

## Chapter 4

### Progressivism Redux: Ethos, Policy, Pathos

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#### Introduction

Any dispassionate review of schooling policy reform around the globe cannot fail to notice the surprisingly uniform direction it is taking. (I do not claim comprehensiveness, but have in mind the USA, the UK, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, as well as the African countries represented by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa [see ADEA, 2000].) The educational hold-all name against which all this reform (or reaction, as some would have it) is happening is increasingly given as *progressivism* – the first and only comprehensive ideology of schooling of what Ulrich Beck (2000) calls the first age of modernity. There is something richly ironic about this. As David Tyack (1974) has made clear, ‘traditional’ pedagogy had never bothered to name itself because it never considered that there was any alternative – it was ‘the one best system’, an essentially unreformable model in a world where the model and the world were indistinguishable. When the reformers did arrive, first in central Europe and then with a bang in the early twentieth century in the USA with Dewey, they did so with understandable revolutionary – or romantic – zeal, the two often meshed together.

What has to be kept in mind here is that the powerful impulse behind progressivism as an educational movement was social justice, since it was at this stage becoming clear that industrialism and mass schooling together were producing an uneducated and unskilled working class. Most of progressivism’s social zeal was thus concerned with producing equitable educational outcomes for the children of the working class who were, it was now quite plain, being disadvantaged by public spending.

As progressivism began to develop both as a theory and as a practice, it spread out over the ideological spectrum. Tyack (1974) distinguishes four important sub-variants:

- ❑ The pragmatic *administrative progressives* sought redress in the direction of scientifically-driven administrative efficiency. Ball’s (1999) contemporary performative zealots are arguably the ancestors of this progressive strand rather than the post-modern functionaries Ball takes them for.
- ❑ The equally pragmatic *pedagogical progressives* (or reconstructionists) were the Deweyans proper, including both John and Evelyn Dewey and William Kilpatrick, Dewey’s ‘best student’ and tireless advocate of the ‘project method’, the avatar of problem-solving learning, curricular integration and service learning, among others.
- ❑ To the left came the libertarian *educational progressives*, radical child-centred activists, who surfaced mostly in alternative schools, most notably perhaps A.S. Neill’s Summerhill.
- ❑ To the left of them came the *social reconstructionists* like Teachers’ College’s Coutts, who attempted to marry Deweyan progressivism with socialism.

While different in both politics and pedagogy, ‘All competence modes’ – as Bernstein (1996:68) would call these different varieties of progressivism – ‘despite their differences, share a preoccupation with the development (liberal/progressive), the recognition (populist) and change (radical) of consciousness’. Or to put that another way, progressivism was first and foremost about radical *progress*. The driving assumption – progressivism’s ‘most scandalous notion’ – was, as Charles Simic (2000:9) has said about modernism, ‘that it is possible to begin from scratch and be entirely original....’ This is manifested in the pervasive chiasm of progressivism: the original one best system was, in progressivism’s founding gesture, exposed as a fraud, and the promised progressive future depended now upon a complete and total replacement of the old in all its manifestations with the new, the *authentic* one best system. Salvation positively depended upon a guillotine-like severance with the past.<sup>1</sup> To this day, this social or ‘paradigm’ shift is advocated by progressives in either/or terms in ways that would make Kuhn (and Lenin for that matter) wince at its romantic naïveté.<sup>2</sup>

There is some merit in the view that progressivism as an educational movement was an exclusively, sometimes even parochially, American phenomenon. Certainly the English did not have anything called by that name. However, their ‘child-centred’ movement is grown from the same stock, as were many other reforms in Europe at the time, like the Gentile reforms discussed below. There may be earlier references to it in South Africa, but in 1934 the New Education Fellowship (NEF), an international advocacy group for progressivism, hosted an enormous international conference with sessions in both Johannesburg and Cape Town. Four thousand people attended; there were three hundred formal addresses and twenty-five overseas speakers, prominent among whom was John Dewey who addressed the conference three times. The conference was opened by Minister of Education Hofmeyr and Deputy Prime Minister Smuts; the latter praised the individuality of the ‘new education’ which he saw as a vital bulwark against ‘proletarian standardisation’.

