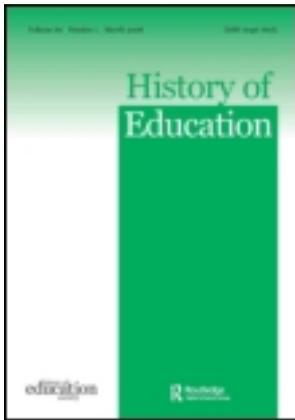


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### In search of American progressives and teachers

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## In search of American progressives and teachers

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Over half a century ago Lawrence Cremin set in motion a historical debate about educational progressivism, a movement if it was one that meant ‘different things to different people’ and roused passions for and against. Personified in many individual and institutional initiatives, it appeared to resonate with individual liberty, political democracy and social reform. Historians since, including Roy Lowe, have joined in the debate. Did it succeed and what were its effects? Perfecting or pernicious? Cohesive or divisive? Models for reforming pedagogy were found in Pestalozzi and Froebel, but translating ideals into practice was the challenge. Laboratory and model schools lent weight to advocacy of reform, but were often private or privileged in their constitution. Dewey and his daughter in *Schools of Tomorrow* publicised a selection of these. Against this backdrop, historians have subsequently sought to explain why traditional pedagogic practices remained so powerful. Cuban drew on a wide-ranging set of primary sources to reconstruct classroom practices and explore the conservative practice of the public schools. Exceptions can be explained by a confluence of factors, local demographic, school and district leadership, paradoxical exercise of authority and control in the implementation of progressive practice.

**Keywords:** progressive education; pedagogic theory and practice; school reform; Lawrence Cremin; Roy Lowe

### Historians and historiography

In the middle of the summer in 1959, Lawrence A. Cremin, the head of the department of Social and Philosophical Foundations at Teachers College, Columbia University, delivered an address that was soon published in *Vital Speeches of the Day*. It was entitled ‘What Was Progressive Education: What Happened to It?’ That was two years before the appearance of Cremin’s most influential work, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876 to 1957*. As he stated in his address, the 1950s had not been kind to a movement that ‘had for half a century enlisted the enthusiasm, the loyalty, the imagination, and the energy of large segments of the American public and the teaching profession...’<sup>1</sup> Now the progressives were either reduced to caricature or the butt of jokes – did you hear the one about the child who only earned ‘a C in sandpile’? – or, more seriously, were accused of undermining everything from academic quality in the public

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<sup>1</sup>L. A. Cremin, ‘What Was Progressive Education, What Happened To It?’, *Vital Speeches of the Day* 25 (September 15, 1959): 721.

schools to national security, allegedly due to the popularity of the writings of John Dewey. Too many people, Cremin believed, wrongly believed that progressive education promoted absolute freedom for the child, but it was, he insisted, 'merely the educational phase of the larger progressive movement in American political and social life', a democratic, 'many sided-effort to improve the lives of individuals'.<sup>2</sup> While the movement 'meant very different things to different people', well-intentioned educators agreed on some fundamentals: to broaden the social functions of the school, promote the needs of individual children, and extend the benefits of the arts and sciences to everyone.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the quotations will sound familiar to readers of *The Transformation of the School*, since they appeared verbatim in its preface. Since the publication of this prize-winning book, honoured with the prestigious Bancroft Prize in American history, numerous scholars have cited, quoted and disputed many of Cremin's key ideas such as his definition of progressive education, its nature and purpose, its wide embrace by the teaching profession, and its linkage to a larger reform movement. As historians have frequently attested, the impact of Cremin's book on American educational historiography was remarkable. In a critical and thoughtful retrospective essay in 1991, historian John L. Rury thus concluded: 'It is difficult to think of another book that has exerted as much influence on the field of educational history...'<sup>4</sup> Cremin put the study of progressivism in education on the map. Over the last generation, historical interest in the subject, as measured by a steady flow of books and articles, has assumed the character of an academic bull market, not only in the United States but in many nations. Among its many virtues, *The Transformation* stressed that progressive education 'was clearly part of a much larger worldwide response to industrialism, and that while the American movement proceeded in terms of the American experience, many of its elements were similar to, and indeed influenced by, contemporary developments in other industrial nations'.<sup>5</sup>

Cremin claimed that progressivism existed but was as slippery as an eel. He thus warned readers not to seek a 'capsule definition of progressive education', since 'the movement was marked from the very beginning by a pluralistic, frequently contradictory, character'.<sup>6</sup> A few historians such as Herbert M. Kliebard, who was a student in Cremin's graduate courses at Teachers College, concluded in 1986 that the phrase progressive education had outlived its usefulness; the more Kliebard studied the various strands of American educational reform, the more he

<sup>2</sup>Cremin, 'What Was Progressive Education', 722. On the many criticisms of progressive education in the 1950s, see D. Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education 1945–1980* (New York, Basic Books, 1983), chapter 2, and D. Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), chapter 9.

<sup>3</sup>Cremin, 'What Was Progressive Education', 722.

<sup>4</sup>J. L. Rury, 'Transformation in Perspective: Lawrence Cremin's *Transformation of the School*', *History of Education Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1991): 68.

