

The Culture of the Independent Progressive School

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Abstract

Even in this “Age of Data,” independent progressive schools have shown a remarkable persistence in offering an alternative educational model. As Traditional Public Schools (TPS) become even more committed to a testing model of achievement, there are schools that continue to operate on identified progressive educational principles. This paper uses observations and interviews at two upstate New York progressive schools to identify characteristics that define the resiliency of such institutions. The author’s findings identify four characteristics common to a progressive educational culture: familial grouping, informality, play, and democracy. Four elements that are important to this progressive model of instruction tied to the culture at these schools are present: individualized child-centered instruction, curricular flexibility, and choice/space/time, the nature of and future for non-institutional schools is also considered here.

Keywords: Progressive schools, play, informality, child-centered instruction, educational culture

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Introduction

Many of us share common mental pictures associated with the term “school,” an institution characterized by standardization, alignment, and aggregate treatment of individuals. However, even in this “Age of Data,” the educational landscape continues to include learning collectives that value community, democracy, and children having a say in their education. The history of education includes the history of its progressive alternatives to a mainstream institutional system that is constantly being reformed (Eryaman & Bruce, 2015; Little, 2015, Morrison, 2007, Miller, 2002). Independent Progressive Schools create a culture that is both educationally and socially alternative, one that has to be attractive enough to compel parents to step outside of the mainstream, a vision that needs to be renewed generation after generation as they try to draw enough new families to their school, What that culture is and how it is transmitted to new students and their families is the subject of this study. What values are held in common by these schools? I wanted to see what practices are common to such independent schools and what place their vision and mission occupies in the current educational landscape.

Research Questions

I am interested in how schools that do not have a self-renewing “captive audience” survive. Before investigating how such schools thrived, I sought to understand what these schools were. I wanted to better understand how such schools have wrestled with Russell’s (2012) question, “Can any progressive school transcend the tendency to fall back to...the educational environment pressures of society?” (p.46). For this project, I reviewed the literature on independent progressive schools and studied two such schools to find out what elements were in common, what was at the core of the visions that established these schools, and what made them distinct from their public school counterparts. My research questions that guided this project were:

- 1) What is the culture of an independent progressive school?
- 2) What are the elements of instruction at such a school?

As such, I am interested in documenting how progressive schools move forward and continue to thrive in an age when what has come to be seen as “education” is ever more narrowly defined (Kirschner, 2008, Grunzke, 2010).

Progressive Education

The Progressive Education Association established a list of founding principles in 1919 (Little, 2013, p.85) that included “freedom to develop naturally” and “the teacher as a guide, not a task-master.” In 1986, a contemporary version of PEA updated these principles to include, “the student as an active partner in learning, “the school as a humane environment,” and “learning through direct experience.” (Little, 2013, p.85). These are present in the schools that I studied and other often-unaligned, but philosophically similar group of schools that came to be identified as “Progressive Schools.” The subjects of my study share the following characteristics with the progressive tradition: a belief in the paramount importance of Children and their Learning (as opposed to institutions focused on promulgating existing institutional parameters), Curricular and Assessment Flexibility, and the importance of Play.

Children and Learning

By focusing on Children and Learning first, independent progressive schools present a stark contrasting option to standardized education.

Compulsory public education is based on a scarcity model of learning, but some have noted that since “learning is everywhere,” formal educational settings should reflect this in the way they are constructed, (Clouder & Rawson, 2003). In Progressive Schools this often means working with a small number of students and emphasizing a child-centered, democratic, community-building environment (Bruce & Eryaman, 2015; Russell, 2012; Eryaman, 2007, 2009). They allow children to have some influence on what they learn and how they will demonstrate that learning has taken place (Vallberg & Manson, 201) This is done in many schools by making a students’ interests a priority (Labaree, 2005); progressive educators have long believed that children have significant agency to “figure things out” (Manilow, 2009) that constructivist learning is most authentic (Neumann, Marks, & Germain, 1996), and useful for building a true community (Eryaman, 2017).

Curricular and Assessment Flexibility

The Curricular and Assessment Flexibility to found in Progressive Schools is one of the most distinguishing features of this type of learning..

While the curriculum in Progressive Schools varies (Chernetskaya, 2009), there is some evidence that by their very nature these schools favor a flexibility in what is taught (Sherman, 2009, Wagner & Compton, 2012). Many such schools have a “democratic curriculum” (McNear, 1978), and while, “progressive education doesn’t lend itself to a single fixed definition, there are enough elements on which most of us agree,” (Kohn, 2008, p. 19) and it has been noted that the more progressive the curriculum, the better the outcomes (Waltras, 2006, Bullough, 2007).