The NEF was clearly a catholic church: Graf von Durckheim-Montmartin extolled the virtues of the Hitler Jugend for ‘disciplined group education’ (Malherbe, 1937:41). Eiselen and Verwoerd both addressed the conference, but so did Malinowski, Hoernle, and Monica Wilson. The tenor of progressivism was clearly evident in the framing of the conference, as were some of the faultlines in the broad front. Significantly, Dewey went out of his way to distance his protocols from those of ‘some would-be progressive schools and teachers’ (Malherbe, 1937:25). For Dewey – as for both Gramsci and Gee, as we will see below – the new educational stress on development did not mean a completely learner-centred or activity-centred curriculum. Direction, even in these early debates, was the issue, as Dewey was at pains to point out: ‘Under the alleged sanction of not violating freedom and individuality the responsibility for providing development conditions is overlooked’ (Malherbe, 1937:25). More plainly still: ‘But development involves a point of direction as well as a starting point with constant movement in that direction...’ (Malherbe, 1937:25). Gee develops this point in an exemplary fashion below.

At this celebration of progressivism in South Africa we have to remember that universal mass education – and thus the possible flaws of progressivism – was still some way off. Mass schooling, when it did come in the form of Bantu Education, was not so much a traditional as

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<sup>1</sup> In this sense, People’s Education was classically progressivist, as Andre Kraak (1998:2-4) shows.

<sup>2</sup> See Spira (1998) who distinguishes between progressive and ‘essentialist’ education – ‘student as passive’, ‘individual facts are taught’, ‘education as memorisation’, and so on – as not so much a straw man as a descriptive travesty. Incidentally, Spira’s panacea is ‘technology-based distance learning’, a method wonderfully opportune once the ‘active learner’ has expunged the need for any ‘teacher-centred’ instruction.

a counter-reformative policy. No wonder, then, that the liberation movement wanted precisely that which had been denied – progressive education. This is plain in all the ‘from-to’ manifestos of People’s Education, NEPI, the ANC yellow book, and into policy – all displaying the characteristic chiliastic certainty that everything in the first column was politically and educationally bankrupt while everything in the second column represented the inauguration of redressive social justice.<sup>3</sup>

But the global tide has turned, and progressivism is undeniably now *passé*: ‘educational progressivism, in practice and in theory, is fast losing ground’ (Eberstadt, 1999). Theoretically (some would say ideologically) the conceptual basis of progressivism has been directly attacked in a range of recent writing. The books by Hirsch (2000) and Ravitch (2000) have been particularly influential. Hirsch has been at pains to show that the naturalism of progressivism, from which stems the idea of the creative, active learner and the facilitating teacher, is rooted less in Dewey’s pragmatism than it is in eighteenth century romanticism. As MacDonald (1998) says bitingly, ‘If the child was, in Wordsworth’s words, a “Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!” then who needs teachers?’ She goes on derisively, ‘But the Mighty Prophet emerged from student-centred schools ever more ignorant and incurious as the schools became more vacuous.’ Who cares, asks MacDonald, when ‘Anything But Knowledge’ is the proud anti-intellectual creed of progressivism?

But people increasingly do care. Not only national but international testing comparisons have shown some striking results (with South Africa stone last on the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, TIMSS). The most charitable conclusion to be drawn is that, on orthodox measures of achievement, progressivism’s predictions are not borne out. Even within the liberal progressive consensus (see Taylor & Vinjevoold, 1999), it is increasingly being conceded that:

- ❑ Effective active instruction, classically proscribed by progressivism as the primary hindrance to authentic learning, makes a major difference to learning.
- ❑ The teacher thus returns, not as a facilitator or manager but as an instructional specialist.
- ❑ This means a return to the importance of content knowledge, both in curriculum stipulation and in instructional guidance. As Dewey said in Cape Town, ‘The New Education needs more attention, not less, to subject matter’ (Malherbe, 1937:25).