<sup>5</sup>L. A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), x. See also K. Jervis and C. Montag, eds., *Progressive Education for the 1990s: Transforming Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991), and H. Röhrs and V. Lenhart, eds., *Progressive Education Across the Continents: A Handbook* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995).

<sup>6</sup>Cremin, *Transformation*, x.

believed ‘that the term was not only vacuous but mischievous’.<sup>7</sup> And yet historians still search for progressivism in education in its varied expressions, including its relationship to teachers and teaching.

Teachers were in theory central to the possible transformation of the schools but in practice a persistent obstacle to its realisation. This was a reality not only in the United States but apparently in other nations as well. For example, in his engaging history of politics and child-centred education in England, Roy Lowe highlighted the multiple reasons why progressive ideas were easier to proclaim than act upon. As in America, teacher-centred instruction often prevailed there, though the public seemed to think that pupils spent their school days in child-centred classrooms. Lowe also reminded his readers that some administrators and teachers openly rejected the norms of child-centred education. Some teachers certainly had a reputation for being child-centred and ‘progressive’, but many did not.<sup>8</sup>

While agreeing that a ‘capsule definition’ of progressive education remains elusive, quite a number of scholars have nevertheless highlighted the common threads that apparently bound it together in every generation. Drawing on postmodern theory, Sol Cohen, for example, believes that progressives shared a common discourse expressed in phrases (or, to critics, slogans) such as ‘learning by doing’ and ‘personality development’.<sup>9</sup> The language describing this approach to education might vary over time yet retains a recognisable set of assumptions and goals. Various historians also agree that America’s progressives, like those elsewhere, favoured child-centred as opposed to teacher-centred schools. Who would identify children’s needs and interests – parents, teachers, psychologists or the learners in question – how teachers would teach, and how classrooms would be organised and arranged, varied in different progressive schools at different times and places. While recognising that a single, coherent progressive educational movement never existed in America, historians continue to identify particular reformers as ‘progressive’ who criticised traditional teaching methods and promised greater freedom for the child.<sup>10</sup>

David F. Labaree, for example, usefully explored the subject in an invited address before the International Standing Conference for the History of Education that was subsequently published in *Paedagogica Historica* in 2005. Drawing on David B. Tyack’s distinction between ‘administrative progressives’ (reformers who wanted to professionalise, centralise, and rationalise urban schooling in the early 1900s) and ‘pedagogical progressives’ (such as the devotees of John Dewey who favoured more child-friendly classrooms), Labaree explained that the latter group had little influence in reshaping classrooms, which remained teacher centred and textbook oriented. But the ‘pedagogical progressives’ nevertheless became the dominant voices in America’s schools of education and teacher training departments

<sup>7</sup>H. M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893–1958* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), xi.

<sup>8</sup>R. Lowe, *The Death of Progressive Education: How Teachers Lost Control of the Classroom* (London: Routledge, 2007), 59–61, 155–7. Also read R. Lowe, ‘Education in England During the Second World War’, in *Education and the Second World War: Studies in Schooling and Social Change*, ed. R. Lowe (London: Falmer Press, 1992), 8–9.

<sup>9</sup>S. Cohen, ‘The Influence of Progressive Education on School Reform in the U.S.A.’, in Röhrs and Lenhart, *Progressive Education*, 329.

<sup>10</sup>W. J. Reese, ‘The Origins of Progressive Education’, *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2001):1–24.

over the course of the twentieth century. Labaree succinctly describes their guiding assumptions.

Today progressivism means pedagogical progressivism. It means basing instruction on the needs, interests and developmental stage of the child; it means teaching students the skills they need in order to learn any subject, instead of focusing on transmitting a particular subject; it means promoting discovery and self-directed learning by the student through active engagement; it means having students work on projects that express student purposes and that integrate the disciplines around socially relevant themes; and it means promoting values of community, cooperation, tolerance, justice and democratic equality. In the shorthand of educational jargon, this adds up to 'child-centered instruction', 'discovery learning' and 'learning how to learn'.<sup>11</sup>

The current label for these ideas, Labaree concluded, is 'constructivism', progressivism born anew.<sup>12</sup>

While Labaree provides an excellent description of the refashioning of child-centred philosophy (or progressive discourse) in our times, the role of teachers in the history of progressive schools merits more consideration. For example, if progressives hoped to make schools more child-centred, how would that occur? How would teachers in the United States who themselves had usually been taught in traditional fashion replace the old education with elements of the new? How have historians described the place of teachers in their narratives of progressive education?

During the last generation, historians have helped to answer these questions. Some scholars have tried to recover the history of teachers and their classroom practices, a daunting task. Others have examined the evolution and nature of teachers' institutes, normal schools and schools of education. Still other historians have written fine-grained analyses of individual schools or school systems that claimed to wear the progressive mantle. Together, these studies help explain why turning child-centred ideas into the 'transformation' of schools was so complicated and difficult to achieve. This scholarship undermines Cremin's claim that, between roughly 1900 and 1950, progressive education 'enlisted the enthusiasm, the loyalty, the imagination, and the energy of large segments of the American public and the teaching profession...'<sup>13</sup> He is correct if one ignores how most teachers actually taught.

