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I believe that a teacher’s role is that of facilitator to her student’s learning and that her classroom should be a place that sparks the imagination, gets creative juices flowing and awakens her students’ desire and natural drive to learn. The teacher should strive to create a classroom which fosters her students’ growth and development. Some teachers emphasize to a greater extent the students’ sense of value and interest than other teachers do, and those teachers in the latter category depend less on the intrinsic desire to learn, relying more on external factors. Although external factors such as a child’s environment have great part to play, I believe that the child’s built-in desire to learn plays a key role in how that child learns. The teacher should therefore play on that innate drive to learn and not see herself in vacuum that is the main source of information. There is much to be said for Maria Montessori’s philosophy of education. I like the fact that children learn to help themselves as they move independently from activity to activity with the guidance of their teachers. This way, students learn about themselves and can learn more about the areas they are really interested in. I believe that Progressivism is an educational philosophy that is based on the precept that human beings are social animals who learn best in social situations with other people. According to progressivists the learning situation should consist of realistic activities which simulate the real-world and in effect prepare the person to survive and excel in a competitive and modern society. Students should gain realistic, helpful knowledge and skills that they can apply in the real world.

One of the earliest and most famous practitioners of Progressive education was Francis W. Parker who believed that there was no use in having knowledge without understanding. Francis wanted schools to offer child-centered education that was based on real-life activities in order that children’s creativity could be encouraged and children would better be able to grasp the concepts.

In his Quincy, Massachusetts system he removed the traditional curriculum, replacing it with learning units that followed central themesand linked knowledge of different disciplines. He had gained two years experience in Germany, closely observing educational trends and was ready to apply the methods he had learned in his superintendent of schools position in Massachusetts.

Parker left Massachusetts in 1883 to take up a new position as principal of Cook County Normal School in Chicago. This school also trained teachers in Parker’s Progressive methods.

Francis Parker’s 1894 Talks on Pedagogics became one of the first educational writings in America to earn world acclaim.

John Dewey (1859-1952) is remembered as the father of Progressive education and was the most noticed and probably the most effectual individual in Progressive education. A very talented philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, Dewey was also the most famous spokesperson in Progressivism. His thinking was influenced under the tutelage of William James, a psychologist and philosopher at Harvard who believed in a connectivity between everything in the world. Dewey and his wife enrolled their children in Parker’s school in 1894, founding their own school two years later.

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Parker moved from practice to theory but Dewey started with hypotheses, devising methods and curricula to test them. Dewey had become dissatisfied with philosophy, stating that it was mere speculation and sought out ways to make it relevant to real issues. He rejected dichotomy in favour of a philosophy of experience in which everything in the world could be connected. Therefore in 1896 Dewey founded the Laboratory School to test his theories and discover how a school could become an interdependent community and develop individuals’ own capacities and satisfy individual needs. For Dewey these two goals were not mutually exclusive but were dependent on each other for success. This interdependence of purpose is the main thrust of Progressivism.

Dewey and other educators like Charles Eliot and Abraham Flexner worked to make the Progressivism philosophy into the main pedagogical belief in America and in 1917 began the Lincoln School of Teachers College which held the goal of formulating an elementary and secondary curriculum that would remove irrelevant material and strive to include material which was applicable to the needs of everyday life.

One of the most famous projects that arose from their work (a third grade project which followed the everyday life of the Hudson River) became an introduction to reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, science, literature and art. Each part of the project gave individual children the opportunity to focus on different aspects that they were interested in. Each part of the project also gave in depth coverage of some important part of modern society. The children also had to work cooperatively on the project in the various parts.

By about 1950 Dewey reported that Progressivism had not caught –on as he had hoped it would have and in 1955 it faced criticism by the publication “Why Johnny Can’t Read”. This publication criticized the reading programs for following the Progressive concept of reading in context. Then during the conservative Post World-War II Era, the liberality at the very heart of Progressivism was questioned. Alternative approaches which arose a few years later at the peak of the Cold War, competed with the Progressive approach but ironically included Dewey’s ideas of education based on real world experience and the student playing an active role in his

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learning. This led to a come-back for Progressivism and Parker’s and Dewey’s ideas in the second half of the 20th century.

The Open Classroom Movement led by Herb Kohl and George Dennison brought many of Parker’s child-centered ideas back into focus and in recent years Alfie Kohn has been an avid supporter of the Progressive movement, openly criticizing the No Child Left Behind Act.

Public Education in America experienced reduced funding in many states due to Ttaxpayer revolts. This has led to the foundation of many independent schools, a large proportion of which follow the Progressive philosophy. Furthermore, the public has challenged the No Child Left Behind methods of teaching and testing, and this has led to an increase in the number of schools following the Progressive philosophy.

Though Progressive programs vary throughout America, most Progressive schools ascribe to the following principles:

* A flexible curriculum that is influenced by students’ interests
* Teachers act as facilitators of learning who guide students in using varied activities to learn
* Teachers use many different materials which give opportunity for individual and group work
* Teachers support learning by discovery
* Programs frequently use community resources and service-learning projects.

Most Progressive education programs accomplish the above goals through the following methods:

* Students learn by doing hands-on projects, in other words there is a focus on **experiential learning**.
* The curriculum is integrated and focuses on the themes to show how subjects are related.
* Problem solving and developing critical thinking skills is emphasized.

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* There is also an emphasis on group work and developing social skills.
* The goals of learning are real understanding and action or application instead of rote knowledge.
* Learning projects are collaborative and cooperative.
* Education aims at instilling social responsibility and teaching democracy.
* There is an orientation toward community service and service learning projects in the daily curriculum
* Subject content is chosen by thinking ahead to question what skills will be relevant in future society.
* Varied learning resources are employed instead of textbooks.
* There is a focus on promoting life-long learning and importance of social skills.
* A child’s performance is assessed by evaluating the child’s projects and productions.

Some of the limitations of Progressive education include the fact that educators do not believe in the basic skills approach to teaching reading and writing, they take a contextual approach. Progressivism may indirectly segregate teachers as an effect of teachers’ experience with Progressive curriculum as it denounces the same type of instruction that enabled African-American teachers to conquer the education system. Some educators argue that Progressive education is available mainly to the upper middle class and actually puts minority students at a disadvantage.

Despite these shortcomings, Progressivism has its many strengths, that have been mentioned above and offers a positive alternative to traditional methods of education and one that is useful in preparing students for their future lives in a harsh, competitive modern society.

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