

My Conversion

A first-person account of the devastation wrought by progressivist education.

It is painful for me to chronicle my journey from the “progressivist” camp of education philosophy to the “traditionalist” camp, to revisit my anger and guilt at coming to terms with what I allowed to happen to my children. I do so here in hopes that sharing our experience will make it a less likely scenario for other families.

Our children began in public schools just as wholesale progressive reforms were being implemented. The sales pitch was a marketing tour de force: child-centred instruction, success for all, lifelong learning skills — and so, learning would be easy and fun because it would wait for developmental readiness and native curiosity.

A translator could have told me that we were being sold whole language, project-based learning, and constructivist math. I’d like to think I could have taken it from there. But, maybe not. As the child of two fine teachers, I was conditioned to accord teaching professionals respect and deference. And I was preoccupied with ancillary issues.

There were clues aplenty that progressivism wasn’t delivering on its promises. Reading was laboured and slow; my children “hated to read” — despite having been read to daily for most of their lives. Math facts were insecure, despite heavy doses of manipulatives and light doses of those mind-numbing flash cards.

By the end of elementary, we acknowledged to ourselves that something had gone badly wrong, though the causal link from early instruction was not yet clear. It was easier to place blame on ourselves, on an exaggerated sense of homework neglect.

Still, we took the precaution of moving the children to a private school billed as traditional — only to eventually discover it to be an up-scaled version of the progressivism offered at no extra charge by the public school next door.

Pointers

- **Accept** primary responsibility — and rights — with regard to your children’s educations.
- **Trust** your instincts, but not blindly; accept the need to educate yourself thoroughly about education philosophies and methods.
- **Operate on the assumption** that educational problems have educational solutions, i.e. don’t be too quick to buy ‘disability’ or ‘disorder’ theories for problems that are limited primarily to learning situations.
- **Consider** the opinions of teachers you deem worthy of respect, but never to the point of abdicating your responsibility to independently monitor progress and to remedy learning problems in a timely way.
- When problems arise, **scrutinize** the curriculum and teaching methods at least as hard as you do your child.
- **Believe** that your child’s educational achievement will reflect the competence of his teaching and the diligence of his learning (which you are empowered to impact) more than his native ability (which you are not).
- **Pray** for wisdom, patience, and stamina.

That discovery, too, was years in coming. I was so consumed with the career that paid the tuition that I barely took note of the continuing deterioration in scholastic achievement, much less delved deeply into the reasons why.

What was it that finally broke through my unquestioning faith and mindless optimism? A recognition that certain elements of a grade 7 math program were badly askew, some research for purposes of a teacher conference, and finding the Mathematically Correct web-site. A binge of research ensued which continues to this day.

As full understanding of how progressivism had failed my children finally dawned, I was furious — more

with myself than anyone else. But, I can no longer spare the emotional energy which anger consumes.

It takes all I’ve got to stay attuned to three children from 3:00 to 10:30 pm sufficiently to correct Kumon math, direct grammar remediation, go over their SRA reading comprehension work, monitor the writing process program, and check assigned homework for the knowledge gaps which have undermined so much prior learning — and somehow attend to the non-tutoring aspects of parenting.

I’ve had to make a choice between meeting the needs of my children (in which anger would be a hindrance) and activism on behalf of all children similarly impacted by progressivist methods (in which anger can be a useful source of stamina).

If I have anger left for anyone, it is the educationalists who control accreditation standards that shape teacher training and professional development. Their slavish commitment to the progressivist world-view involves a degree of self-service and dereliction of duty that borders on criminal behaviour.

(Adapted from www.illinoisloop.org. The author wishes to remain anonymous. She and her husband hold doctoral and masters degrees in non-education fields and provided their children with an enriched environment. All three of their children have professionally-assessed aptitude in the superior range. Despite this, their progressivist instruction resulted in children whose learning difficulties resembled those of the “disadvantaged”. The after-school remediation of elementary skills described in the essay has, over the course of about 18 months, made significant improvement to the children’s grade-level achievement and attitudes towards learning. The family will home-school two of the children next year using the “Classical” method.)