### Reforming teachers, reforming schools

When advocates of the 'new' (or as it came to be known 'progressive') education became more prominent in the United States in the nineteenth century, they recognised the challenges ahead. Most schools across the nation were taught didactically by poorly trained individuals who relied on textbooks as the primary means of instruction and recitation as the main check on student progress. Complaints about dull pedagogy and boring classrooms were common.<sup>14</sup> After observing many classes in Cincinnati in the 1850s, one educator concluded that 'teachers to a greater or

<sup>11</sup>D. F. Labaree, 'Progressivism, Schools and Schools of Education: An American Romance', *Paedagogica Historica* 41, nos 1&2 (2005): 277.

<sup>12</sup>Labaree, 'Progressivism, Schools and Schools of Education', 277.

<sup>13</sup>Cremin, *Transformation*, vii.

<sup>14</sup>W. J. Reese, *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to 'No Child Left Behind'* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), chapter 3.

less degree, teach as they themselves were taught', and they spent much of the school day standing in front of a class, with a textbook in hand, asking questions and checking in the book to confirm the answers.<sup>15</sup> As John M. Gregory, the former president of the University of Illinois, noted in 1886, many teachers viewed children's minds as a receptacle, 'a bag to be filled with other people's ideas, a piece of paper on which another may write, a cake of wax under a seal'.<sup>16</sup> And so they often 'drone on through dull hours and dreary routine, reading commonplace questions from books', leaving students bored and happy to leave school.<sup>17</sup>

Some reform-minded educators in the first half of the nineteenth century thought the solution to ineffective teaching might come from Europe. Some visited the model schools established by Johann Pestalozzi or the kindergartens created and inspired by Friedrich Froebel. Most pupils in Europe or America were in primary or elementary schools, and both men and their followers focused their attention on improving education for young children, devising clever ways to enable children and teachers alike to escape from an overly bookish curriculum. As women became the majority of the teaching force in America, especially in the elementary schools in the cities, reformers were also encouraged, hopeful that a new pedagogic day might dawn. They widely believed that women were less likely to use corporal punishment and more likely to favour gentler and more innovative teaching methods.<sup>18</sup> But numerous critics at the end of the century discovered to their horror that most schools from first grade to high school remained teacher centred. Talk and chalk prevailed. Usually the product of schools where old-fashioned pedagogy ruled, teachers replicated familiar classroom routines.<sup>19</sup>

The great hope of many American reformers lay in professionalising teaching. In the nineteenth century, teacher training institutes and emerging state normal schools seemed to catch the spirit of child-centred education. In particular, teacher educators lectured to their pupils on Pestalozzi's ideas about object teaching and on the gentle disciplinary practices found in his model schools for orphans and the poor. Widely described as charismatic and empathetic, Pestalozzi was lauded in America's earliest educational periodicals and by reformers such as Horace Mann, who championed normal schools, in the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>20</sup> The Pestalozzian craze spread quickly after mid-century. Christine Ogren, the leading historian of the normal school movement, explains that Pestalozzian ideals including various forms of 'object teaching' became 'entrenched in the normal schools by the mid-1860s'.<sup>21</sup> The celebrated normal school in Oswego, New York, trained hundreds of teachers in Pestalozzian, child-centred methods; many graduates later spread the gospel

<sup>15</sup>*Twenty-Sixth Annual Report of the Trustees and Visitors of Common Schools, To the City Council of Cincinnati, for the School Year Ending 30<sup>th</sup> June 1855* (Cincinnati: Gazette C. Steam Printing House, 1855), 70.

<sup>16</sup>J. M. Gregory, *The Seven Laws of Teaching* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1886), 34.

<sup>17</sup>Gregory, *Seven Laws*, 46.

<sup>18</sup>C. F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), 124–5.

<sup>19</sup>Reese, *America's Public Schools*, chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup>Kaestle, *Pillars*, 109–10.

<sup>21</sup>C. A. Ogren, *The American State Normal School: 'An Instrument of Great Good'* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 35.

of this 'new education' to other states when they later became normal school instructors themselves.<sup>22</sup>

As Ogren discovered, however, the academic preparation of many normal school pupils was modest, so they spent considerable time mastering the basic academic subjects they would teach, reducing the time available to learn new pedagogic techniques.<sup>23</sup> And while Pestalozzi, like many well-known child-centred enthusiasts, apparently had a magnetic personality, textbooks that tried to capture the lively approach of teaching mathematics through common objects, or geography and science in the field or through experiments, were often dry, didactic and formulaic.<sup>24</sup> That did not bode well for those seeking to transform schools along progressive lines to make students active participants in learning and to emphasise social cooperation and 'learning by doing'.