Play

As institutionalized education has become more task- and efficiency-oriented, progressive schools have maintained play as an important feature of their learning day.

Many Progressive Schools are able to use play to help their children grow. Peter Gray’s work in this area (2013) has been very important in identifying the positive elements of learning through play In discussing play, other scholars have noted that the less a learner is being evaluated, the better their performance (Michaels et al., 1982), the higher the incentives (grades, marks) the less creativity there is (Amabile, 1996), while the more there is a “playful mood” present, the greater the creativity (Estrada, Isen, & Young, 1997). Both the progressive schools that I visited allow time for such willful activity that will lead to the formation of new skills (Byers, 1977). Or as the head of one progressive school said to me, “I like to leave time for the accidents in learning to occur.” (Post, 2016).

In considering the often-cited works on Progressive Education (Cremin, 1964, Graham, 1967) and more contemporary descriptions of these schools (Little & Ellison, 2015, Read, 2014), these three characteristics consistently are present.

Theoretical Framework: “The Three Essential Progressive Philosophies”

Jan Russell’s 2012 work on Progressive Education identified the three essential progressive philosophies as, “child-centered learning, community integration, and democratic-decision-making.” Her findings seemed consistent with historical accounts of progressive schools (Pratt, 1948, Reese, 2001) and more contemporary descriptions (Kohn, 2008, Burton, F., Collaros, & Eirich, 2013). These “philosophies” seemed to be rooted in both instructional practices and prevailing attitudes at today’s Independent Progressive schools.

Child-Centered Learning

Allowing the child’s interests and desires to play an important part in their school day has been noted as a characteristic in many studies of progressive schools (Labaree, 2005, Ivie, 2007,

Chernetskaya, 2013). One scholar explained this approach as, “Teaching and learning are not merely an exchange of data; they are a cooperative journey in which the path is laid subtly before the student. It is the student’s duty to recognize and follow the path by his own means.” (Manilow, 2009, 9. 218)

Community Integration

It is important that the school itself functions as a healthy community where individuals learn from, rather than simply compete with each other (Kohn, 2008) and in the process come together to create knowledge (Lieberman, 1994; Eryaman, 2006). There also needs to be a living connection between the school community and the larger community it is located in (McNear, 1978, Ramaley, 2005, Schneider & Garrison, 2008, Saha & Dworkin, 2009).

Democratic-Decision-Making

The most comprehensive examination of what democratic decision-making looks like comes from Ann Angell’s review of the literature on this topic. (Angell, 1991). Angell identified six elements observable in classrooms employing this style of instruction. These include “Democratic Leadership Behavior” where individuals are encouraged to express their views (p.250), “Teacher Verbal Behavior” that used divergent questioning” (p. 251), “Respect For Students” that encouraged tolerance (p. 252), and open discussion of sensitive issues (p. 253).

Dr. Russell’s work was key to my study here. From the existing literature prior to my observations, I read many scholars who also concurred with her findings on child-centered learning (Elliot, Bradbury, & Garner, 2014), community integration (Engel, & Martin, 2005), and democratic decision-making (Chernetskaya, 2013). In formulating both my methodology and research questions, I was influenced by her work and descriptions of what contemporary progressive schools share.

Methodology

I gathered my data for this qualitative project through direct observation of school activities, face-to-face individual and group conversations and interviews and phone interviews. All learning institutions---traditional or otherwise--- are social entities and qualitative research with its ability to study social interactions in the process of making meaning is the best choice for the work that I am doing. What I observed was naturalistic, occurring in its native environment, and interpretive on the part of its participants: two hallmarks of qualitative work (Holloway, 1997). Through interviewing I was able to compare individual perceptions and phenomenologies that characterized what goes on at each school (Melterud, 2001). Finally, I attempted to include as many constituent groups as possible in my work, observing students while speaking with a variety of adults in each school community so as to better strengthen my ultimate findings. (Lofland, et al, 2006)

My methodology was characterized by purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013). In looking for independent progressive schools, numerous individuals pointed me to one of the schools used in this study, certainly the largest such school in this county. They were an obvious choice. In interviewing the founder of that school and asking her about its history, she mentioned the second school that I used in this study as having been helpful in their expansion to educating middle school age children. I need to emphasize that one of the factors in using these two schools was the openness, cooperation, and eagerness of the staff and leaders there to share their experiences. I did briefly consider including a third independent school in another state but traveling and logistics did not permit me to do so.

