another brick, followed by another brick, followed by another brick, until they're graduated, at which point we assume they have a house. What they have is a pile of bricks—and not for long.

For seven years, I taught a course on existentialism to high school students. I loved this course. It was my baby before I had a real baby. I would spend time in between terms reading up on existentialist thought so I shouldn't miss any, um, cutting-edge developments in the field. I tweaked my lesson plans and my assignments in between the terms when I taught it. It took me a long time to realize that, while I loved the topic, I like kids, and I was entertaining enough to hold their attention even at eight a.m., that course was all about *me*. I was focused much more on the teaching than on the learning. In fact, the course itself was already pretty much designed, and I was just waiting to bring it out like a young stereotypical male tuning up a car and polishing it and looking forward to the time he can take it out and show it off. For a class, that makes approximately as much sense as a single person saying, "I have this great marriage all ready to go. All I have to do is find someone to have it with."

The reality is there's something wrong in a college classroom where the syllabus has been written before the first class meeting as if students are interchangeable rows of bird beaks, just waiting to have knowledge deposited in them. Good teachers from pre-K to graduate school cannot teach the same course the same way to different people. They develop the course *with* the students because it's not just about transmission, it's about a process of co-creation so that the students become able to act on the kind of learning and sense-making of which they're capable. I didn't understand that then. I didn't understand much at all about how learning happens. I was never invited to think about it. Once you do, you come to realize that our criteria for who's a good teacher have to be radically rethought. Progressive education says the student has to play an active role.

Howard Gardner has a great line buried in one of his books: he asks us to imagine the kid who comes home and is asked, "What'd you do in school today?" And the kid says, "Nothin'." Gardner says the kid is probably right. Things were done to him, but the opportunity to actively participate in making decisions about the learning, and to learn in an active sense, may have been missing.

Third, progressive education is not interested in a bunch o' facts, but rather in deep understanding: not just knowing how to find information, but knowing what to do with it once it's found, how to make connections and distinctions, why to go looking for information in the first place, being able to look at the things we find critically, skeptically, and from multiple perspectives. All of which, of course, runs contrary to the bunch o' facts approach, the traditionalism, the basic skills, back to basics. ("Back to basics" is, of course, a misnomer. We never left.)

Ellen Lagemann, who's now the dean of the Harvard School of Education wrote a book a few years ago where she said the one thing you have to know about twentieth-century education in America is that Dewey lost and Edward Thorndike won. Thorndike was a guy who never met anything he didn't want to measure and was in some ways the progenitor to

Skinnerian behaviorism. The idea that our schools in this country have been taken over by a cabal of constructivists who've turned all of our schools into hotbeds of Deweyan progressivism would be comical if this inversion of reality was not so dangerous. It becomes more than just of academic interest to assess the actual orientation of American schools, public and private, because if it turns out that progressive education is, in fact, a rarity, then it's a little difficult to blame the real or imagined problems with American education on progressive stuff. The reality is that if our schools are in trouble, which is a complicated question—I would argue yes in some respects, but no in others—you're much more likely to find the problem with a lack of emphasis on deep understanding. Back to basics is the single greatest explanation for the absence of excellence in American schools. And of course the very people who claim we have failing schools with falling standards tend to prescribe more of what caused the problem in the first place as the remedy.

Progressives know better. Progressive education doesn't repudiate facts and skills, but rather says that facts and skills should be learned *in a context* and *for a purpose*, such that the learning is typically organized around questions and problems and projects, rather than around facts and skills and separate disciplines. The fact-oriented approach explains so much of why we don't have what we need.

A friend of mine, who is a teacher-educator, had a daughter in fifth grade at the time of this story. She came home, he wrote me, with a worksheet on simple machines—ball bearings, inclined planes, pulleys, that sort of thing. As he came home from work, she said, "Dad, test me, test me!"

"Well," my friend said, "Why don't you just tell me what you've been learning about?"

"OK, but first ask me what these things are!"

"OK, if you insist. What is a ball bearing?"

"OK, easy dad! A ball bearing is *blah blah blah*." A verbatim repetition of the definition she had learned from the teacher.

My friend said, "But Rachel, what *is* a ball bearing?"

"I told you, Dad. A ball bearing is a *blah blah blah blah*."

To make a long story short, he continues, "I turned over the ottoman, which is on wheels, and showed her the ball bearings, and her eyes got wide.

"Cooooo! *That's* what a ball bearing is? How does it work? Can we take apart the ottoman? Oh, I get it. Why didn't Mrs. Lambert just tell us this is what it was? Can you buy these at the store? Where do they sell these things anyway? Hey, wanna help me make something that rotates? Hey, cool, watch what happens if I hold one of these things and try to spin this thing. What would happen to this thing if the balls were really big? Would the wheels go faster?"

