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A Letter to Future Educators: Making the Case for Progressive Education

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge Northeastern Illinois University professor, Dr. Brian Schultz, for developing a course for pre-service teachers to explore, question, and practice the philosophies of middle school curriculum in the context of progressive education.



A Letter to Future Educators: Making the Case for Progressive Education

Melissa Barone, Northeastern Illinois University

Introduction

Northeastern Illinois University requires preservice teachers to take EDFN 313: Problems, Issues, and Practices in Education, to receive a middle school endorsement. The course was offered in the summer of 2016 over a six-week period. The main objective of the course was to discuss the issues in education related to the middle school curriculum philosophy while introducing ideals of progressive education. This is a daunting task in a short period of time. This is especially true when most students have not been exposed to the historical, philosophical, and sociopolitical aspects of middle level education in the context of progressive education. I was somewhat surprised by some of my peers' rejection of and disinterest in the progressive curriculum we were exposed to throughout the course. There was an overarching fear that developed an argument against progressive education. This fear is one that current practicing teachers continually voice. It is the fear of not meeting the rigorous state-mandated standards and not preparing students to do well on numerous standardized tests. As preservice teachers, this is our time to explore and innovate, not to allow outside forces to dim our light and spirit for transformative education. For this reason, I am writing a letter to my fellow peers. The letter is divided into two sections. The first makes the case for implementing progressive middle school curriculum. The second describes a method of implementing the ideals of progressive education through a Social Action Curriculum Project (SACP). This letter is meant to encourage a new generation of educators to invert the curriculum we once knew and develop meaningful educational experiences for our future students.

Reflection

Dear Future Educators,

We are beginning our teaching careers in what could be the most hyper-standardized time in education history. The anxiety that comes with our profession has increased due to state and federal mandates that allow student test scores to determine our pay and job security. This is a valid concern for preservice teachers, however, now

more than ever is the time for us to change the path education is taking. We should move away from teaching standards to prepare students for a test. We are preparing for a test that will never come close to defining the imaginative, inquisitive, expansive minds of our students. It is wasting the potential of students and teachers alike. Now is the time to develop our students as problem solvers and innovators so that they are prepared to face the challenges of society with diligence and thoughtfulness.

Although it may be difficult at times, we should not allow the stress of meeting mandated objectives hinder our ability to create educational experiences that promote future generations to be problem solvers and lifelong learners. Teaching to prepare for a test does not promote thinking because the thoughts are being pushed on children by “authority” figures. In the words of educational philosopher John Dewey (1963), “A thought is not a thought unless it is one’s own” (p. 35). I trust we can change the thought-constricting path of education through the integration of progressive education.

Making the Case for Progressive Education

Progressive education is not a new idea; in fact, it’s been around longer than what most would call “traditional” education. The rise of progressive education in America was a response to increased urbanization and industrialization in the early 1900s. Reform was wanted at this time because people were questioning the democratic nature of society as they faced devastating labor conditions, racial inequality, and corporate influence. It is not surprising that this questioning led to the development of progressive education. Progressive education began as a way to reform society by creating an environment within schools for students to engage in democratic practices and explore the wonderment of childhood. The goal was and still is for students to bring the democratic practices and wonderment from their classrooms into their future society.

We still live amongst inequality and injustice, proving that the path to progressive education is ongoing. As future educators, we must remember why it is we decided to enter the field of education. Was it to follow the instructions of a textbook? Maybe you were excited to enter the field to align objectives to standards? Or instead were you motivated by the potential education has to make the world better than you left it? When we feel cornered by outside influences and fatigued by the profession, we need to let our passion be the motivation that drives us. With this drive we can then provide the educational experiences that children deserve.

There are many different aspects of progressive education, but the two major characteristics of this reforming education invert the traditional curriculum. Progressive education and middle school curriculum revolve around the interests of students and solving current social problems. In essence, these two traits ensure that the students are the central focus of the curriculum. It seems today that most classrooms do not hold students in the center but instead allow outside forces, such as doing well on standardized tests, to push students to the side. Should we allow the needs and interests of corporate powers or competitive politicians to determine the curriculum? Unfortunately this is often the case, therefore learning in school has turned into a competitive sport to get the best scores. We’ve allowed people without knowledge of

education to confuse doing well with beating others (Kohn, 2010). Children are innately curious, which is why the curriculum should revolve around the questions students ask (NMSA, 2010), not the facts which outside influences think should be memorized.