While most future teachers never attended a normal school, those who did were thus lectured (ironically enough) on the benefits of the 'new education' and the failures of memorise-and-recite methods, just as students today are exposed to 'constructivism'. Then, as now, translating new pedagogic ideals into practice was difficult. Most teachers in nineteenth-century America laboured in ungraded, one-room rural schools, and in the cities rote instructional methods also prevailed. Everywhere, either alone or in groups, pupils at school recited subject matter memorised from their ubiquitous textbooks.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, critics complained that most normal school graduates sought teaching posts in the cities, where they could earn higher salaries and enjoy greater cultural amenities. Urban educators had pioneered in modernising public education, having created the first high schools and graded classrooms, expanding the market for uniform textbooks.<sup>26</sup> But uniformity was the bane of child-centred educators. Champions of object teaching and kindergartens wanted to improve the education of young children, but urban elementary school teachers often had classrooms with more than 50 pupils, making individual attention unlikely. So it was not surprising that, like Cremin, scholars have regularly described the famous exposés of urban schools of the 1890s that documented the ubiquity of traditional instructional methods. Teacher-centred, textbook-governed instruction remained common.<sup>27</sup>

In *The Transformation of the School*, Cremin noted that while innovative practices (the project method, for example) entered public schools in the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century, by the 1920s some of the most well-known examples of progressivism appeared in private schools that mostly

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<sup>22</sup>Ogren, *American State Normal*, 36–7.

<sup>23</sup>Ogren, *American State Normal*, 29, 44–5. Also read J. W. Fraser, *Preparing America's Teachers: A History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007), 52–3, 121–2.

<sup>24</sup>Ogren, *American State Normal*, 37–8, and Reese, *America's Public Schools*, 88, 93–4. On the professional training of kindergarten teachers, which initially occurred outside of normal schools, see Fraser, *Preparing America's Teachers*, 168–72; and the landmark study by B. Beatty, *Preschool Education in America: The Culture of Young Children from the Colonial Era to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>25</sup>Kaestle, *Pillars*, 16–18.

<sup>26</sup>Kaestle, *Pillars*, 120–35, and W. J. Reese, *The Origins of the American High School* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup>Cremin, *Transformation*, 4–7, D. B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 55–6, 82–3, and Reese, *America's Public Schools*, 114, 138.

educated children from elite families drawn to the creative pedagogy found there.<sup>28</sup> Such schools included laboratory or model schools attached to normal schools and universities. In 1896 John and Alice Dewey founded the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, and it was attended by the children of ‘middle-class professionals’ in Hyde Park.<sup>29</sup> Like Pestalozzi’s model schools in Europe in the early 1800s, the Laboratory School was flooded with visitors, especially educators from across the nation and abroad who were exploring alternatives to conventional forms of teaching. Dewey’s writings also began to gain national attention, which helped publicize the school and its underlying philosophy.

While Dewey consistently warned about the excesses of the ‘new education’ and did not advocate romantic, child-centred ideals, his writings frequently criticised conventional schools. As Herbert M. Kliebard has written, ‘Dewey’s position in curriculum matters is sometimes crudely described as “child-centered”, though he was actually trying to achieve a creative synthesis of the child’s spontaneous interests and tendencies on the one hand and the refined intellectual resources of the culture on the other’<sup>30</sup> Dewey often did condemn the lifeless, mind-deadening pedagogy found in most of the nation’s schools. In various publications he decried the prevalence of bolted-down seats, pupil passivity and teacher reliance on textbooks while contrasting this ‘old education’ with promising trends. But he also cautioned against sentimental views of children and the romanticism espoused by Pestalozzi and Froebel. Their ideas, Dewey added, ossified as their enthusiastic followers reduced them to slogans and formulae in textbooks and curricular programmes. Progressives nevertheless seemed not to notice that he criticised extreme positions, whether of the ‘new’ or ‘old’ education, and he was frequently labelled an advocate of child-centred schooling by friend and foe alike.<sup>31</sup>

In 1897, Dewey offered a succinct explanation of his educational philosophy in *My Pedagogical Creed*. Emphasising that the school was a ‘social institution’ and that the child was a ‘social individual’, he argued that schools did more than transmit knowledge, the world’s inherited wisdom.<sup>32</sup> At a time when rural life and farming were being displaced by cities and factories, schools were crucial in helping children understand the values, symbols and knowledge necessary to adapt to a new society; but, like earlier critics of teacher-dominated schools, he believed that students should engage more actively with their own learning. Like other reform-minded educators in the 1890s, Dewey called for new ways to imagine classrooms, which meant realigning the relationships between teachers and pupils. He wanted schools to promote children’s intellectual and social growth, which seemed stunted in classrooms dominated by mindless memorisation and pupil passivity.

<sup>28</sup>Cremin, *Transformation*, 201–15.

<sup>29</sup>Cremin, *Transformation*, 135, R. B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 110, and H. M. Kliebard, ‘John Dewey’, in *Historical Dictionary of American Education*, ed. R.J. Altenbaugh (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 112.

<sup>30</sup>Kliebard, ‘John Dewey’, 112.

<sup>31</sup>Westbrook, *John Dewey*, 98–104, and Reese, *America’s Public Schools*, 136–42.

<sup>32</sup>J. Dewey, ‘My Pedagogic Creed’, in *Dewey on Education*, ed. Martin S. Dworkin (New York: Teachers College Press, 1959), 22.