A progressive school is not about memorizing the definition of ball bearings, or the date at

which an event happened in history, or the difference between a simile and a metaphor. That's not to say that these topics aren't covered. It's to say that questions that kids have drive the education.

One of my favorite mischievous things to do when I'm at a teacher conference is to tell people I'm going to ask a math question now and to warn that the people who are most likely to get this question wrong are the math teachers. Then I proceed to ask: Which is larger, two-sevenths or five-seventeenths? And the correct answer is: *Who cares?* I remind them that if they ever forget that that is the correct answer to that question, their teaching is in serious jeopardy. It's the same answer to the question: What is the definition of a prepositional phrase? That's not to say we don't teach fractions in progressive schools! We're a lot less likely to use worksheets and textbooks and lectures, but that's not to say that we don't teach them. It's that it has to be in a context and for a purpose. Kids don't care which fraction is bigger, but they do care how fast they're growing. They do care about the fairest way to divide up a pizza.

Similarly, people do not get hooked on phonics. Nobody in history has ever gotten hooked on the "cr" sound. It's a means to an ends, folks. I don't care about spelling and grammar and vocabulary except as means to the end of richer literacy and the ability to understand and communicate more fully. I don't care if people can spell well. I care that they know how to edit. Some of the sharpest people I know are horrible spellers. Spelling should not become a huge deal in its own right, even in third grade, much less should we clonk kids over the head to the point that, in order to write correctly spelled stories, they have to stop being imaginative and stop liking writing. Even at the age when it is time for kids to learn how to spell, it's not a separate topic. You don't put away your language arts book and take out your spelling book. You don't give all kids the same list of words, which have nothing to do with their lives or interests, and require them to memorize the correct spellings. Again, to say these things doesn't mean we don't care about spelling. In a context and for a purpose.

One of my favorite stories came from a third grade teacher, who was at a workshop I gave many years ago and said, "It is so hard to do what you're saying: giving kids more choices about their learning." I knew she had a story coming. I was not disappointed.

She said, "I wanted to make one little change. At some point, I had realized that when I said, 'Boys and girls, this is *our* classroom,' I was lying to them. Because in the most literal, physical sense, I had decorated the whole damn room before they ever showed up." And she said, "I knew what I had to do, but I couldn't summon the courage to do it, which was to leave the walls bare and invite the kids to help participate in making decisions about what went on the walls. I was terrified of what the parents would say or what my principal would say. You know, 'Doesn't she care?'" All the other rooms were brightly festooned with color, often commercial posters or the always-popular autumn leaf motif. All the other rooms had something—until you get to high school, of course, where, apparently, the physical environment ceases to matter altogether.

But she said, "Finally, one August, I decided that this is the year. If the principal asks why, if the parents look at me funny, I'll explain what I'm doing, and the walls were left bare. The first order of business, after we learned one another's names, was: How do we want

our room to look? We had a class meeting, and we decided what we wanted where.”

She said, “I can’t prove it scientifically, but I think it was better than any other year I had had up until then, all the time I was teaching, because the kids felt every day as if they were coming into *their* room.”

But, it’s the postscript to this story, the little coda, that explains why I tell it, or at least why I tell it here. The kids decided that they wanted to take this wall here, cover it with blue construction paper, and put up the stuff of which they were proudest. Each kid had a space to do with what he or she wanted. So you had individual choice superimposed upon the collective, democratic decision to use the wall that way in the first place. Needless to say, it was not the star spellers or the error-free papers that went up. Everybody matters in this classroom. But wait a second, did I say blue construction paper? The kids wanted to put it up themselves. This is the annoying thing about democracy. They soon realized that if they didn’t want this display to look really lame, they were going to have to measure the paper, and if they wanted to measure the paper, they were going to need to know something about fractions.

So, at their request, the teacher did a little mini-lesson on fractions, which was probably the most effective fraction lesson in the history of the world, not because the teacher was great at it, but because the answer to the question “Who cares?” was “We care!” We’re not learning fractions because it’s going to be on the damn standardized test. We’re not learning fractions because it’s on the teacher’s lesson plan or in the next chapter of the textbook. We’re learning fractions because we need to know something about them in order to do something we care about. This is nothing other than warmed-over John Dewey, which I put to you is better than piping hot behaviorism any day of the week. The point, then, is not that we don’t teach facts and skills. We are mostly concerned about deep understanding, but the facts and skills have a purpose, and we start with the questions and the problems.

Next, progressive schooling is marinated in community. It’s not only active learning; it’s interactive learning. We don’t see kids in progressive schools as isolated entities, stranded, each one at his or her own separate desk, learning what one writer rather poignantly described as “the central message of American elementary education: how to be alone in a crowd.” Rather, it’s about us. It’s about thinking in the plural. It’s about creating a place where we feel connected, where we feel as if we belong, because that helps us to become good people and good learners at the same time. In short, progressive education is about taking kids seriously—treating them with respect, such that we don’t simply try to shoehorn them into an existing curriculum or school structure or schedule, but rather do everything in our power, given that there’s a bunch of them at one time, to make the curriculum and the schedule and the structure responsive to what they need.

