



RESEARCH ARTICLE

AN EXPOSITION OF THE PROGRESSIVE APPROACHES TO ADULT EDUCATION, A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

South Africa has a high rate of unemployment and Adult illiteracy. There is a trend towards adult education to enable citizens to earn a living and become valuable citizens to the country. There are many Adult Basic Education and Training facilities. The further education training colleges are also set up to improve the vocational skills of these adults who need skills training in order to get work or better employment. The approach in these facilities should be based on the principles of Progressive education. Children in preparing for their adult life also will benefit from the scientific teaching of the progressive approach. This paper focuses on explaining what Progressive education is and a critical review of its strengths and weakness. It is proposed as an important method of adult education in South Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

The Progressive approach to education refers to a set of reformist educational philosophies and methods that emphasize individual instruction, informality in the classroom and the use of group discussions and laboratories as instruction techniques. Some refer to progressive education as discovery teaching.¹ Although progressivism comprised many different points of view and addressed a range of social issues, it can be broadly characterized as an effort to effect societal change toward greater equity and democratic participation. A belief in experimentation and gathering evidence reflected in the emerging social science of the twentieth century helped shape a vision of a better world which could be achieved through education¹ Progressive education is based on the belief that students learn best in real life activities with other people. Learner centeredness, the experimental method and social activism are key methods for education.²

It is a broad movement for educational reform for the twentieth century. Progressives view existing schools as rigid, formal and detached from real life. They prefer informal classroom arrangements and informal relations between learners and teachers. Schools should teach useful subjects including occupations and emphasize learning by doing than instruction purely from textbooks. Developing of the child's personality is at the centre of education and thinking – teach the child not the subject is an important concept which was criticized by some educationists such as Neatby¹. Jean-Jacques Rousseau provided research for the child-study movement. This laid out an educational program for a

hypothetical new-born from birth to adulthood. He advocated a radical withdrawal of the child from society and an educational process that utilized the natural potential of the child and its curiosity, teaching by confronting the child with simulated real-life obstacles and conditioning by experience rather than teaching intellectually³. It based on the principal that humans are social animals who learn best in real life activities with other people. The philosophy is based on: becoming aware of the problem – defining the problem – propose hypothesis to solve it – evaluate the consequences of the hypothesis from one's past experience – test the likeliest solution. Experiential learning (learning by doing) includes projects. This involves the formulating of hypothesis on problems that are identified and testing to find solutions. Another important concept is collaborative and cooperative learning projects. This includes group work and development of social skills.

Education should be child centred and not subject or content centred in that education attends to the child's intellectual, emotional and physical growth. Education must be a continuous reconstruction of living experiences on the activity directed by the child. This opposes formalised authoritarian procedure and fosters reorganization of classroom practice and curriculum as well as new attitudes toward individual students. It allows for easy assimilation of new immigrants due to the vocational training emphasis². Education is also for social responsibility and democracy. Progressive education thus is a pluralistic phenomenon including industrial training; agricultural education and social education as put forward by educational theorists such John Dewey and Malcolm Knowles². John Dewey was an eminent thinker of the progressive education movement and American education foundation. Dewey's work consummated the trends in education below the

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university level animated by the impulses of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. Dewey's views on child education built on the ideas of Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel in Western Europe. Participation in meaningful projects learning by doing, encouraging problems and solving them facilitates the acquisition and retention of knowledge and fosters the right character traits of unselfishness, helpfulness, critical intelligence, individual initiative. Progressive learning is more than assimilative; it is the development of habits which enable the growing person to deal effectively and intelligently with his environment. Where the environment is in rapid flux as in the industrial revolution and social upheaval the elasticity which promotes readjustment to what is new is the most necessary of habits. Progressive education philosophy as described by John Dewey includes the conduct of the pupils shall be governed by themselves according to the social needs of the community; interest shall be the motive for all work; teachers will inspire a desire for knowledge and will serve as guides in the investigations undertaken rather than as task masters; scientific study of each pupils' development, physical, mental, social and spiritual is absolutely essential to the intelligent direction of his development; greater attention is paid to the child's physical needs with greater use of the out-of-doors; cooperation between school and home will fill all needs of the child's development such as music, dancing, play and other extra-curricular activities; work will be of the laboratory type giving freely to the sum of educational knowledge the results of their experiments in child culture. These rules for education sum up the theoretical conclusions of the reform movement begun by Colonel Francis Parker and carried forward by Dewey. Dewey aimed to integrate the school with society and the process of learning with the actual problems of life by a thorough application of the principles and practices of democracy⁴.