Prior to beginning this study I met with the founders of each school who approved my work there and informed the parents of my presence. My observations of the students were done while sitting next to them within the classrooms of each school. I interviewed each teacher on one occasion and the founders at both schools---one of them on a single occasion, the other three times. All of these interviews were recorded, transcribed, and categorized on a data grid I created. I directly observed

them working with students a total of fifteen times between the two schools. Three of these observations were for half of the school day, the rest were for the entire day. I followed up what I observed with direct questions during the interviewing process. Trustworthiness has also been strengthened by the anonymity of all who were involved.

Specifically I used purposive sampling in selecting these two schools, which have little connection to each other in terms of location, population, or teachers. In doing so I hoped to increase the dependability of my project. Additionally, the categories that I created and discuss here were based solely on the information provided to me through my interviews and direct observations, in a grounded research effort. My aim was to maximize trustworthiness through this “conformability of findings.”

I had no previous contact with progressive schools and I relied on grounded analysis (Glaser 1993, 1996) to inform what I was seeing and ultimately in the formation of categories and themes. This was particularly true in considering my direct observations of students. In laying the groundwork for my coding I relied solely on my interviews with the staff there and my direct observations within the schools. The coding work was a product of my research done at these two schools. It was only after my research there was concluded for this project that I did the coding work. At that point I constructed a “master comments grid” for the adults that I interviewed to aid in my narrative analysis (Herman et al, 2012) of what each was saying about their conceptions of their school. It was only through these two sources of information that I was able to identify recurring themes of democracy and community.

Schools and Data

“Apple Tree School” is in a suburban area in a mid-sized Northeast city. I began going there in September 2015 and made many visits there throughout the 2015-16 school year.. I had the opportunity to observe portions of and the entire school day at times. I was also able to sit in upon teacher planning sessions and observed the school’s director interact with both students and staff. I watched the students of the school as an entire group and was able to observe each of the three full-time teachers instruct different age-groups of students. I was allowed the freedom to roam throughout each of the schools and was able to see many different configurations of students being instructed, from kindergarteners to eighth-graders. One afternoon, after school was over, I conducted a nearly-hour long interview with the Apple Tree School’s founder. I interviewed all three of the school’s teachers, two of them in person and one over the phone. I was able to speak with five parents who had/are sending their children to the school, some face-to-face, others on the phone. I was also able to interview the Apple Tree’s director on more than one occasion.

“Indian Orchard School” is in rural Central New York State. I was able to visit there on multiple occasions and was able to watch the daily activities of the school, including seeing the two full-time teachers and one part-time instructor at work. I conducted two face-to-face interviews with the school’s founder, who still teaches there and is involved on a daily basis, along with speaking with her on the phone. I was also able to interview all of the school’s teachers face-to-face during one of my visits there.

I visited these two schools 15 times between September 2015 and June 2016. 13 of these visits were for observation purposes only, with 9 of them being full school days and the others for a portion of the school day. My other two visits were primarily for interview purposes. I also conducted interviews after school and on the telephone. All of my interviews with teachers were at least 15 minutes long, with many of them being over thirty minutes. I interviewed the founders of each of the schools for more than 45 minutes. All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and condensed onto a grid. Each interviewee was asked eight common questions during the interview, centering around the culture of the school, their description of their school, and its advantages for the children who attend there. Additionally I regularly reviewed each school’s Facebook and web sites.

Both of the settings that I observed were informal and relaxed. The facilities play a part in the story of these schools and you can't help but notice how comfortable each of these places are. If part of the mission of Progressive Education is to treat everyone there more as a human being than depending on the role they play, then these places contribute to that as much as the practice having students call teachers by their first names.

"Apple Tree School" is in a building that used to be a Jewish synagogue. It has two levels, with the largest and main one upstairs and a basement level that is divided into classrooms. Both have the look of a Community Center where kids might be dropped off for an after-school program or a Saturday activity with their friends. A large carpet takes up much of the space upstairs. At different times 31 students gather around its perimeter to listen and speak. The remainder of the space includes desks, games, shelves of books, a cramped planning area for the teachers and the director's office. It is charmingly busy and delightfully cluttered.

"Indian Orchard School" is located in a building that was once used to house the Dean of Students on a college campus. It is a former home so the feeling of warmth and caring that resides there is no surprise. The 24 students enter through the backdoor into a kitchen where they put their lunches into a refrigerator. The morning meeting is held around a rug in the living room, the children eat lunch at tables in the Dining Room, and instruction is done throughout the house, including in bedrooms along the hallway. The academics here are of the highest level, but it has all the familiarity of your grandmother's house, as one of the teachers there said to me, "The setting tells the story."