Some progressive educators are not so big on the collaboration part and emphasize individualized learning instead. Different people emphasize different things. Some are very strong in the social-moral component, not so much on the deep understanding, and some vice versa—some by design and some by carelessness. But those are the general points I find coming up again and again to indicate what it is we’re trying to do.

Strictly speaking, what I’ve just described to you has as much right to be called traditional

education as what we usually call traditional. I hate that nomenclature. I don't know better words for it. In some respects, what we now call traditional education is fairly new. Long before kids were doing individualized skill stuff, they were apprentices to mentors and they were doing multi-age education in one-room schoolhouses, and they were cooperating in various ways. But I keep the nomenclature just so we can all be talking about the same thing to minimize confusion.

Progressive Education: Effective but Rare

What's interesting is how hard it is to do well. Any bozo can stay one chapter ahead of the kids in the textbook or can show kids step by step on the blackboard how you borrow from the tens place. Anybody can, as some of my teachers did, read their notes off a yellow legal pad that I suspect wasn't yellow when the notes were written. Traditional back-to-basics education is far less demanding of student and teacher alike than is progressive education in the sense that I've talked about. In order to do the kind of mathematics with kids that allows them to actively invent ideas, so that you don't even tell them how the procedure is done, you don't just school them in the accepted algorithm; this requires the teacher to know a hell of a lot more about math than the kind of math that is used to prepare kids for standardized tests. The same thing is true with interdisciplinary studies, where the teacher has to have some grounding in math as well as in social studies, because in progressive schools there is often no sharp division, no wall built between the traditional disciplines. It's harder to do.

But here's the interesting point that no one should forget, and none of our friends and neighbors and colleagues should be permitted to forget: it works better.

The research, for example, on teaching kids to read is quite remarkable. I spent some time in preparation for one of my books really digging into the reading research. And I found that when skills-based, narrowly conceived, direct, explicit instruction in phonics approach is contrasted with the approach that dare not speak its name—whole language—which is much closer to what I've called progressive education, the results of the carefully controlled studies are really striking. When you use stupid, standardized measures of achievement, which is basically about getting kids to bark at the page on cue, you tend to find that whole language and the traditional, phonemic awareness approach do about equally well. Which is amazing in its own right because the traditional approach is basically geared toward that end and that end alone. Yet even when most kids are not explicitly schooled in decoding—only those who need it are given explicit instructions—they still do as well at decoding. But when you look at more meaningful measures of literacy, the whole language/progressive kids leave the traditionally skilled kids in the dust.

Then I walked across the library and started reading the *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* and similar journals, and I found almost exactly the same set of results, which I review in the Appendix of my book *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, which makes a fabulous gift, incidentally. What I found was that when you compare the kids who are taught the traditional way, where the teacher shows you step by step how you get the right answer and then gives the kids fifty more problems just like it so they can mindlessly imitate what the teacher has shown, and compare that approach to the kind of math class where there aren't worksheets or textbooks, and where the teacher requires the

kids to invent their own solutions and then argue, in a caring context, about what they got and how they got it, again the two groups do about equally well on standardized measures of calculation. And on meaningful measures of quantitative understanding, the progressive kids are far more effective than those taught in the traditional classrooms.

It's amazing! Don't let anyone tell you that progressive education is touchy-feely, fuzzy-fluffy nice, but that "research suggests we need to use the traditional approach so students learn well." Even if you're using conventional criteria, and even if your focus is limited to academic achievement, and you don't give a damn whether the kids are decent people, progressive education tends to work better. And the more ambitious and meaningful the criterion, the better progressive education tends to do relative to the kind that is pervasive in our society.

It is now time for me to ask you a question. If I'm right about this, even half right, if it's true that progressive education started because some people had values that said "it's inhumane to treat kids like they're widgets in a factory," and now we have scientific research to corroborate those good intentions, *why is progressive education so rare, so hard to start and sustain?* Why are the worksheets and the textbooks and the lectures and the quizzes so much more popular in private and public schools alike across this land of ours in the year 2004, as they were in 1984 and 1944 and 1924? [Audience members suggest that traditional (as opposed to progressive) education doesn't take as long, that it is easier to do, that it seems comforting by virtue of its familiarity, and that it remains more consistent with how teachers are trained. Additionally, traditional education allows administrators to maintain control, and it is more likely to perpetuate the status quo in society.]

Challenging Questions for Progressive Schools

Let me ask you half a dozen questions at a school-wide level and half a dozen questions at a classroom level to see if we're moving as far as we could be.