We, with our students, need to take back our classrooms from these outside influences. As educators, it is basic practice to be reflective of our teaching. We should continually reflect on our students' role in their education so that we can always improve the experiences for them. Do you see students as receptacles of the information you're providing? Or do you see them instead as curious beings with the capacity to learn through experience? School should be a place for children to "get a life experience in which [they] should delight and find meaning for its own sake" (Dewey, 1963, p. 37). We must remember that our students deserve a prominent role in creating the curriculum because they have the most at stake. Consider your students co-creators of the curriculum, share the classroom with them, and always question if you are giving enough choice to ensure students' interests are guiding the curriculum.

In order to ensure the interests of students are central to the curriculum, we as teachers must have the courage to share authority with our students. Do not think of yourself as the provider of information. Consider yourself a lifelong learner and enjoy learning and exploring unknown territory with your students. Together with our students we can "become jointly responsible for a process in which all are grown" (Freire, 2000, p. 80). The roles of teachers and students can be interchangeable; do not fear learning from and with your students. This is an action worth taking as it "leads to increased achievement, demonstrates democratic processes, and furthers meaningful student-teacher relationships" (NMSA, 2010, p. 17). When we share the authority of the classroom, the students will be open to sharing their interests and questions.

Greatness is in store for you to observe when you open your classroom to the interests and inquiries of children. Students will fully engage in the curriculum because they are intrinsically motivated through their personal interests. When students see that the experiences they are having in school are personally meaningful, they will want to produce works of greatness because it is work that matters to them. When questioning the concept of interest-guided curriculum, I encourage you to think of a time you lost track of your surroundings learning about something that interests you. Have you ever been lost in a book about growing your own garden? Have you been engulfed in reading sports stats while building your ideal fantasy football team? It is important that we realize the powerful impact integrating the interests of students can have on motivation and learning. But more importantly, we must see interest-based learning as an opportunity for students to experience freedom. We can give our students the freedom to have ownership of their education. If they experience this democratic practice in the classroom, they will expect nothing less outside the school walls.

The next attribute that I consider critical to the transformation of our current education situation is the ability to involve solving social problems within school walls. The overarching purpose of progressive education is to aid in the solving of societal problems. Who better to question and participate in developing these solutions than the children it affects, both now and in the future, if these issues are left unresolved? You may be thinking that these are not topics that should be brought into the classroom. I

encourage you to keep an open mind because students, especially adolescents, are going through a developmental phase where they naturally question both their role in society and society around them. Why shouldn't the school, a place where students spend much of their lives, be an environment where they can openly question and discuss the issues they see in society? We as educators have a responsibility to create a classroom environment that allows students to feel open to do just that. James Beane (1990), a well-known teacher and scholar, explains that the "curriculum must include possibilities for all views to be heard and for the presence of all people to be recognized" (p. 65). By allowing students the opportunity to address and discuss their concerns with society, we are allowing them to practice democratic skills so that they will engage in respective discourse and understand the value of their voices.

Implementing Progressive Education

At this point you may be wondering why I am describing what seems to be a utopia compared to our current constrictive teaching environment. However, I believe that this type of education can and should be integrated into the current system. My professor, Dr. Brian Schultz, proposed a single project as one way to combine the qualities and ideals of progressive education. This project is known as a Social Action Curriculum Project (SACP). A SACP is a problem-based project that is specifically action-oriented and centers on concerns of the immediate classroom participants (Schultz, McSurley, & Salguero, 2013). This project allows the interests of students to lead the learning by addressing social problems that they have a personal stake in.

There are four phases of a SACP that were drawn from the framework of the Center for Civic Education's Project Citizen. The first is naming a problem. How do you integrate the interests of students with social problems? Simply ask: What problems do you see in the world around you, the community you're within, or the school you attend? This open conversation provides students an opportunity to take ownership of their curriculum through proposing problems to solve. It invites the students to think critically because "problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers" (Freire, 2000, p. 83). By integrating this curricular attribute, the classroom becomes a place for students to openly question and consider the world around them. After students have discussed the problems they see, there will likely be commonalities between their issues or possibly agreement on just one. During my course at Northeastern Illinois University, the problems ranged from public school food quality to violence in the city of Chicago. As we all voiced our problems, we saw commonalities and the topics began to condense. We then chose which topic we wanted to investigate and formed groups of three to five people who shared the same concerns. It was empowering to choose a topic that focused on issues identified by the class instead of being told we had to follow a strict guideline that could suffocate our creativity and motivation to learn.