All of my contact with both of these schools was very cooperative, open, and friendly, everyone I talked to was eager to share their experiences and educational views.

Data Analysis

In my Theoretical Framework section, I referred to the work of Jan Russell (2012) and her identifying characteristics of progressive schools as, "child-centered learning, community integration, and democratic-decision-making." It is with those categories in mind that I considered the data I gathered in my observations and interviews at the two schools. I was not trying to fit what I saw into those exclusive categories nor I was attempting to confirm her findings. In reading over my field notes and interview transcriptions I was attempting, with her work in mind, to consider what were the observable and confirmable elements that I was both seeing in my daily observations and hearing identified as well in individual interviews. I created a grid with the answers to 8 questions that I asked each staff member at the two schools. Each answer was coded for summary descriptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and I performed a similar task with the transcripts of my interviews and with my fieldnotes in my descriptive stage of coding (Saldana, 2009).

In my next analytical coding stage (Jones 2011), I began to categorize my data. From that I was able to identify themes and specific language that occurred repeatedly. Russell's three characteristics were included in what I discovered, but as the "findings" below reveal, I also found other common categories. It was at this point that I began to see a distinction between those descriptors and sub-categories that were concerned with instructional and learning behaviors and those that were broader, touching on the instructional, but only as one of a number of phenomena that went on at the schools regularly. As my coding continued I was able to group learning and teaching themes separate from these cultural identifiers.

Findings

In discussing what I found at these two schools, I divide my analysis into two parts. In the first one, "A Different Type of School Culture - How These Progressive Schools Are Distinct from Public Schools," I will consider the specifics of the culture shared by these two schools. I will specifically address four defining characteristics. This first section connects to my first research question and also

connects back to the literature on progressive education and are connected to the beliefs that underpin the philosophy and practices of the school. The cultural facets at both schools were familial grouping, informality, play, and democracy.

My second section of the findings focuses on the instruction that is done at these schools and addresses my second research question. It considers five facets of the learning dynamic that engages the teachers and students at these private progressive schools. The instructional characteristics that I observed were individualized child-centered instruction, curricular flexibility, choice/space/time, and teacher autonomy

A Different Type of School Culture – Defining Characteristics

The Progressive tradition of education evident in these two schools can be characterized as “pedagogical”, rather than “administrative.” Its continuance is important for it is extending a view of children and their human nature that runs contrary to the assumptions of an institutionalized factory-like state school system. Rousseau’s view that children are able to naturally educate themselves and Pestalozzi’s belief that the needs of the individual need to be valued over that of the society (Ruddy, 2004) were continued in America with the work of Emerson and Thoreau who sadly saw compulsory school attendance as, “making a straight-cut ditch out of a free meandering brook.” (Fuller, 1992) This was also present in the Temple School of Bronson Alcott who valued students’ personal experiences over rote learning. (Gura, 2007) In an age of standardized education, it is the progressive school that continues these lofty aspirations.

In this section on Culture, I will discuss the cultural elements that I found at the two schools that I observed at. These include Familial, as opposed to classroom grouping of children that is characterized by age-mixing rather than grade levels. Along with that I will describe Informality, Play, and Democracy as indispensable elements of these schools.

Familial Grouping

In reviewing my data, I attempted to focus on the experience of children who attend these schools as people, not students. In particular I was interested in the relational aspects there. What I found between students and with their teachers is unlike the formally educative authoritarian models of Traditional Public Schools (TPS). Unlike TPS that are based on scarcity and competition, these schools are more like a family and a community than a classroom. It is impossible not to compare what is intentionally done in these two progressive schools with reality of life in today’s traditional public school where conformity is the paramount value and standardization and continual assessment affects all that is done there. This is one of the elements that makes these schools distinct from their TPS counterparts.

As part of the project, I asked all of the instructors what the culture of the school was. Half of them used the word “community” in some context. Those who did not used phrases that connected to the notion of community and relating to others, such as “taking care of others,” “a laboratory for how to be a human being,” “home-like,” and “we all work together to learn.”

My observations at the schools show two close-knit groups. The older children regularly took care of the younger ones and the younger children seemed to feel comfortable interacting with older students. Each setting had a feeling of one unified group, rather than being subdivided into smaller units that were distinct from each other. The different academic groups did not seem to lead to a “clique-like” atmosphere of exclusion between different students. At one of the schools when newer students came to visit, the older ones helped them to negotiate this new uncertain environment. Both schools place children at their level of ability in grouping them for academics, instead of a less-flexible grade model. There is a sense of shared responsibility and caring for each other that is present when the children engage with each other in academic and non-academic contexts. In both schools I saw

children willing to help each other and share what they know with other children. I did not see a sense of hierarchy and exclusivity which would damage this notion of community.