Another concept is 'learn by doing' which involves the following steps; become aware of the problem, define the problem, propose hypothesis to solve it, evaluate the consequences to of the hypothesis from one's past experience, test the most likely solution¹. Experiential education shows learners theory and practice simultaneously.³ This relates to the reconstruction of experiences through interactive processes with one's environment.² Some of the basic principles of adult education originated from the progressive movement including needs and interests, the scientific method, problem solving techniques, the centrality of experience, pragmatic and utilitarian goals, and the idea of social responsibility. Reason, experience and feeling are given more importance than tradition, and authority². The scientific method (inductive scientific method) refers to observation and the testing of hypotheses through experience. This method is also called the problem solving method, the project method or the activity method. Nature provided the context and conditions within which human persons struggled for existence². The view of the progressives on education which through science, would lead to the betterment of the human condition. It is emphasized that there are no absolutes in knowledge or in morality. Education was inspired to be lifelong. This problem centred or situation learning encourages adult education². Americanization education for adults refers to citizenship training (preparation for citizenship) – emphasis on virtues of democracy and capitalism, and instruction in the factories in work habits and safety. For women there are lessons in

hygiene, childcare and American style cooking and homemaking². Community education refers to the enhancement of school programs by involving the community in schools and the enhancement of the community through providing educational experiences for all people of all ages in the community. The programmes that involved adults were the expanded use of community facilities such as schools; adult education programmes to meet the needs and interests of adults in the community; recreation programmes for adults; coordination and delivery of community services; community development and citizen participation². Participation training assumes that persons can be trained to participate actively in the learning experience and to assume responsibility for the success of the programme².

Aims and objectives of education

The progressive approach's aim for adult education has a decidedly social role; its purpose is to abet the democratic order which although it is good can be improved. These trends are evident in many of the authors of the progressive philosophy for adult education such as Hart, Lindeman and Knowles⁵. The goal of adult education is a good democratic society and learning should proceed from experience – from the situations of adult themselves rather than from abstractions or discipline based subject matter. This mandated a highly learner centred form of education involving the teacher as a guide and facilitator rather than as the guardian of knowledge⁵. Progressive education in adults would lead to a better, more fulfilling personal life, ability to work in society, while at the same time making a better citizenry and a better world. Thus understanding and action as the goals of learning are more important than rote learning². The progressive education movement gained popularity for adult education in America since it was a society that was rapidly becoming urbanized and industrialized and this movement was an inspiration in establishing theoretical positions and practical programmes. Progressive educators seek to motivate the student to take an interest in his or her studies. Democracy is seen to involve dynamic participation in social, political, and economic decisions. Thus education entails respect for diversity where each person is recognized for his or her unique characteristics. Critical, socially engaged intelligence should be developed so that individuals are able to comprehend the issues concerning their community and enable them to participate in a collaborative effort for the betterment of society.³ Education would flourish if it took place in a democracy; and only true education would allow democracy to develop. A democratic society is viewed as committed to change and respecting the freedom of individuals to be true to their own convictions and commitments².

Progressive education emphasizes depth of understanding of disciplines as well as creativity, analysis, critical thought, and a desire to investigate more. Progressives see society as needing improvement and the schools as serving the function of helping students become thinking citizens who can contribute to creating a more just society³. Thus the goals of education were both individual and social to improve society and culture. Adult education is to foster creativity and stability, as well as individuality and social consciousness². Progressive education for adults established that group activity under self-direction and self-government would make the

classroom a miniature republic where equality and consideration for all would prevail. This would have beneficial social consequences; tend to erase unjust distinctions and prejudices. It would equip the learner with qualities and capacities required to cope with the problems of a fast changing world. It would produce alert, balanced, critical minded individuals who would continue to grow in intellectual and moral stature⁴ in the present economic difficult times and high unemployment rate of South Africa, the progressive approach to adult education would contribute to job creation. Progressives view adult education as a means to democracy without corruption in the face of social, economic, political changes. This would help train workers and leaders needed for the growing industrial society².

Proposed curriculum of education

The progressive education movement stresses that there is no fixed menu like a curriculum. However the following general principles apply. In its early form there was an emphasis on all learning in schools to come through playing. Children's social and emotional development and psychological attitudes (self-concept, self-esteem, how well the child works with others) are to be given an overriding importance. A high school as supermarket curriculum, an approach in which core subjects are crowded out, should be adopted. Hard work on the way to mastering a subject should be given very little importance. In the culturally important academic subjects – mathematics, science, history and geography, foreign languages, literature and arts – curriculum planners can and should organize a curriculum that emphasizes content. Educations in these subjects should be cumulative and sequential with each year's study building on what has been learned previously. Curriculum planners, textbook writers and teachers should not ignore or discard the tools, terminology, and methods that practitioners have historically used in academic disciplines. These tools and methods, along with the knowledge that practitioners have gained over time by using them are in fact what defines those disciplines. To attain advanced conceptual understanding in all subjects' explicit teaching is necessary. Conceptual understanding of a subject comes with hard work of studying a subject for a long time and in depth. The teacher here needs to guide the student directly and often has to impart knowledge directly.¹

