

# From the Frying Pan.....

*Progressive practices were designed to make school more democratic, humane, and joyful....*

**By Jeanne Chall**

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Most teachers believe that they are following a fairly traditional, teacher-centred approach to learning. And yet, most schools have been touched in many ways by progressive education. This influence is reflected in the fact that they have accepted certain concepts and beliefs from progressive education without necessarily implementing the broader program.

Below are some of the beliefs and concepts from progressive education that have made their way into public schools.

## **Readiness**

One of the widely-accepted concepts from progressive education, particularly in elementary schools, is the notion that there is a right and best time to learn based on the learner's development and interests.

It cannot be denied that the readiness concept was designed to be constructive and humane for the children. But it also created difficulties for the many whose instruction was delayed too long.

I have encountered child after child in grade 4 or 5 who is functioning on a first- or second-grade level in reading. The child is usually intellectually able and often well above average in intelligence. The story is the same.

When the child was not reading in grade 1, the parents were told not to worry. He was not quite ready but when he become ready he would learn. That usually did not happen, however. Instead, the child fell further behind. When he reached grade 4, the school called the parents for a conference and informed them that the child needed clinical assessment to find out why he had not learned.

Recent research, as well as some of the old research, finds that readi-

ness can be developed. Thus, the readiness

concept, which delays learning until the child is ready, may not be optimal for the child's development. In most instances, earlier rather than later learning leads to high achievement in later grades, and earlier attention to the 'lack of readiness' leads to better progress than waiting for readiness.

## **Student Choice**

Another concept from progressive education is that students learn best if they choose what they want to learn, when they want to learn it, and what pace suits them best. And yet the research finds that the students do less well academically when they are given freedom to choose, select, and pace their own learning.

Teacher-centred learning is particularly effective for those who enter school with limited knowledge, language, experience, and skills. They have not had the opportunity to learn some of the beginning skills in reading, writing, and mathematics that progressive, student-centred approaches tend to assume come naturally and that the upper- and middle-class child usually acquires at home.

When children fail to learn in a student-centred school environment, the explanation usually is that they lack maturity or readiness. And yet their lack is often just the failure to receive the necessary instruction.

## **Student Happiness**

The widely-held concern for keeping the child happy and interested has often led to concern for entertaining the child.

J. Hersey, writing for *Life Magazine* in 1954, asked: "Is it not misplaced emphasis, to say the least, when the objective of deriving pleasure from an act is put so far ahead of the objective of learning to perform the act? Is not the point that pleasure in itself is not an objective of the

school curriculum at all, that learning is the main objective, and that pleasure may be an aid, a motivation, a means toward the realization of the true objective and a wonderfully-desirable by-product of its attainment?"

A problematic example of misplaced emphasis is found in beginning reading. Whole language places the first emphasis not on learning to read but rather on the reading of "authentic" literature, right from the start, that is interesting and enjoyable.

## **Individual Differences**

The progressive concept of individual differences — that in any given classroom there is a wide range of talent and achievement and that teachers should take each pupil at his or her best learning pace — has also made its way into teacher-centred schools.

Among its weak features is that although assessment of individual differences may be met for reading instruction, it is not easily met for content subjects. Even if a grade 4 student receives reading instruction at a grade 2 level, he is expected to use a grade 4 social studies text when learning social studies.

Another weak feature of the concept is the difficulties it poses for the teacher. To cope with this challenge, teachers focus their teaching on students who lag behind, while advanced students are seldom given more challenging work.

The concept of individual differences is one of the most humane concepts of the new education. Yet, it can easily become one of the most destructive. Unless it is clear to all that standards need to be met at given ages and grades for students of different abilities and that those who do not meet these standards are to be given additional instruction, we will have a greater number of students lagging further and further behind as they proceed through school.

# .....Into the Fire

*...but the new ideas created other problems worse than the ones they were designed to fix.*

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## **Social Promotion**

When teachers began to accept lower standards from students who were seen as having problems, it was not because the teachers did not care but because they often cared too much. They did not wish to hurt the students more than they were already being hurt.

When the lag became very great, the schools tended to call in experts from fields other than education — psychologists, neurologists — to suggest solutions. In spite of well-established evidence from research and practice that good instruction is the most effective treatment for those who lag behind and that learning is itself therapeutic, schools sought out causes and solutions of poor achievement that often were based on therapy, not instruction.

Social promotion has also meant that the older students' teachers have the difficult task of teaching a class with students who vary widely in achievement. This variation grows with each successive grade and becomes more onerous for the teacher.

## **Teacher as Facilitator**

There has been a growing tendency to no longer regard the role of teaching as the major objective of teachers. The ideal student-centred teacher is one who encourages and sets the stage for student learning but does not do direct teaching.

While less teaching may contribute to independence among some students and enhance the learning of able students, it puts greater strain on students who are less able. Direct instruction has a beneficial effect particularly on those whose learning is less proficient.

The student-centred ideal that "the less the teacher teaches, the better the students learn" often has negative consequences, especially among those who have difficulty in learning.

## **Parents as Teachers**

As the role of the teacher as teacher has declined, parents are increasingly expected to take on some of the work of teaching. They are expected, for example, to read to their children before kindergarten and to help with homework and projects.

The consequence is that students' academic achievement becomes increasingly dependent on their social-cultural and ethnic background.

## **Self-Esteem**

While one can appreciate that self-esteem is a worthy goal in itself, a considerable amount of research and past experience suggests that pursuing it as a means of raising achievement levels will be an incomplete solution, at best. American children already have higher self-esteem than Asian children, but they manifest much lower achievement.

## **Dropouts**

Student-centred concepts have tended to dominate our explanations of why students drop out of school. The individual's social and psychological problems have been favoured as reasons in spite of research findings that dropping out is highly related to low achievement.

Why do we tend to seek 'deeper' underlying psychological and sociological causes of dropping out of school? It is quite reasonable to expect students to drop out when they know they are failing.

Why does no one in the school take them aside and teach them to read and write? School factors are the strongest predictors of achievement and test performance, especially among those students whose achievement is low.

## **Indifference to Research**

New programs tend to be given a hard sell when they are first proposed,

but the research evidence of their superiority is not made available. When new approaches do not produce the expected gains, the common explanation is that teachers have not received appropriate and sufficient instruction in their use. Also, the complaint is voiced that the tests used to assess the new methods do not really assess the important outcomes.

## **Stress on Problem Solving**

Although both teacher-centred and student-centred teachers consider creativity and problem solving to be the ultimate outcomes of education, they generally believe there are different ways to get there.

Student-centred educators tend to place less importance on acquiring knowledge and skills — on the assumption that these are acquired naturally from an emphasis on problem solving. Teacher-centred educators tend to place greater importance on the basics because they believe they are needed in problem solving.

The research has found that those who learn the basics early do better in reading and math — on tests of basic skills and ultimately in problem solving. Progress in higher-level cognitive skills — problem-solving in math and comprehension in reading — is usually slowed down when basic skills are not automatic.

Progressive ideas were designed to make children's lives more joyful. When their effects are examined closely, however, it is found (as with all great revolutionary movements) that, despite the creators' best intentions, problems have arisen.

Indeed, some of these new ideas and practices may have brought about problems as great as or greater than the practices and ideas they were designed to replace.

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