School-wide question number one: Are we defending the idea of progressive education rather than doing it apologetically or half-heartedly? There are schools—I think of one in the Boston area, where I live, and one in New York City—with a long history of progressive education that have excised the word "progressive" or anything resembling it from all their view books and stuff they put out to their community because they're afraid, deathly afraid, that they might put off some families. So they try to be different things to different people and have a mission statement that you read and say, "Yeah, but what are you *against*?" Or: "How does this distinguish you from the umpteen other schools that say the same things?"

Are we *proudly* progressive? Are we emphasizing what we know—that progressive education isn't just for rich, white kids? We have by now a growing pile of evidence that kids from low-income communities and kids of color are most victimized by the skill-and-drill approach, where they're turned essentially into seals, barking out letters or numbers on command and in unison. And that's why I always talk to reading teachers and say, yeah, some kids come in already knowing a lot about how to read; they're pretty far along at age five or six. What do you think is going on in their homes? It looks like whole language! The kids who come in without those skills and that background are the last kids who ought to be

memorizing abstract rules, each of which has an exception. These are the kids who need to be learning to read by *reading*, not spending a week on the “schwa”!

Are we sending out that message, that progressive education is varied and responsive enough so that it already allows individuation and different approaches for kids with different needs? You don't have to balance progressive with traditional; progressive already *is* the balance, when it's done correctly. Some kids need more structure—that's fine. We can do that in progressive schools. What kids tend *not* to need is control. That distinction is often lost. We say we're doing structure, but what we're offering is traditional control, which benefits few members of our species. And the research tends to support that. Are we saying that clearly? Are we getting this message out so that educators help parents understand not only what we're doing, but why we're doing it, so that then the parents can hold our feet to the fire when necessary?

How do we bring the parents along? The best two approaches I have found are to help the parents look backwards and forwards. And here I'm speaking especially to the parents who don't come to an event like this. When I say look backwards, I borrow an idea from my friends in Chicago, Smokey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar, who have created these workshops for parents. These happen to be African-American inner-city parents—no reason that it wouldn't work in a place like this, either. And basically you ask the parents: First, what do you want your school to do? Many parents will cough up the usual reactionary clichés of basic skills and high standards and the like. Then you ask them to think about what it was like when *you* were learning to read. Think back to your experiences in the classroom. Think about a time when it worked and a time when it was awful. A lot of people had miserable experiences. For most people in the country, if they have anything positive to say about high school, it's just the friends they hung out with rather than meaningful intellectual challenge. And some people, who didn't do as well or weren't as fast, started turning off to school and feeling lousy about themselves in the earliest grades.

But you ask them, “Tell me about a time when everything was terrific, when school was perfect, and you groaned when the dismissal bell rang.” The simple rarity of the experiences many people are able to produce is telling enough, but you listen to their experiences by having them pair up, share with each other, and then report out and write on the board or a flip chart the key elements of those good experiences they had when they were kids. It ends up looking like my lecture notes [on what a progressive education comprises]! People say the one time I remember was great was the time *we* got to pick what we were going to learn next, not just have the teacher choose. It was the time when we went off the school grounds and did something actively. It was the time when we were together in a group, learning from each other, not alone. And so on. And then, the facilitators of the workshop say, “Shouldn't your kids have that stuff all the time, as opposed to its being the exception as it was for most of us? You have just provided a more powerful argument against traditional goals and practices than I ever could.” That's looking backward.

Looking forward is to start, as I like to do in workshops, by asking, “What are your long-term goals for your kids? How would you like them to turn out long after they've left us?” I've done this dozens and dozens of times in private schools and public schools; in elementary and lower, in high school and upper; in urban, suburban, and rural. I've done it with administrators, teachers, and parents. The list I get of long-term goals is astonishingly

similar from one group to the next. Everywhere I go, people say—try it yourself—”My long-term goal is for kids to be (lot of “c” words come out) caring and compassionate and curious and critical thinkers. I want them to be successful and responsible, happy and ethical.” And of course somebody’s going to come up with “LLL”—lifelong learner. I could break into the bedroom of an elementary school teacher at three in the morning, shake her awake: “Quick—what’s your long-term goal for your students?” “Lifelong learner! And how did you get in my bedroom?” In that order.

I hear the same responses everywhere. And at some point I realized that what I do for a living is to say to people—about different topics and to different groups, “You know, you say you want this, so how come you’re doing that?” Who cares what *my* long-term goal is? What matters is that there is a disconnect between *your* practices and your own long-term goals! You said you wanted kids to be caring and responsible and ethical? Here’s the evidence showing that the use of rewards, including praise (“good job!”) and punishments (including Punishment Lite, like time-out) are effective ways of *undermining* caring and compassion and responsibility. When you do things *to* kids, with bribes and threats, even if you use neater, newer language to describe them, you’re much less likely to reach your own goals. Hell, two studies show quite clearly that kids who are often given rewards or praise are less generous than their peers. Look at the data.