The curriculum is built on inter-disciplinary studies to promote understanding of many cultures. Individual achievement is encouraged and rewarded. The values are of shared goals, friendship, and cooperation in mastering difficult tasks³. Testing of learning through experiences is imperative. In this way the learner understands the importance and also the limitations of assimilated knowledge and ideas. Through action combined with reflection, the mind sharpens, and the learner's activity in the world is more consistent and competent and the capacity to attend to spiritual and emotional needs builds up. This system of education encourages the learner to analyse, assess and deepen their ability to be an advocate for social justice. Imposing no official way of thinking about their responsibility to each other, and to the Earth – develop a personal vision to a commitment to their environment and to oppose social injustice³. The curriculum should be organized around problems that would relate to experiences of the learners². A problem or situation based curriculum is thus

designed². Total education is through study, work and social activities. The learning process is paralleled to real life with an integrated curriculum focussing on thematic units with strong emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking³. Integration of community service and service learning projects into the daily curriculum. Selection of subject content by looking forward to asking what skills will be needed in future society. De-emphasises on textbooks in favour of varied learning resources. Emphasis on lifelong learning and assessment by evaluation of child's projects¹. Vocational education is added to traditional liberal arts education². The curriculum of adult education includes an utilitarian, pragmatic and vocationally oriented dimension².

Views of the teaching and learning process

The teacher has a deep knowledge of subject matter areas and is actively engaged in learning through formal study, direct observation and participation. Understanding learning and development in the context of community, family and culture is needed for teaching. The teacher continues to grow as a person and as a professional. He is a helper, guide, encourager, consultant and a resource person.² The teacher is to establish the appropriate methodology for learning². Almost all of the critics of progressive education suggest that the positive aspects of progressive method should not be excluded such as projects, field trips, group work or a student explaining in class how he solved a problem. Thus they imply direct instruction cannot replace these valuable methods of learning.¹ A progressivism teacher provides not just reading and drills but also real world activities and experiences that relate to the actual lives of the students. Progressives share the point of view that democracy involves dynamic participation in social, political and economic decisions. Therefore education of active citizens involves two principles. First is the respect for diversity where each person is recognized for his or her unique characteristics. Secondly critical, socially engaged intelligence should be developed so that individuals are able to comprehend the issues concerning their community and enable them to participate in a collaborative effort for the betterment of society.³ The principles of progressive education include learning should be learner/child centred; learning should be active; learning should engage the whole child/learner; learning should have purpose³. Learning should proceed from experience- from the situations of adults themselves rather than from abstractions or discipline based subject matter. On the balance of the aims, strengths and weaknesses of progressive education it would seem that the best curriculum would include progressive education, but also includes some of the liberal methods to teach the non-science subjects.

Role of the teacher

Teachers are to promote a deeper, broader purpose for education. Rather than just disseminating facts, educators strive to prepare learners to be critical thinkers and thoughtful citizens and to educate the whole person/child.³ Learners have different kinds of intelligences and learning styles, multiple styles of teaching should be used in order to address the diversity of intelligences, talents, and learning styles. Teachers are committed to promoting and preserving a community that values and celebrates racial, ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic diversity. This is done through workshops,

performing arts programmes, films and curriculum development. Teachers are to stimulate learners to be lifelong learners, independent thinkers and to pursue academic excellence and individual achievement in a context of respect for others and service to the community. This community created will be one built on understanding and respect for others.

The teacher is a guide and facilitator to direct learning rather than as the guardian of knowledge. The teacher provides the setting that allows for learning. Teachers also share with the learners insights that come from their own experiences. The teacher and the learner plan and learn from each other – reciprocal learning.² Teachers have scientific training and high ideals². The task of the educator is to attend to the formation of habits in students, and then students have the opportunity for freedom, creativity and progressive thought.² Teachers' attitude towards their work and life is scientific. Have an attitude of eager, alert observation, a constant questioning of old procedure in the light of new observations, a use of the world, as well as books, as source material an experimental open-mindedness and an effort to keep as reliable records as the situation permits in order to base the future open accurate knowledge of what has been done. Aim of teaching is create learners whose attitude towards life is that of the artist. Teachers ideally have an attitude of relish, of emotional drive, a genuine participation in some creative phase of work and a sense that joy and beauty are legitimate possessions of all human beings. Teachers are to have an experimental, critical and ardent approach to their work and be a multi-faceted teaching person. Learning and growing for learners and teachers is a complex integration of processes of thinking, feeling, doing and reflecting. Teachers are to arouse interest in those things that are educationally desirable². Teachers are to organize, stimulate, instigate and evaluate the process of education². Planning must be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power².