That hardly meant a diminished role for teachers. As biographer Robert B. Westbrook stated, the kinds of schools Dewey had in mind placed ‘heavy demands on teachers’.<sup>33</sup> The geometric expansion of knowledge in the modern world meant that no school could include everything in the curriculum, and teachers had to know more than their predecessors. They also had to help pupils develop their intellectual powers and learn how to think clearly and critically. Otherwise they would never understand the realities of an ever complex society and participate in it fully as citizens, family members and workers in a new industrial order. Teachers should resemble a guide, not a mere hearer of lessons or marker of exams. Conventional pedagogy that stressed memorising textbook knowledge seemed untenable, an anachronistic and self-defeating way to prepare young people for the future.

Dewey’s writings were widely cited by various educators, many of whom quoted him out of context, partly due to the difficulty of his prose and style of argumentation, in which contrasting ways of thinking about education and schooling were often juxtaposed.<sup>34</sup> But his words and the publicity surrounding the Laboratory School helped inspire a new generation of educational reformers, many of whom ignored the philosopher’s criticisms of child-centred schools or letting children do as they pleased. To clarify for local parents and other interested readers why the Laboratory School adopted novel approaches to teaching and learning, Dewey delivered a series of lectures published as *The School and Society* in 1899. There he explained that schools traditionally imparted learning by forcing children to memorise material they frequently did not understand. Textbooks were important repositories of the knowledge adults had accumulated over the centuries. But pupils were often repelled by textbooks, which were usually crammed with facts, rules and formulas; the knowledge was abstract and removed from their experiences. No wonder, contemporary critics agreed, that so many children experienced academic failure and joyously dropped out of school as soon as possible.<sup>35</sup>

By the early nineteenth century, when new intellectual currents such as romanticism encouraged a more optimistic view of children, innovators such as Pestalozzi and Froebel advanced new ways of thinking about how young children learned. As America became more urban, industrial and ethnically diverse, Dewey argued that it was hardly surprising that traditional schools in his native land seemed outmoded and dysfunctional. In response, schools in Chicago and other cities across the nation expanded their social role. By the early 1900s, many urban schools offered poor children free breakfasts as well as dental and medical examinations. They expanded physical education and athletic programs and established domestic science and manual training courses.<sup>36</sup> To Dewey and other theorists, this heightened attention to children’s needs and interests indicated that teachers and texts would no longer occupy the centre of the classroom. Indeed, some historians have recently argued that a substantial part of America’s domestic welfare state found a home in the nation’s public schools.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Westbrook, *John Dewey*, 108.

<sup>34</sup>Cremin, *Transformation*, 237–8, and Reese, *America’s Public Schools*, 137.

<sup>35</sup>J. Dewey, *School and Society*, in Dworkin, ed., *Dewey on Education*, 51–2.

<sup>36</sup>W. J. Reese, *Power and the Promise of School Reform: Grassroots Movements during the Progressive Era* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

<sup>37</sup>T. L. Steffes, *School, Society, & State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

The Laboratory School, then, was one of many examples of schools that tried to adjust to changing economic and social realities. While maintaining the academic quality parents expected, teachers at this school offered clay modelling and manual training classes as well as innovative teaching of standard subjects. Students worked cooperatively to construct a building, not to train future carpenters, but to provide a new way to learn maths, physics and other subjects. Instead of relying on books to discover something as basic as how to boil an egg, children experimented and actively learned through trial and error. Pupils improved their ability to draw not by imitating models from a book, but through the guidance and constructive criticisms of teachers.<sup>38</sup> Experience and books together aimed to lay a foundation for children's intellectual growth and understanding about basic occupations, from how buildings arose to how meals were prepared. Solving concrete problems and working cooperatively attempted to tap children's curiosity and initiative and also strengthen democracy, which many contemporaries feared was undermined by industrialisation and the growing power of corporations and concentrated wealth.

Other innovative schools across the nation challenged conventional practices. In 1915 Dewey and his daughter co-authored *Schools of Tomorrow*, which highlighted a variety of educational experiments across the nation. Most of these schools rejected rote instruction and memorisation and the belief that children's minds were empty vessels. While *Schools of Tomorrow* showcased some important private schools, one chapter featured the Gary, Indiana, public schools, then becoming world famous by providing more balanced attention to work, play and study. Many of its schools had ample playgrounds, workshops and specialist academic teachers.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere, the 'new education' took other shapes and forms. At the University of Missouri, for example, a laboratory school featured innovative classes based on structured play and group activities.<sup>40</sup>

The Deweys also praised Public School 45 in Indianapolis, Indiana. It became a beehive of activity as its creative teachers pursued 'learning by doing'. 'The work done is that required by the state curriculum, but the teachers are constantly finding new ways to prevent the work becoming a mere drill in textbook facts, or preparation for examinations'.<sup>41</sup> Pupils in the fifth grade built a bungalow. In maths class they sketched its dimensions to scale and calculated the cost of materials before working on them in manual training class. Pupils then decided that the bungalow should be part of a farm, which became the basis for lessons in English, art and other academic subjects as they learned about family life and farming. Neither the child nor the teacher was the centre of the classroom.<sup>42</sup>

Such innovative schools, whether public or private, became beacons of light to educational reformers who despaired of the persistence of the status quo. *Schools of Tomorrow* documented the existence of many model schools and inspiring teachers. In his many writings, Dewey recognised, however, that the majority of schools remained conventional, oriented around adult authority, textbooks, competitive

<sup>38</sup>Dewey, *School and Society*, 50–70, and Kliebard, *Struggle*, chapter 3, for a clear description of the Laboratory School and Dewey's philosophy, especially related to the curriculum.