Something has to give. You said you want your kids to be lifelong learners who care about learning, well, here’s the evidence showing that the last way to get that is to give them letter or number grades. To the best of my knowledge, every study that has ever looked at this question has found that kids who are trying to get As become less interested in the learning itself and less likely to think deeply than kids given the same curriculum in a school or classroom where there are no traditional grades. You can look up the research yourself. At that point, something’s got to give. Either you say, “Well, I guess it’s not *that* important that they’re caring because I’m not giving up my stickers” or “I guess they don’t *really* need to be lifelong learners because we *can’t* get rid of grades” and the practices stay and the goals fade into empty rhetoric. Or, on the other hand, you can say, “No, these goals really do matter, in which case, we have to courageously reconsider our practices.”

So when I come across people who think very differently, which is just about every day of my life, I think in terms of how to invite them to look backward at their own experiences and forward at their long-term goals for the children in order to help bring them along in a way that I hope is respectful. But none of that happens if we’re pussy-footing around about this and if we’re not courageous enough to be forthright defenders of progressive education. Is your school?

Number two: Does the good stuff in your school continue all the way up the grade levels or is there an incremental diminution of progressive education so that by the time they get to grade five or six, or seven or eight, or eleven or twelve, it’s starting to look more and more like a bunch o’ facts curriculum? I was just asked on the radio yesterday what good early childhood education looks like, and I was describing how the kids make decisions and it’s a community and they have class meetings and meaning rather than skills are at the center, and the host asked an interesting question. He said, “How long until that approach doesn’t make sense any more? At what age should the kids be getting more traditional education?” And I quickly replayed my own comments in my head and said, “Never.”

People talk about developmentally appropriate education—makes a lot of sense, but I have some concerns about that phrase because when I look at what people say middle school students really need, who doesn't need what's on that list? That's why my friend Debbie Meier tried to set up a high school that contained the best of kindergarten practices. Because that leads to the intellectual acuity we're looking for. (She also threw in a measure of graduate school, with the students defending their major exhibitions as if they were defending dissertations.) Are we falling short because we're under the spell of the people who say, "That stuff where the kids make the decisions and learn deeply and are part of a community is great when they're young, but now it's time to get serious"? Or do we bravely resist that? Indeed, not just resist, but proactively defend the appropriateness of progressive education all the way up the age ladder?

Number three: Does your school's schedule sometimes prevent learning that spills over the allotted time? Are kids ever in the middle of a project that is unbelievably exciting and they need another hour, but they've got to stop because at 10:30 we go to music or to science? It's hard to coordinate what different bunches of students are doing with different staff members, to be sure, but what comes first, the schedule or the kids' learning? Are we flexible enough to be sure that we haven't dug ourselves into canals, into ruts, such that we are slaves to what the clock says or what our predetermined plan was?

Four: Is assessment at your school consistent with the rest of your progressive vision? Keep in mind that progressive education and many of its outcomes are hard to quantify. Albert Einstein put it well. He said, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted, counts." A contemporary thinker, Linda McNeil, who teaches at Rice University, said, "Measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of education." I always say that administrators, especially public school administrators, need to copy that down and print it up in 42-point Helvetica and frame it and put it in their offices. Because otherwise we're slaves to what can be quantified, and assessment sometimes becomes the tail that wags the dog of learning. So we start doing stuff that lends itself to measurement. Well, folks, it's a hell of a lot easier to measure the number of times a student uses a semicolon correctly in an essay than it is to measure how many wonderful ideas are in that essay. Ergo, the more focused you are on measurable results, the more trivial the teaching tends to become.

Now, even schools that don't use letter and number grades sometimes smuggle in this unnecessary quantification through the back door. They do it by using four or five gradations to rate kids but calling each one by a nicer name: "Exceeds expectations," "Has skill developed," "Still working on it." Or they do it with check marks on rubrics that are sometimes so elaborate that there is no way in hell a teacher can meaningfully assess how advanced each of fifteen or twenty kids is on umpteen different sub-criteria within language arts. Moreover, it leads kids and teachers and parents to do the same kind of pigeonholing. If a rubric with lots of different criteria and sub-criteria helps you think about how well things are going in the class, and where the kid needs help, then use it privately. Describe, don't rate, when it's time to communicate to the students and their parents. Better even than a narrative is a conference, where you talk with the parents and the kids. You know why that's better than a narrative report? Because in a conference there's at least the theoretical possibility of dialogue. Narratives are monologues, although at least they're qualitative as

opposed to quantitative.