This familial model values collaboration over the competition seen throughout the public school system. Significant research has confirmed the value of mixed-age groupings (Gray, 2013, Vygotsky, 1978) in instructional and social outcomes. The familial model, while not present in TPS, continue to be used in progressive schools.

Informality – Non Hierarchical Relations and Environment

There is an intentional informality to both of these schools that contributes to the learning environment, allowing them to exist more as families than institutions, and certainly defines them. As I mentioned previously some of that comes from the settings themselves---one resembles a community center and the other is a house. As you go through the rooms, their shelves and storage areas are filled; cluttered, but not in a disorganized way. The look is certainly non-institutional which is congruent with a progressive approach to learning.

There are many things about these schools that are non-hierarchical. The showiness of dressing for school is not present; the students dress for comfort, like they're hanging out with their friends. In some ways, there isn't a lot of difference between the way that the students and teachers look. There is a "leveling" of sorts that is also apparent in the way the adults and children speak with each other. The students call the teachers by their first name. One of the teachers said to me, "We're all equals, in a sense." Another teacher who had attended a progressive school when she was young, said that she had never addressed an adult by their last name until she attended a public high school and that formality introduced an unneeded level between teachers and students.

The morning discussions that take place around a rug in both schools have more of the feel of a family talking things over, than a class of students competing for attention. This is all part of a relaxed approach to learning that also characterizes the schools' instruction where the teachers are not afraid to admit that they don't know something, strive to bring relevance to lessons as much as possible, and at times turn over instructional responsibilities to the children. At Apple Tree School, students have a chance to present a "Legacy," where they speak in depth on a topic of their choosing. At Indian Orchard School, two students taught a unit on Physics.

"We don't start with hierarchies," one teacher told me. "Traditional school cannot support a collaborative model, based on hierarchies."

Play

Both schools use play in at least two different ways to benefit their students. Educational games are included as a part of learning; at the first school there is an extensive supply of academic games that were made by adults there---some of them are nearly 15 years old. I saw them used on a number of occasions. One morning I watched a group of 5th and 6th Graders discussing a game that they had developed and talking through the rules that they should use, rewards and consequences within the game, and how a winner would be determined.

In a larger sense, these two schools are filled with a playful attitude towards learning. I was reminded of Isen's finding that an increase in a playful mood sparks an increase in creativity (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987). To listen to the students in these schools participate in a discussion, interact with the adults, and ask each other questions is to see young people just starting to understand their creative powers. Unlike public schools and the seriousness with which they address achievement today and the demand for "rigor," I never saw the adults and students at these progressive schools burdened about what they were doing. These are joyful places, due at least in part, to the degree of

play that is encouraged and shared. The most playful, fun moments were when all the students gathered together for a discussion.

At the top of the stairs leading to the main room of the first school is a quote from Einstein: “Play is the highest form of research.” I asked each of the teachers to tell me what Einstein’s quote meant to them.

“It means everything,” one said. “Learning equals play equals discovery. That’s where the magic happens.” “Play is the foundation of everything,” another said. “Play is exploring. Some tied the notion of play more directly to academics. “Play is problem-solving and negotiation. Kids need to figure out things on their own.” “The best kind of learning happens when you don’t think you’re learning.” “Lots of learning happens through play.” “Students learn in different ways and play creates interest.”

Some of the teachers saw play as an activity that helped nurture positive qualities such as “social interaction.” “pursuing your own goals,” “getting to decide,” and “using your own volition.”

One was very general in her appreciation of it: “Play sets you up for everything.”

Democracy

Neither of these schools is a democracy in the sense that the teachers and founder own the authority and make policy decisions. However, there is much about what they do that is democratic. . Each of them follows the follows the four characteristics necessary in a classroom climate that lead to citizenship outcomes as defined by Angell (1991). These include peer interaction in cooperative activities, free expression, respect for diverse viewpoints, and student participation in deliberations and decision making

The adults honor the children’s opinions by being open to including them in regular discussions about issues facing the school. They teach them about their responsibility to act fairly themselves and towards others (Apple Tree School’s rules are: Take care of self, materials, and others). One of the teachers described the school’s culture as, “Democratic” and identified one of the advantages of the school as, “learning to be a good citizen.” It is obvious that it is a main goal for each of these schools to produce students who are responsible members of a community. The emphasis on community and democracy makes these places where, “We all work together to learn,” “all have ownership,” “we’ve all got something to learn,” and school, “feels like an extension of home.”