Why the *volte face*? And is it sufficient? These questions are addressed below.

## The trouble with progressivism

The acknowledgement of the role of instruction in successful learning – and thus of the pre-eminent importance of the teacher and of teacher knowledge – is, as I have said, increasingly conceded by some of the leaders of progressivism, like Linda Darling-Hammond (Muller, 2000b).

In a recent communiqué (Spencer Deans,<sup>4</sup> 2000), the Deans of ten Schools of Education in the United States made a plea for ‘moving beyond ideological divides’ and listed what they feel thirty years of research into school reform in the USA has established does actually work:

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<sup>3</sup> ‘For the real chiliast, the present becomes the breach through which what was previously inward bursts out suddenly, takes hold of the outer world and transforms it’ (Mannheim, 1936/1991:193).

<sup>4</sup> The Spencer Deans are a group of deans of Schools of Education at prestigious USA universities, all funded by the Spencer Foundation.

- ❑ high expectations and high standards;
- ❑ curricula based on high standards;
- ❑ standards-based assessment;
- ❑ strong principals;
- ❑ stable school environment;
- ❑ parental involvement;
- ❑ teachers with content and pedagogical knowledge;
- ❑ on-going INSET; and
- ❑ micro- and macro-accountability.

This is a rather orthodox list, and mirrors the conclusions above (Muller, 2000b). The Deans are evidently trying to move the debate onto a plane where research and not ideology is the decisive factor, but it will not be so easy. They allocate positions in terms of ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ – a bifurcatory progressivist reflex that is obdurately diehard. Furthermore, in many quarters they themselves are seen as the problem rather than its solution. The sustained ‘education school bashing’, as it has come to be called, has not been on the basis of their supposed ineptitude but on the basis of their ideology – as Hirsch (2000) has said, by an ‘all too ept advocacy of Romantic ideas, not by incompetence but by an all too competent rhetoric in the service of the notion that specific subject-matter knowledge has only secondary importance.’ In short, schools and departments of education are widely seen as the ideological home of progressivism.

That is almost certainly too sweeping a generalisation, and the Spencer Deans are clearly moving away from that stance. However, the contention in the field is often remarked:

You might think progressive and traditional educational theories represent competing programs to achieve an agreed-upon goal, and that scholars would welcome signs of achievement in the same way that medical researchers welcome evidence that one cure works better than another. But you would be wrong. Inside the educational world, these two streams of thought are viewed more as alternative moral and philosophical systems, as fighting faiths. What is mere evidence in the face of such iron certitudes (Traub, 2000)?

To summarise: the ‘one best system’ of progressivism is under unprecedented attack. The progressives have laid claim to the moral and political high ground of social justice, but their opponents say this is just what progressivism does not deliver. The terrain is fatally politicised, and almost without fail the sides give political or ideological labels to one another. The opposition is not unified by any coherent paradigm, and it is certainly misleading to call them ‘traditionalists’ or ‘conservatives’; Hirsch prefers the label ‘classicist’ that – accurate as it may be in terms of the literary canon – to my mind confuses the issue further. In the meantime, though, a steadily growing base of empirical research is pointing mostly in one direction:

Education looks more and more like a real social science; specific instructional practices have been isolated as never before. And the outcome is pretty clear: One study after another has shown that traditional instructional methods which Chall calls “teacher centred” produce better academic results than progressive “student-centred” ones... (Traub, 2000; see also Chall, 2000).

The messy public scrap in the United States and elsewhere, edging reluctantly towards rational public debate bolstered by research results, is not particularly edifying, and the limits to furthering the debate on the basis of political position-taking have clearly been reached. What is needed is a way to recontextualise the issues that will lift discussion out of the

rancours of political one-upmanship. The section that follows will examine the way that one particularly perspicacious progressive, James Gee, has dealt with some of the critiques of progressivism.