Here's another issue about assessment, and this could be an hour-and-a-half talk in its own right. An amazing amount of evidence in educational psychology suggests that even good assessment can be overdone. I'm going to summarize a whole chapter of a book of mine, and a lot of studies that fed that chapter, in one sentence: The more that kids are led to focus on how well they're doing, the more they tend to become unengaged from *what* they're doing. Even rubrics, even portfolios (which, by the way, must replace grades, not yield grades), even exhibitions of learning can be problematic if kids are constantly thinking: "Is this good enough? How am I doing?" You start to sound like former mayor Ed Koch, who used to wander the streets of New York in the '80s going, "How'm I doin'?" "How'm I doin'?" He thought it was cute — as opposed to, say, neurotic.

But I don't care how jazzy or modern or complex your assessment stuff is. What even a lot of the people in the authentic assessment movement haven't grasped, possibly because they're not familiar with this line of research from ed psych, is that any assessment, when overdone, begins to get kids too focused on their improvement and their achievement as opposed to what it is that they're actually learning. There are some progressive schools that actually use standardized tests like the ERBs, even if they're private schools and don't have to. There are some progressive private schools that use standardized tests as part of the admission criteria, and these are, I would argue, terribly problematic practices as well. So, is assessment throughout the school consistent with the general vision of progressive education?

Number five: Are *we* lifelong learners? Are the people in your school going to conferences and reading the journals and asking: How is this year going to be different from last year? What can I learn that will lead my teaching to be something other than a reproduction of what I did last year? Look, I know teachers who have one year of teaching experience—and they've been doing it for twenty-three years. And if you're an administrator, what are you doing to invite such teachers to become lifelong learners? The single greatest obstacle to change in an educational setting is people who say, "We have it down. We are at the pinnacle, the zenith of good education." And if somebody says, "You know, you might want to consider such-and-such," the instant response is, "We're already doing that" or "Well, we can't change that tradition—it's the (name of school) Way." That is a recipe for stagnation.

I think there are some people from Friends schools present tonight. I came across an interesting remark from a guy named Douglas Heath who wrote a Pendle Hill pamphlet. He said Friends schools should be characterized by "divine discontent." He writes, "I feel uncomfortable with a head and a faculty who are contented, who have no innovative experiments in mind and who seem to believe that the Kingdom has already arrived at their school." It's not just a matter of having heads hire faculty members who are open, indeed thirsting, for change; it's a matter of *structures* in the schools that provide it! How much time do teachers at your school spend observing other teachers? In a school that's about professional growth, there is not only an opportunity, there's encouragement to spend time in the classrooms of colleagues, including colleagues who teach different subjects and different ages. High school chemistry teachers need desperately to watch a great first grade science lesson. And there must also be structured opportunities, as there are in other

countries, for teachers to get together and talk about kids and pedagogy.

Beyond the structures, administrators must also create a climate that fosters reflection and improvement. It should be easy for teachers to say, “Help! I’ve got this one kid, I swear, who’s taking up half my class time. I lie awake nights thinking about what I’m going to do with this kid.” But in so many schools, the teachers don’t feel safe enough to call for help. The young and new teachers feel like, “I’m treading on thin ice. I’m supposed to know what I’m doing here,” and the older, seasoned teachers are *really* expected to know by now how to handle such a child. So how can administrators create an environment where there’s both the structure and the climate that encourages us to keep learning?

And my last school-wide question is: Does this place feel for the kids, as well as the staff, like a caring community? How much regular opportunity is there for older and younger kids to come together? Do you have any, I mean *any*, contest or competition set up in the school, which sends the message to each child that other people are potential obstacles to your success? It’s not just a matter of having warm, empathic, caring individuals working in the school; again, it’s a matter of structural change to remove the barriers to caring and to set up the opportunities where it can happen.

Challenging Questions for Progressive Classrooms

And now, a bit more quickly, half a dozen questions having to do with what goes on in individual classrooms, and then I will gladly respond to questions and comments that you have.

Number one: Do we reflect on our premises, and by “we,” I’m talking here about classroom teachers. Do we reconsider our rules and our structures? Do we ask the big questions and challenge ourselves, or are we just offering a groovier version of the old school of education? One example: a kid doesn’t turn in his homework. The old school response is “that’s another zero for you!”—you know, some kind of threat or bribe or rule to make the kid start getting the homework in. In the groovy school, we sit down with the kid and we try to figure out how we can work out a plan, maybe even a formal contract, so that we can solve this problem together and get you to do the homework. “We care about you, you know that, don’t you? We know that every kid—even you—can learn. We know you can do it, so let’s do a little *brainstorming* here to get that homework in.” Now my first question is, What the hell is the homework? Is it worth doing? How much say do the kids have in coming up with it? Because if the teacher is unilaterally imposing the assignments, you’ve got big problems in terms of the depth of the learning, to say nothing of the likelihood of compliance. The research shows that there is zero benefit to giving homework before high school. The common prejudice that it trains kids to develop good habits and develop self-discipline has never, *never* been demonstrated in the research. And there’s no academic benefit to making kids do homework on a regular basis. Even in high school, the only advantage researchers have found is that kids who do more homework end up with higher achievement—as judged by the teachers who assigned the homework. Now there’s a great experimental design, huh? But if you look at any criterion other than teacher-determined grades, there’s no benefit to it. The best progressive schools have kids do stuff at home when it makes sense, when it organically spills out of the classroom: interviewing parents about something, or doing a cooking experiment, or “Because we didn’t have time to finish

today, let's think about this tonight"—as opposed to mandating there should be forty-five minutes of homework every night.