In this section I have shown four aspects of progressive school culture that distinguish them from the TPS model. Familial Grouping and age-mixing leads to positive outcomes both socially and academically. Informality in both relationships and environment create a more relaxed, helpful setting to learn in. Play is used to benefit the students and was identified by many adults as key to the learning that goes on there. Finally, these two schools incorporate the essential elements necessary to advance a sense of democratic citizenship in their students.

Instructional Characteristics of a Progressive School

The Progressive vision of education has long featured an emphasis on child-centered education (Cremin, 1961, Graham, 1967) that is rooted in experiences (Dewey, 1956, Pratt, 1948). As Progressive education developed in the 20th century, two competing visions, the “pedagogical” and the “administrative” were put forward (Labaree, 2005) with the former ” focused on child-centered learning, discovery learning, and learning how to learn.” (p. 277) While it was the “administrative” with its emphasis on social efficiency that has come to dominate the TPS environment, the pedagogical has continued to find a home in the world of progressive schools (Little, 2013) In observing these two schools I was looking for first-hand examples of what instruction in such an

environment was characterized by. I will show that Individualized Child-Centered Instruction continues to have a central place in contemporary progressive schooling. I will also describe how Curricular Flexibility and Assessment distinguish how learning occurs at these schools. The concepts of Choice, Space, and Time are visible here and important to each child's learning environment.

Individualized Child-Centered Instruction

In observing the instruction at both schools it was apparent that an emphasis is placed on meeting each child where they are at. This is reflected in the academic groupings which are not age- or grade-dependent, but are organized by each child's individual abilities. However, there were some differences between the two schools. "Apple Tree School" has weekly "learning contracts" that it uses to organize each student's work. Every student has a different contract and the teachers spend a significant amount of time making sure that they are addressing each student's needs in the different academic areas with the proper materials, activities, and groupings. A teacher there said that while each child did not have their own curriculum, they did have their own "pacing," a comment that the school's founder also mentioned. The second school used more general groups and followed a five-year curricular plan that they had put together especially for their school. I noticed teachers there repeatedly making an effort to tailor what they were doing and the activities that they were using to instruct so that each child was "met where they are at." The school has a main lesson that all of the students get together, but the specific elements for it are expanded on to the students separately, so that they are able to learn at their ability level. In this way, the second school both has a unified learning community and effective child-centered instruction so that each student is able to grow from the point which they individually are at. This ability to balance maintaining community wholeness while treating each student as an individual is certainly a strength of the second school. In my interviews with the teachers about the advantages a child would have in attending there, I heard two different types of answers, some from each school. Some focused on treating the child as a unique person and included, "they are listened to," "individualized curriculum," "individual attention," "a true sense of self," "we look at individual choices," and "it helps shape who you become." Others focused on the sense of community found there: "a social understanding of being part of a community," "recognize self and voice and use them with others," and "there are kids here who don't fit in the [public school] model." Again it is obvious that these two progressive schools are able to both effectively create a community and meet individual needs.

Curricular Flexibility

One of the most interesting features of both of these schools is their use of traditional curriculum resources for their instruction, albeit in more individualized ways. The founder of the Indian Orchard School referred to what they do as, "The Traditional Progressive Education Model." A teacher at Apple Tree School described their approach as, "Using traditional materials, but in a non-traditional way." Another teacher spoke of the importance of knowing parts of speech and grammar. However, these materials are used as a starting point for more individualized work.

Freed from the curricular dictates of a district, these two schools could choose to use a variety of materials or none at all. What I saw at the two schools was that while they have a progressive view of how children should be instructed and like to allow them some degree of choice, it is, "freedom within a structure," and part of that structure is a traditional curriculum. Apple Tree School regularly uses mainstream educational curriculum from established publishers, particularly for their Math instruction. A child's "contract work" for the day frequently includes worksheet pages. The reading instruction is also very traditional, particularly at the early grades where phonics instruction is heavily emphasized. However, as the children become independent readers, the teachers take considerable time to work their way through novels and stories and spend a great deal of time in discussion and questions about what is being read. In this way, traditional materials are used to yield a deeper literary experience that is not typical for school settings designed to train a student primarily to pass a test. Instructional groups are age-mixed, depending on ability.