## Immersion

A well-known criticism has it that progressive theories ‘actually work against the new orthodoxy’s supposed social justice goals of emancipation and empowerment’ and that ‘educational progressivism is a sure means of preserving the social status quo’ (Hirsch, 2000). In the USA this point is particularly associated with the black feminist writer Lisa Delpit, and has also been made for South African progressivism (Moore & Muller, 1999; Muller, 2000b). Why is this so? According to Gee (1999), it is because progressive pedagogy effectively hides the ‘rules of the game’ from disadvantaged learners, leaving them without visible scaffolding on which to advance. Gee pairs the first criticism with a second, allied one, namely that the confessional strategies of progressive pedagogy causes learners to put their inner life on display, and therefore amenable to surveillance and discipline. This Foucauldian criticism is familiar from the work of Walkerdine (1988) and Gore (1997) and, for South Africa, Ensor (1995). Thus, progressivism blocks the induction of disadvantaged learners into the knowledge structure but submits them to middle-class moral regulation. On the one hand, it promotes permissiveness that generates failure; on the other, it promotes ‘soft coercion’ that generates social control. Taken together, these two criticisms cast progressivism in the role of a Machiavellian instrument of class control.

Where most progressives would deny this picture, Gee partly concedes the case by contending that the critique identifies the dark mirror side of progressivism, but that progressivism (or any reform for that matter) is double-edged and requires a particular kind of supplement in order to keep the virtuous side, which he claims is still viable, to the fore. To show how this might work, Gee first considers how we learn things in everyday life. We start with pattern recognition, and follow our noses analogically. However, our noses on their own will not lead us to the culturally determined pattern clusters (situated meanings) of our community. Since pattern clusters are potentially infinite, our experience requires guidance to reach the appropriate patterns; hence, ‘experience and guidance (constraint, direction) are inextricably yoked’. Dewey would concur.

Learning at school is no different. Say we need to learn about ‘light’. The situated meanings and pattern clusters of light in everyday experience differ from those in physics. We need, therefore, to be immersed in the physics pattern clusters, but there is also an ‘absolute need for guidance (constrain, direction) as a supplement to being situated in experience’. Of course, this does not necessarily entail explicit guidance: most scaffolding, he says, is ostensive and tacit. Nevertheless, guidance is what it is, and for schooling it is the teacher who must do it.

So far the concessions to critique are modest. Progressive pedagogues, it has been argued, have always had to flout their rule of invisibility to achieve positive learning (Davis, 1996). However, in the last part of the paper Gee goes beyond acknowledging that the teacher is just another part of the scaffolding furniture. Drawing on the Vygotskian distinction between spontaneous (everyday) and non-spontaneous (scientific) concepts, Gee argues that one only ‘gets’ non-spontaneous concepts through “‘overt instruction” that focuses on (a) putting things into words, (b) conscious and intentional use of new concepts, and (c) the relationship among forms and meanings’. Here the teacher breaks free from the scaffolding furniture, and becomes indispensable to direct guidance. The implication is that this is what is needed to

paralyse the dark side and allow virtuous progression to flourish.

Gee presents us with three scenarios for concept learning. The first two are essentially similar, and the teacher in the second scenario (school) simply provides what the semiotic agencies of the community do in everyday life (instruction I). In the third, however, something is to be learnt (non-spontaneous concepts) which requires active intervention of a sort not found in everyday life. Instruction here (instruction II) becomes a form of direction qualitatively different to that provided by the community because ‘everyday language, in creating patterns and associations, is less careful about differences and underlying systematic relations, though these are crucial to science’. Although Gee does not say it, it should be clear that instruction II requires that the teacher:

- ❑ knows more than the learner (has adequate content knowledge); but more critically
- ❑ knows the conceptual destination of the learning; and therefore
- ❑ purposefully steers the learner towards a preset goal.

With this, a number of key tenets of learner-centredness are breached, and we begin to move towards a more teacher-centred model, away from weak framing of the curriculum to far stronger framing – and thereby somewhat away from progressive pedagogy towards the more expert, purposive teacher to which the empirical school reform research is pointing.