<sup>39</sup>J. Dewey and E. Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1915), chapter 7, and R. D. Cohen, *Children of the Mill: Schooling and Society in Gary, Indiana, 1906–1960* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, c.2002).

<sup>40</sup>Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 31–44.

<sup>41</sup>Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 54.

<sup>42</sup>Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 54–8.

examinations and other familiar practices. Historians over the last generation have agreed with Dewey's assessment. They have documented the many reasons why changing school practices proved so difficult even though prominent educational theorists and teacher educators frequently praised child-centred pedagogy.

The rising importance of social history in Europe and America since the 1960s helped to advance scholarly understanding of how much schools actually changed over time. As Rury pointed out in his retrospective essay, *Cremin's Transformation of the School* is not a social history of school practices but **is a history of ideas, and particularly the ideas of a rather narrow group of influential educational thinkers**, including such notables as Edward L. Thorndike, John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick.<sup>43</sup> Despite attention to schools and curricular innovations, Cremin concentrated on the ideas of the progressives and organisations such as the Progressive Education Association. His assumption, disputed by historians since the 1970s, was that teachers and the public had largely supported progressive education in the first half of the twentieth century. Enthusiasts in the 1950s, however, reduced progressivism to slogans, discrediting it in the eyes of some liberals and many conservatives.<sup>44</sup>

### Classrooms and constancy

As Rury explains, social and cultural historians by the 1980s increasingly studied the actual effects of different strands of progressivism on classroom practices. Some analysed the deleterious effects of standardised testing, which Dewey had also criticised. Others questioned the role of progressivism in the education of African-Americans, since many programmes in manual training and domestic science became reduced to narrow trade training and vocationalism.<sup>45</sup> While historians did not agree on a common definition of progressivism, they concluded that while many prominent educators engaged in child-friendly rhetoric, relatively few classrooms could be called progressive. Study after study discovered that over the course of the twentieth century, America's public schools, which enrolled around 90% of all pupils in school below college, remained mostly teacher and textbook oriented. Average class sizes had dropped and bolted-down seats were replaced by moveable seats and desks; but teachers still dominated classrooms, competitive exams were common and conventional pedagogy persisted. Despite occasional waves of innovation – team teaching, open classrooms, 'schools without walls' and the like – traditional practices reigned and ruled.<sup>46</sup>

What had happened? With Cremin often cited as an inspiring starting point in their research and sometimes as a foil, historians after the 1970s increasingly tried to explain why traditional pedagogic practices remained so powerful. Some scholars focused on public schools, others on private alternatives. Whether they examined the limitations of charismatic leadership, which had guided many child-centred schools, or the tensions between progressive ideals and classroom realities, they

<sup>43</sup>Rury, 'Transformation in Perspective', 73.

<sup>44</sup>Cremin, *Transformation*, 181, 343–53.

<sup>45</sup>Rury, 'Transformation in Perspective', 71–3.

<sup>46</sup>See especially J. I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984). On the parallels between earlier forms of progressivism and those of the 1960s, read L. A. Cremin, *Public Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 3–24.

exposed the high hopes and bitter disappointments experienced by many liberal educational activists.

Most notably, in 1984 Larry Cuban published *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1880–1990*. One of the most influential books in the history of education, it imaginatively drew on a wide-ranging set of primary sources to reconstruct classroom practices in the public schools. Examining everything from official school reports to architectural plans to photographs of classrooms, he found that teaching methods had indeed changed over the course of the twentieth century. This was especially true in public elementary schools. But they had not changed as much as critics believed or child-centred activists desired. Class size dropped dramatically, teachers on the elementary level used more mixed methods of instruction compared with secondary teachers (who were more subject oriented), and the atmosphere of schools in general became more relaxed and informal. Teachers and administrators by the 1940s often spoke the language of the ‘pedagogical progressives’, but even when some practices were altered, tradition proved resilient. Cuban’s research on teaching practices between the 1890s and 1980s led to the following conclusions:

[The] evidence clearly shows that the dominant teaching tendency was toward varied forms of teacher-centered instruction. In elementary schools that prevailing tendency was modified by clusters of hybrids mixing student-centered teaching practices with more familiar ones. In high school academic subjects, fewer hybrids existed and the dominant tendency emerged clearly.<sup>47</sup>

### Localities and leaders

While Cuban’s book rested on a surfeit of sources from different geographical regions, Arthur Zilversmit presented a closely analysed set of case studies in 1993. In *Changing Schools: Progressive Education Theory and Practice, 1930–1960*, Zilversmit studied the fate of a variety of progressive reforms in four different communities in greater Chicago. Winnetka’s schools served as the key site, since they were heralded as one of the most important centres of progressivism in the inter-war period. During the superintendence of Carleton Washburne (1919 to 1943), Winnetka’s schools were inundated with visitors. Winnetka was a very wealthy community, initially settled by New Englanders with a deep commitment to community-based institutions such as public schools. The school board that hired Washburne, an alumnus of a famous private progressive school in Chicago, gave him considerable latitude, and he built a hybrid system, to use Kliebard’s and Cuban’s phrase.<sup>48</sup> Winnetka’s parents supported non-conventional teaching methods and curricular innovation but not at the expense of academic excellence. To ensure that children had mastered the basics, Washburne tested children regularly and reported the results to parents. While academic coursework dominated morning sessions, teachers then led pupils in a variety of creative activities in the afternoon. Art

<sup>47</sup>L. Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890–1980*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1993), 245.