Instruction at Indian Orchard School is based on a “rotating curriculum,” first written down by the founder over 20 years ago that they still largely stick to. She compared it to a “college-model” of course offerings that progresses. They also use very time-tested resources with their Math instruction, including a Math book that is more than 15 years old. I saw older students using worksheets to solve quadratic equations and younger students doing “tracings” of coins—both rather dated activities. However, there were also students using an abacus and others discussing world civilizations. Students in both settings have a great deal of freedom in what they write and the time they can take to finish a piece. Truly, there is an eclectic mix of subject matter and activities resulting in an education that is both developmentally appropriate and focused.

Assessment

Both schools eschew school assessments as they are traditionally understood. They measure their students’ learning but not in the way that traditional public schools gauge achievement. As progressive schools, they have identified other methods to see how their students are progressing.

The teachers told me that they do not give paper-to-pencil tests, either to individual students or groups. The founder of Apple Tree School did tell me that they use “reading inventories” and checklists to document reading levels. Neither school gives state assessments, although both will have 8th Graders about to leave their school practice some standardized assessments to prepare them for what lies ahead.

Both schools provide narrative-style report cards twice a year to parents. They do not include reading levels, letter grades, or test scores, but instead are the teachers’ description of a student’s progress to that point. Both founders noted that the report cards that they provide are more extensive now as parents’ expectations have changed in this era of testing.

Choice, Space, Time

As I looked through my notes on what I observed at these two schools, these are the three elements that kept reappearing. Teachers spoke about “working with them where they’re at,” helping children gain, “a true sense of self,” and how, “they feel heard.” Students at these schools don’t seem to be, “on the clock.” In all of months of observation I never once saw an activity that had to be concluded in a rush. There are schedules and things that need to get done, but nearly everything was able to be carried over to tomorrow. Or further. At the first school a girl named Chloe talked to me about a story she had been working on, “since last year.” Physically, even though these are small areas everyone always seemed to have the space they needed to comfortably work.

These elements are also present here for the teachers. In discussing the importance of their collaboration with each other, one of the teachers at Indian Orchard School talked about how she appreciated the freedom she was given in deciding how to instruct. Although there are no “planning periods,” here all of the teachers talked about how their schools were only able to work due to the sharing attitude that they each brought to their work. The founders have intentionally created an environment where, “All of us are completely invested in this non-mainstream effort.” Many of them mentioned proposing teaching units that they had never done before and sharing resources with each other. They are interested in providing each other with the space that they need to do their job comfortably. “We need to be able to work together, even though we have differing ideas,” one said.

In this section I provided the characteristics of a Progressive School learning environment. Structured around a child-centered education, these schools take advantage of the Curricular Flexibility that they have being outside of the TPS landscape and also use alternative methods of Assessments. Latitude in Choice, Space, and Time is extended to each student so as to better accommodate their unique learning needs

Discussion

“Progressive education only exists in the ways that people bring it to life” (Read, 2014, p. 39)

Progressive Education has been a resilient schooling option for more than a century. Despite operating counter to the educational mainstream, there continues to be a segment of American families that want their children educated in a setting that values community, democracy, and the individual. In a sense they are paradigmatic of these Progressive Educational principles and following in a predictable tradition,

However, I believe that these two schools are also reflective of the contemporary educational scene in this country. No matter how it is perceived, the standards movement, the mandated testing brought about by *No Child Left Behind*, and the adoption of the Common Core have all led to a narrowing of the educational vision in this country. The two schools I studied reflect this with their use of learning contracts, traditional materials, and expanded report cards.

In general, the growth of charter schools and the increase in homeschooling in this country have decreased the private school population (Marcus, 2015). When I spoke with both teachers and founders at these schools a number of them mentioned “financial stability” and “improvements to the facility” or “owning our own building” as goals when they look to the future. The founder of Indian Orchard School said, “We’re all on a short string here.” Progressive Education may be an alternative to the mainstream, but it cannot help but be affected by the forces that are molding what goes on in the public school classroom. While dissatisfaction with public schools may be a constant, any school that charges tuition is going to have a hard time attracting students when other “fee-less” options are available.