Even putting that aside, if you're going to have homework, does it grab the kids? Is it stuff that's meaningful to them? Otherwise, even your groovier, more respectful way to solve the problem is just a different version of the old school that sees the kid as the problem to be fixed. Anyway, homework is just an example. My first question to teachers is whether we're asking ourselves the radical questions—and by radical I mean “of the root,” as opposed to the piddly little questions of implementation.

Number two: Is the classroom lesson not merely hands-on but also “minds-on”? I was in one sixth grade classroom once where they had “hands-on learning” that consisted of gluing cotton balls to a piece of paper while the students had to memorize the names of different cloud types. You see the problem here? It's nice when kids take rulers and measure things in first grade, but I have this amazing story, which I wish I had left myself enough time for, about a first grade in which the kids basically have to *invent* the *concept* of standard units of measurement before they use rulers.

Some teachers use KWL charts: What do you *Know* about this topic already, what do you *Want* to know, then what did you *Learn*? You've seen this sort of thing, right? But I've seen it done in such a perfunctory fashion that the kids are never really asked to reflect meaningfully about what they want to know; they have to come up with an idea right on the spot. Well, I don't *know* what I want to know about this right now, so I'll come up with any old thing. There's no rich thinking about it. Plus, the way I saw this done once, what the kids decided they wanted to know had very little to do with what then happened in terms of the teaching. To be minds-on doesn't mean you just check off, “Okay, KWL chart done—I'm progressive.” And, by the same token, while I love dioramas as much as the next guy, Lucy Calkins reminds us to ask whether there's enough reading going on during reading time.

Number three: What goes on in your classroom with regard to skills? I think there are three problems that tend to happen. One, of course, is that we put too much emphasis on teaching specific, isolated skills. That's the traditional problem and it laps over into even progressive schools. The second error is to teach no skills at all because we're progressive. But the third error, which I find more intellectually interesting although I don't know if it's more widespread, is to teach the skills, but separate from the rich stuff. So we read great books together, and then we put our books away and learn about the silent “e.” See what I mean? It's a lot harder, but a lot better, to nest the skills in the questions and problems and projects and richer instruction.

Number four: Are we still pursuing a curriculum about getting the right answer? That is a bug-a-bear that's really hard to put in the closet. “Ooh, you're so close!” we caring teachers say when the child says “seven and two are ten.” First of all, you may not know if the kid is close. Her answer may have been one digit off from the correct one, but the child may have gotten there by a lucky guess. Conversely, this kid who's off by an order of magnitude may really understand the underlying principle much better, but made a simple calculation error. Not all wrong answers are equal, and not all right answers are equal, and if the focus is on the thinking and the understanding, you don't become overly preoccupied with the right

answers. But in progressive schools, it's harder to spot this.

I visited a second grade classroom in a mostly African-American public school in Chicago, where the teacher was leading a lesson about tolerance. "What does tolerance mean, boys and girls?" She acknowledges each answer until she gets the one she wants and then says, "Say that again" and writes *that* response, and *only* that response, on the board. Clearly this is not a place about thinking; it's a game called "Guess What's on the Teacher's Mind." We know that happens. But by an interesting quirk of fate, not long after that, I was on the West Coast visiting a classroom as different as one can imagine from that second grade classroom. First, it was a high school. Second, it was a private school. Third, it was an allegedly progressive private school, which you could tell because they called the teacher by her first name and sat on cushions on the floor and there were only seven of them in the room. And the high school teacher was leading a discussion about what makes a society civilized. This struck me as a fairly rich and generative question, but as I watched and listened, it became increasingly clear that this was just a far more sophisticated version of what I had seen two thousand miles away in the other classroom. The teacher gave subtler clues about whether they were warmer, warmer, warmer, cooler, cooler—you know, approximating the right answer.

I was once in Minnesota in a kindergarten classroom. I always go in and look at what's on the walls. I like to see lots of kids' stuff—as opposed to lists of consequences for bad behavior, ranging from "verbal reprimand" down to "get your leg sawed off" or whatever. And I walk into this classroom and I see a bunch of pumpkins that kids had made, and I thought, "Oh, cool," and go over to look at them more closely and I see that they are *identical*. In this classroom, apparently, there's a single right answer even to the question, how do you make a pumpkin from these materials? That was such a marker. I could have predicted so much about how that teacher interacted with those kids. There are various ways in which we play the right answer game.