<sup>48</sup>Kliebard, *Struggle*, 210–12.

and music programmes flourished; students enjoyed various forms of hands-on learning; and they even ran a Credit Union at the junior high school to simulate adult activities. Physical education rounded out the attempt to educate the whole child.<sup>49</sup>

Zilversmit also studied three nearby communities in depth, none of which embraced the kinds of child-friendly activities that made Washburne and Winnetka famous. He demonstrates that Lake Forest, a very wealthy suburb, was less committed to the public schools; the children of school board members, unlike those in Winnetka, often did not attend the public schools. The children of the wealthiest families in Lake Forest 'attended private schools until they were old enough to go east for a prep school education. It was predominantly the children of servants and local tradespeople who attended the public schools.'<sup>50</sup> The two other communities studied in depth by Zilversmit were poorer and lacked the tax base of their wealthier neighbours; moreover, their school boards did not seek to appoint particularly creative administrators or non-traditional teachers, which was never a priority among parents.<sup>51</sup>

Zilversmit's comparative framework enabled him to highlight the unique history of Winnetka as a community and the special character of its well-known superintendent. Washburne was an exceptional talent, a charismatic individual who inspired trust in teachers. With the support of the school board, he opened a teachers college in 1932 and met regularly with his staff; firmly in command, he had considerable influence in hiring and retaining teachers committed to his vision of education. According to Zilversmit, Washburne genuinely respected teachers, the linchpins in any reform effort, which helped make the local schools accountable to parents but also more innovative and probably more engaging for students during portions of the school day.<sup>52</sup>

Like earlier generations of reformers, John Dewey, Carleton Washburne and other progressives realised that school improvements would not occur unless teachers were better trained and committed to new pedagogic principles. Finding such teachers in abundance would not be easy. Didactic pedagogic practices had the weight of history on their side. Moreover, urban school boards became heavily dominated by business elites and professionals in the early twentieth century. As a group they rarely espoused radical ideas about schools; indeed, they often described schools as business enterprises, not a child's garden, and they fought against expanding teachers' rights when they tried to join labour unions, for example.<sup>53</sup> The confluence of factors that made Winnetka a showplace of reform was also unusual, an anomaly among school districts. A perfect alignment of conditions during Washburne's tenure helped ensure his success in implementing his version of child-centred education. Winnetka was a wealthy community, civic-minded and sympathetic people served on the school board and the superintendent worked harmoniously with teachers. The economic crisis of the 1930s, however, weakened the appeal of his ideas among businessmen and the public at large. Calls to eliminate

<sup>49</sup> Arthur Zilversmit, *Changing Schools: Progressive Education Theory and Practice, 1930–1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 37–56.

<sup>50</sup> Zilversmit, *Changing Schools*, 66.

<sup>51</sup> Zilversmit, *Changing Schools*, chapter 4.

<sup>52</sup> Zilversmit, *Changing Schools*, 45–56.

<sup>53</sup> See especially Tyack, *One Best System*, 126–76.

‘fads and frills’ and to strengthen traditional instruction in the basics accelerated, and Washburne resigned as superintendent in 1943. Charismatic leadership left with him and more traditional practices returned to the schools.<sup>54</sup>

What happened in Winnetka raises a number of issues about the relationship between progressivism and teachers. Even though most teachers since the nineteenth century had received their own education in traditional, textbook and teacher-centred schools, where children were expected to be quiet and passive unless called upon or told otherwise, reformers then and in every generation believed that they could transform classrooms. They assumed that schools were malleable and that key figures in determining educational policy-making – taxpayers, parents, elected officials, administrators – as well as teachers, the agents of any possible reform, would champion the cause. As numerous historians have pointed out, however, competition (not cooperation or sharing) was basic to America’s capitalist economy, parents were usually politically moderate or conservative, and taxpayers often preferred low assessments on their property, weakening school budgets. Even working-class families who supported the public schools often lacked much discretionary income or large bank accounts, so they often opposed raising taxes, since they lived close to the margins, worried about losing a home to foreclosure, and had other bills to pay. After the First World War, periodic recessions, the Great Depression and fear of debt only added to their anxieties.<sup>55</sup>

As Roy Lowe rightly noted, identifying precisely ‘what actually goes on in the classrooms’ remains a complicated task for any historian, which is why many studies of progressivism more often quote educational luminaries on its presumed benefits than document its triumph in classrooms.<sup>56</sup> But scholars who have studied classrooms, either directly through observation or indirectly through documents and other sources, have largely confirmed Cuban’s claim that teacher-centred instruction, in whatever form, mostly survived the test of time. Ranking schools and teachers by the results of the standardised test scores of students remains far more common than the implementation of non-traditional teaching methods. Attention to back-to-the-basics and scores on report cards and league tables seems ever popular with the public that foots the educational bill.