Strengths

Many of the strengths of the progressive approach to education are mentioned elsewhere in this exploration. However some will be further emphasized here. Progressive educators stress the need for passion in learning and personal inquiry. If learners are given enough time to focus and engage with material in depth, a passion for learning can be generated and students can filter and process the knowledge and skills that constitute each academic discipline through their own perspectives, purposes, values and prior understanding³. Progressive education is ideal for adult education because of its emphasis on vocational and utilitarian training, learning by experience, scientific enquiry, community involvement and responsiveness to social problems. The progressive ideals inspired agricultural and industrial training. The progressive movement also contributed to the introduction of vocational education in the adult evening schools all over the world, the development of voluntary organizations and agencies, the providing of services to the poor through settlement houses and other social agencies, an interest in parent education programmes, education of women. As such progressive education is in tune with the needs of adult education.³ In South Africa Adult education should be primarily taught using

the progressive approach to education, enabling adults to gain practical knowledge to help in their daily life.

Weaknesses

Critics suggest that the thematic or project orientated instruction fails to teach the most basic elements of the different subject matters.³ Evers is negatively critical of the progressive education movement and suggested it was wrong one hundred years when first invented by Dewey and since then the progressive education system has not got better.¹ Progressive movement had taken over parental responsibilities and were coddling children instead of teaching them and they had removed religion from public education.⁶ Bestor believed that the purpose of education was to provide equal education to all citizens thus he believed that in tailoring education to the individual, progressive education was depriving citizens of this equal access to knowledge. He believed that the scientific management of education had removed it from all schools and proper teaching training. This teaching method was also criticized for making unrealistic demands on teacher's time and abilities.⁶ Pitsula described the progressive education movement as rooted in objective science, was totalizing in nature and thus had a tendency to drive out alternative claims to authority based on religion, tradition or parental wisdom. The learner was at the mercy of the educational experts who knew best. This education was viewed as indoctrination both moral and intellectual and was not liberation of the people⁷. There are internal contradictions and ideological inconsistencies since there was child centred and individuated attention on one hand and explicit differentiation through intelligence testing on the other hand².

Neatby objected to the aim of progressive education –i.e. 'education as life and as growth' and 'whole child goes to school', which sought to intervene in all aspects of the life of the learner. Parents, religion and tradition is then pushed aside or treated in a patronizing, paternalistic manner. Neatby argues that in this way dictatorship in learning is masked under the cloak of democracy. Neatby goes further to state that the progressive movement is not correct in their assumption that all learners are equal or almost equal in their ability. Learners are not equal in their capacities. Neatby further stresses that it is more important for the learner to be intellectually trained which is more liberating than social skills or life skills only. A curriculum that is not rich in content deprives the learner from a rich, full and intellectually rewarding curriculum. Neatby recommended some group activity and shared activities are acceptable but must be kept within strict bounds so as not to lose the opportunity to identify and nurture the individual who is above average. Here the criticism is that group activities lose the opportunity to train and nurture the genius and the group proceeds as a unit and individual development is lost. Her criticism of progressive education is summarized as morally flabby, intellectually clouded and creatively sterile⁸. Other criticisms of progressive education is at times lacks discipline, child centeredness, focussing on trivial problems, little attention to subject matter, anti-intellectualism, and a lack of a clear definition of the teachers role³. Americanization education was taken up by only a small percentage of the target population. Immigrants desired literacy in their own native language as well as opportunities to develop cultural and intellectual interests. It was also criticized for imposing

values on immigrants to such an extent that they have been encouraged to give up their unique qualities of religion and culture². The emphasis on science sometimes causes a loss in the learning of humanities, history, literature and the arts. Fixity of ideas has been replaced with the fixity of problems². Too much influence has been given by this theory to the power of education to bring about social change. The view of education and human life appears too optimistic. The attention is on the learner and at times insufficient attention is given to the role of the teacher and to the importance of the subject matter². The radical movement are highly critical and described the progressives as the originators of bureaucratization, social control and racism. This is denied by the progressives². The radical view seems to ignore the democratic approach used by the progressives which encourages self-awareness of problem resolutions.

Conclusion

In South Africa with economic uncertainty, high unemployment among the adults and a need for vocational and scientific learning, the progressive approach provides an answer. It prepares children to solve problems on their own and to build on their reasoning skills. There is an emphasis on working together and thinking logically. The criticism of its irrelevance on art and humanities teaching is valid and here a more liberal approach is required. Progressivism helps new citizens adapt to their new country and participate in a democratic and socially and culturally changing society.

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