After guiding the students to clearly define a problem, they can embark on the next phase of the project: looking for possible solutions. This can begin as a group conversation and lead into deep research surrounding the topic. This research will involve reading informational texts, a Common Core State Standard objective that is supposed to be met by grade levels K-12. Through this one phase of the project, you can ensure you are meeting various standards. It's important to realize that we can meet the standards students are expected to meet while also giving them an active role in their educational experience. I encourage you to invert your view that standards come first when planning

curriculum. Allow the curriculum to emerge from the students' solutions to problems, and the standards will be addressed. Problem-solving curriculum is naturally interdisciplinary because problems are multifaceted. Therefore, we can meet a variety of standards through doing SACPs with students.

Once students have identified possible solutions through research and creativity, they can move onto the third phase: choosing one solution to fully immerse themselves in. This is followed by the fourth and most important phase, which asks students to take action towards solving or lessening the effects of the problem. It is important for students to understand the topic by completing research, but it is even more important for them to take steps toward action. In my own experience participating in a SACP, my peers and I were so engulfed in research findings while in phase three that we lost sight of the main objective: taking action for social change. We had to refocus on taking action, something you may have to guide your students to do. It's much easier to be critical of a problem through discourse and reading, which is prominently practiced in schools. However, learning to take action towards changing problems is not something taught in schools. Maybe this is due to the "mechanical massing" we faced in our own educational experiences (Dewey, 1963, p. 23). The mechanical massing holds true today as we push more and more towards standardizing education through standards, quantitative data, and testing. By allowing this, we are admitting that we are only trying to teach students to follow rules, when we should be encouraging them to share their voices and take action.

Taking action is something we may not be accustomed to. We want students to practice taking action to solve social problems so that they can transfer this classroom experience into the world and act as transformers of it (Freire, 2000). If your students are puzzled during the action phase of the project, you may want to expose them to *Techniques for Participation* (1992) by activist and author Katherine Isaac. Some of these techniques include: pamphleteering, whistleblowing, surveys, and public hearings (Isaac, 1992). These are just a few examples of ways your students can work towards actively engaging in problem solving. The goal is for students to look to their community when taking action so that they can build a relationship with the community as a means for resources and support. The school should not be a closed space from society; instead it should have its doors open to the community and the world. My group conducted multiple interviews with community leaders, developed a survey for Chicago Public School parents and students, and visited community organizations when working to solve the problem we were addressing. We were able to translate our research and ideas into real actions, giving meaning to our work. If we give students the opportunity to incorporate meaning into their school lives, I do not think we will ever hear the prominent student phrase, "When am I going to use this in real life?" SACPs have the potential to develop a generation of problem solvers, ready to take action.

In order to meet the objectives in this standard-driven atmosphere, you must be willing to shift your view of what meeting certain standards looks like. Begin by considering activities and assignments that are already within schools, such as writing persuasive essays or reading expository text. Then use this as a starting point to think about how the work students are doing within the SACP can be interpreted through these commonly found school activities. Maybe instead of having your students write a persuasive essay about their favorite food, your students choose to write a letter to their alderman persuading that person to initiate a recycling program in their school. It could also be possible for students to analyze data after surveying their school population

about their eating habits. Regardless of the track the project takes, the skills students can potentially gain from this type of work are far more diverse than the departmentalized areas in most traditional school environments. How pleased would your administration be if you could show that you covered multiple subject standards in one class? What is more important, though, is that students are engaged in authentic cognition that allows them to think about solutions and actions that cover a vast array of topics and skills. Although the project may only cover one problem, the students will be able to gain various skills through the experience because of the multifaceted nature of problems. These skills are essential tools for addressing any problem they choose to solve in the future. This type of curriculum asks students to be problem solvers and think instead of absorb and regurgitate irrelevant information. Dewey (1963) believed that the absorption of facts and isolation of traditional schooling could lead to selfishness. SACPs and progressive education encourage collaboration and community, which develops the next generation into compassionate and intelligent beings who will enjoy and excel in bettering society.

After reading this letter, I hope you reflect on your own educational experience. Is it something you want to repeat with future generations, or do you believe it is time for education to evolve? While reflecting, remember that education can be transformative even when you feel pressured by outside forces. Remember that teaching is an art, and only educators and the students themselves can truly understand what is best for them. Remember that education is about learning, not competition. Lastly, remember why you became an educator. Do not allow outside forces to drain you of your passion and creativity, because if it is drained from you, the same will be true for your students. We have the potential to make change. There are more teachers and students in this nation than policy makers and textbook executives. We can make change, and the time is now. It is not enough to hope that someone else will change things; we need to initiate change, and it starts in our classrooms.

Sincerely,
A Future Educator for Change

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