America’s private progressive schools, which taught a small, self-selected, often elite student body, had a much freer hand in implementing pedagogic innovations that enabled pupils to become more active learners. While they varied over time in their aims, curricula and character, these schools often shared one thing in common that was rarer in the public schools: charismatic leadership. And private school founders could hire teachers who largely shared their enthusiasm for innovative teaching. Consider, for example, the revealing portraits of some of these schools in the edited volumes on progressivism published by Susan F. Semel and Alan R.

<sup>54</sup>Zilversmit, *Changing Schools*, 51–6, 122–8; and A. Zilversmit, ‘Carleton Wolsey Washburne’, in Altenbaugh, *Historical Dictionary*, 378–9.

<sup>55</sup>See B. M. Nicolaidis, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), which underscores the centrality of home ownership to working class economic security.

<sup>56</sup>Lowe, *Death of Progressive Education*, 1.

Sadovnik. In his study of Marietta Johnson's Organic School, established in Alabama in the early twentieth century, historian Joseph W. Newman points out that 'One of the school's greatest assets was its faculty. As Johnson's reputation spread, she attracted teachers who were willing to work for low wages in order to work with her.'<sup>57</sup> Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., similarly explains that, as in many similar schools founded by 'charismatic' individuals, the progressive Park School in Buffalo, New York, which he had attended, had unusually 'talented and creative' teachers, handpicked to further the mission of the institution.<sup>58</sup> Just as public schools likely hired teachers perceived as cooperative and unlikely to rock the boat, progressive private school leaders also wanted their institutions to become an extension of their personality and reflect their philosophical views. As it happened, the leaders of some self-described progressive schools preached democracy but behaved autocratically.

For example, Semel points out that Caroline Pratt, the founder of the City and Country School in New York City, was remembered as someone who 'encouraged democratic governance' but was clearly, like Washburne in Winnetka, in full control.<sup>59</sup> 'Informants recall that she would enter a classroom and if she saw something amiss, she would share her distress with the teacher in full view of the students. In short, there was really only one way to do things: Pratt's way.'<sup>60</sup> One informant compared her to Stalin.<sup>61</sup> 'Caroline Pratt was in charge of her school from the day it opened', one historian has quipped, 'and, according to some, she remained in charge even after she retired'.<sup>62</sup> In a study of the Dalton school, which became one of New York City's most elite independent schools, Semel noted that its founder similarly had an 'autocratic leadership style'.<sup>63</sup> While Dewey believed that the child, the teacher and the curriculum were all important in shaping a child's educational growth and promoting democracy, private school leaders sometimes favoured a my-way-or-the-highway point of view as they championed their own version of progressive schooling.

Ever since Lawrence A. Cremin published *The Transformation of the School*, scholars have debated its meaning, nature and possible consequences for a variety of public and private schools in different eras. Sceptics who doubt that something called progressivism or progressive education ever existed remain in a minority, though the invocation of the words by many scholars has not produced any consen-

<sup>57</sup>J. W. Newman, 'Experimental School, Experimental Community: The Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education in Fairhope, Alabama', in 'Schools of Tomorrow', *Schools of Today: What Happened to Progressive Education*, ed. S. F. Semel and A. R. Sadovnik (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 80–1.

<sup>58</sup>E. F. Provenzo, Jr., 'An Adventure With Children: Reflections on the Park School of Buffalo and American Progressive Education', in Semel and Sadovnik, 'Schools of Tomorrow', 108, 110–11.

<sup>59</sup>S. F. Semel, 'The City and Country School: A Progressive Paradigm', in Semel and Sadovnik, 'Schools of Tomorrow', 131 and Zilversmit, *Changing Schools*, 122.

<sup>60</sup>Semel, 'City and Country Day School', 131.

<sup>61</sup>Semel, 'City and Country Day School', 131–2.

<sup>62</sup>M. E. Hauser, 'Caroline Pratt and the City and Country School', in *Founding Mothers and Others: Women Educational Leaders During the Progressive Era*, ed. A. R. Sadovnik and S. F. Semel (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 71.

<sup>63</sup>S. F. Semel, 'Helen Parkhurst and the Dalton School', in Sadovnik and Semel, *Founding Mothers*, 90, and S. F. Semel, *The Dalton School: The Transformation of a Progressive School* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), for a comprehensive history.

sus among different writers. Is progressive education a discourse, as postmodern writers claim? Is it a revolt against all forms of tradition, especially teacher and textbook-centred schools? Or, as Herbert M. Kliebard suggests, is the search for progressivism as sensible as tilting at windmills? What does seem clear is that most classrooms are still centred on teachers and textbooks. If the American public remains obsessed with standardised test results as the best way to judge a school, expecting teachers to help pupils arrive at the promised land of child-centred instruction seems unlikely anytime soon.

#### **Notes on contributor**

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