Number five: How are we doing, teachers, at giving up control? This relates directly to the preceding, of course. If you're going to limit the amount of choice that kids have about making decisions in the classroom, and you will have to, then be prepared to justify doing so. The default solution to problems should be to bring the kids in on it. That process looks different when they're four years old than when they're ten or fifteen, of course. But kids learn how to make decision by making decisions, not by following directions. And even some teachers who I find have a lot of the other progressive stuff are still over-controlling and micromanaging kids, just in more artful ways. I know a first grade teacher in Ohio who says, "My goal is to be as democratic as I can stand." Which I think is a fine rule as long as we append to that, "and my second goal is to learn to stand more with each passing year." The best teachers smack their foreheads, driving home: "Oh, why did I decide that when I could have asked the kids?"

But we still have teachers saying they're giving kids structure, when what they're really doing is controlling them. We still have teachers who act like trial lawyers. Trial lawyers are taught never to ask a question of a witness to which you don't already know the answer. I can see why that makes sense in an adversarial legal system like ours, which is ultimately about winning, not about justice. But why do we do that as teachers, rather than saying, "I have no idea!"? At best, we'll say, "Good question!"—which, when you think about it, is

really pretty self-congratulatory: it must be a good question if *I* don't know the answer to it!

If I walk into a classroom during a whole-class discussion, one of the things I look for is how much conversation goes on between student and student, where he turns and says, "I disagree with what you said, Marcie, because remember last week..." In the less progressive classrooms, the teacher is part of almost every exchange—not because that's a predictor of better learning, but because sometimes we need to be in control.

I watched an amazing video of a classroom where the teacher was actively trying to get the kids to stop raising their hands, and the kids weren't ready to do that; they were too accustomed to it. They needed that crutch at the beginning of the year, but by February they were ready. Why *do* we have kids raise their hands, even when we're lucky enough not have forty kids in a room? We rarely do so ourselves when a whole bunch of people are together at a dinner party. We learn the real-life skills of stopping and saying, "No, you go ahead" if two of us start to speak simultaneously, and we take turns, and so on. Raising hands is not mostly about fairness, it's mostly about underscoring the fact that the teacher alone gets to decide who speaks when. These are questions that even progressive teachers don't always ask because it requires them to give up that which they are accustomed to.

The Chicago educators I mentioned earlier, Smokey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar, had an interesting line in one of their wonderful books: "Teachers probably wouldn't have originally chosen their vocation if they didn't crave the spotlight on some deep psychological level. The hunger to really teach something has probably derailed more student-centered innovations than administrative cowardice and textbook company co-option combined." Interesting, at least to think about.

My last question to you is: Does the social and moral stuff in the classroom reflect the same good commitments that the intellectual stuff does? I was visiting a classroom not too far from here, once upon a time, where I was in heaven with the way these kids were doing both math and language arts. It was everything I think a progressive, understanding-based, learner-centered classroom should be. And then it was time for the class meeting. I wrote about this in a book, and I'll spare you all the details, but the teacher told the kids where they had to sit. She asked, "What's the most important question we have to ask about our field trip?"—to which there was one right answer. Kids who talked were singled out and humiliated in front of everyone else and, in one case, separated from the rest of the group. When the class was not doing academic learning, when it was all about being together and deciding together and issues of community—social, moral, behavior stuff—I might as well have been in the most traditional classroom imaginable.

This took me a long time to learn, but only a sentence or two to say: just as you can't cram a math fact down a child's throat and expect the child to understand mathematics—the child has to invent the understanding from the inside out—so you can't transmit values to kids or instill virtues in them. You can't make them honest or responsible or considerate. These ideas have to be constructed, just like understanding of scientific principles has to be constructed. That's even harder for us because now we *really* have to give up some control.

Part of the problem comes from our focus on behavior, even in a lovely room like this—

don't look around, but there are some Skinnerians in our midst. Like teachers who routinely ask, "What are we going to do about this kid's *behavior*?" The more I hear that word at staff meetings or parent-teacher conferences, the more worried I get. Because when you are focused on behaviors you can see and measure, the likelihood is that you're going to return to rewards and punishments—the best tools we have for extinguishing or reinforcing a given behavior. Progressive schools ought to be concerned about the child who does the behavior and his or her motives and values. That's the social-moral domain, which brings us right back to where I started in talking about the whole child. It's not just the *artistic* elements, as opposed to the purely mathematical. It's the *person* and helping that person to grow, as opposed to controlling and getting compliance and conformity.

I ask these questions of you, these dozen or so questions, in the spirit of learning together and also in the spirit of humility because of how many of the bad examples I give came from my own days in the classroom. I know how hard it is to do all these things right. But it's not a matter of either being there or not being there; it's all a journey we're on, and boy, do we need each other.

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