What I found at these two schools both confirms what the literature has shown as being common to the progressive tradition and stands in contrast to contemporary schooling as at least a subculture of the educational landscape, if not a counter-culture. The foundation for all that is done there is established by the four elements of the culture that I saw---familial grouping, informality, play, and democracy. Each of these aspects emphasizes the communal, whereas contemporary mainstream education values competition and measures a school’s success by its individual achievement (Anderson, 2009, Sharp, 2006). Whereas tests scores are the bottom line determinant for many institutions, these learning collectives value the more personal aspects of the school day by encouraging a breaking down of the structures of the school day through their use of play (Gray, 2013) and alternative methods of assessing growth (Kohn 2008, Little, 2013). In doing so they are both subverting the accepted schooling model and putting forth a learning paradigm based more on relationships between people than the completion of tasks. This is reflective of the way that people learn for the most part, out of the reach of institutional schooling (Michaels et al., 1982)

A more responsive instructional approach has developed out of this culture. I see the teaching and learning that goes on at these schools better suited to what young learners need. While the literature has focused on the centrality of child-centered learning (Russell, 2012, Labaree, 2005), I believe that what I saw here and what is pointed to, if not necessarily explicitly identified in the literature, are the paramount values of choice, space, and time. All of the other instructional characteristics are reflective of these concepts being prioritized over traditional school practices. Some have identified these as aspects of non-institutional schooling (Zak, 2014) and others have noted their connection to autodidaxy (Wacker, 2009), but here they are present in school settings and produce the curricular and assessment flexibility that give these schools their ability to best respond to their students’ needs. In doing so, they have attracted a certain type of teacher, one who resists turning learning into a business and instead is more interested in focusing on the individual and their potential (Kenny, 2010). The work that is being done here can be compared to the instruction at Mission Hill School in Boston (Chaltain, 2013), with its emphasis on high quality work and learner as an individual as opposed to the standardization that characterizes contemporary public schools.

Both Apple Tree School and Indian Orchard School work, quietly, proudly out of the mainstream, by treating their students as individuals who deserve time, space, and choice to grow into a valued member of a healthy community. John Dewey said it, Francis Parker said it, and hundreds of their disciples have said it as well. But it's difficult to top the words of one of these school's founders when she said, "This is a place where they were cared for and cared about."

Further Research

The future of schools such as the ones I have studied is uncertain. As some research shows, alternative schools have a tendency to go into decline once their founder leaves. Additionally, what constitutes an education is now viewed differently, with data and standardized documentation a regular part of many students' education. To maintain its emphasis on more humanistic elements of collective learning and still attract enough students to survive will be a challenge. How they do this will require further study.

A limitation of this study if the number of schools I was able to visit and the time I was able to spend on site.. The progressive schooling landscape truly is a culture and deserves more of an ethnographic approach than I could take with it due to my teaching responsibilities. A scholar who could observe, interview, participate as a teacher, and more fully engage with families at events outside of the school day over the course of an entire school year would be ideal. The data gathered in such a role would allow the researcher to identify the unique cultural elements of a private progressive school and contrast them with a contemporary public school.

Further research should also be done into the characteristics of the contemporary progressive school. In examining two I found some elements that surprised me, such as a reliance on traditional curriculum. Even the term "Progressive Education" has some confusion about it (Kleibard, 1987, Kaplan, 2013). How it is defined, who fits that definition, and who claims that mantle are all areas for future study. I would like to see consideration of the question of a progressive private school as not only a "subculture" in contemporary America, but also perhaps as a "counter-culture" whose very existence runs contrary to the assumptions on which public education and how children learn have been built.

Outside of the realm of Progressive Education is the larger question of survival of start-up private schools after their original founder leaves. Educational visions can be very personal things and the continuance of a school into a second-generation of leadership needs to be looked at more closely. Finally, a longitudinal study of the graduates of progressive schools and their career and post-secondary choices might reveal some important advantages and limitations of this particular educational path.

Concluding Thoughts

Schools are now seen more as institutions than intentional communal learning communities. Test scores, adopted curriculums, and teaching strategies receive widespread attention as each town's local school attempts to imitate national trends toward a common accepted curriculum designed to transform students into employees from their first day in kindergarten to their last step on the standardized ladder. Competitiveness is instilled with measurements at each point on the path, Education the product has replaced learning as a joy and standardized schooling now crowds out any other less formal mental pictures of learning, even if they more closely align with a child's life.

To have the courage to start a school without the funding, facilities and materials, and without the captive audience of a local community expected to routinely send their children to your doors is a noteworthy thing. For more than two decades, these two have by their practices and philosophy continued the progressive tradition of child-centered education aimed at furthering community and democracy. By creating a community of informality, play, and choice they serve as an option for

families who do not feel served by the TPS model. By instructing with the child's interests in mind, creativity in curriculum, and using assessments that are appropriate rather than dictated, teachers who have seen the limitations of the TPS model are showing that learning may take place outside of the existing standardized system. Intentional learning communities may forego many of the trappings of the formalized system, and produce students with curiosity and wonder who go on to success in higher education and beyond.

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