I have made Gee concede more here than he wants to, which was merely to shore up a less ‘pure’ but more defensible progressivism. My argument here is that this strengthened progressivism is the lesson from instruction I but that it is not enough, as the third example makes clear. The argument for instruction II does mortal damage to the ‘progressive emphasis on breaking down the boundaries between school and “life”.’ It is my contention that progressivism – in its stress on schooling as practice, and on pedagogy seen narrowly as teaching – loses sight of knowledge and its acquisition, which is the primary aim of learning. Put more bluntly, progressivism does not have an explicit theory of knowledge, and therefore does not have an explicit theory of curriculum or acquisition. Without it, we cannot construct a post-progressive pedagogy.

## **Chinese complexities**

The same cannot be said for that enduring source of inspiration for the left, Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci’s (1986) starting point was that the education system – if it was to serve the cause of the new society, and as the state began to assume responsibility for public schooling – had to move away from the ‘old school’ towards a ‘common school’. The common school was to serve the working class and through them the whole society. At the same time, Gramsci was perturbed by the proposals of the Gentile Reform of 1923, as well as by the ideas of Montessori, the ‘Dalton method’ (enthusiastically promoted in Cape Town by Harold Rugg’s wife, Louise Kruger), and all species of an emerging progressivism. He found the reaction against the old school altogether too extreme: ‘The active school [his euphemism for progressivism] is still in its romantic phase, in which the elements of struggle against the mechanical and Jesuitical school have become unhealthily exaggerated’ (Gramsci, 1986:32-33). This is a surprising judgement, to say the least. Let us see how this revolutionary arrives at his pedagogical position.

The job of school is to ‘accustom [the students] to reason, to think abstractly and schematically while remaining able to plunge back from abstraction into real and immediate life, to see in each fact or datum what is general and what is particular, to distinguish the

concept from the particular instance' (Gramsci, 1986:38). The old school did this by weaning the pupils from folklore, which encompassed both a magical and pre-scientific view and a pre-civic view. The condition for this weaning was theoretical and practical activity (or work) on the part of the pupils. But this understanding has been elevated by the new pedagogues into an absolute, resulting in a stress on activity (educativity) at the expense of instruction. First of all, the difference between school (science and civics) and everyday life (folklore) does not disappear in the industrial era, and it remains the teachers' pre-eminent 'obligation to accelerate and regulate the child's formation in conformity with the former and in conflict with the latter' (Gramsci, 1986:36). To labour the point, 'in conflict with the latter' signals a strong discontinuity between life and school.

In a judgement whose harshness is matched only by that of the contemporary critics of progressivism, Gramsci (1986:36) goes on to say, 'If the teaching body is not adequate and the nexus between instruction and education is dissolved, while the problem of teaching is conjured away by the cardboard schemata exalting educativity, the teachers' work will as a result become yet more inadequate.' This can be paraphrased to say: if the teachers have inadequate subject knowledge, and progressivism sidelines them still further by marginalising their role and exalting that of the learners, then learning is jeopardised – exactly the conclusion of the Curriculum 2005 Review Committee (DoE, 2000f).

But what is it that the teacher must do? What kind of instruction must s/he provide? The answer comes in two parts. The first has to do with 'facts'. Just like our modern progressives, Gentile railed against teaching facts. Quite wrong, says Gramsci (1986:41): 'It is noticeable that the new pedagogy has concentrated its fire on "dogmatism" in the field of instruction and the learning of concrete facts – that is, precisely in the field in which a certain dogmatism is practically indispensable....' How so? What we learn at school, says Gramsci, is how to order facts and objects in the world. Where do the pupils get these to-be-ordered facts from? From the teacher. The good teacher informs the pupils (gives them facts) *and* shows them how to order the facts. The mediocre teacher – in the old school, at least – imparted a baggage' of concrete facts that the active pupil may learn to order by herself. Now, however, 'With the new curricula, which coincide with a general lowering of the level of the teaching profession, there will no longer be any "baggage" to put in order' (Gramsci, 1986:36). Gramsci would have been completely scornful of Gee's view that we acquire the facts of, say, mathematics by 'immersing' the pupils in maths problems in the same way as we get facts about the world through our immersion in it because, to repeat, 'There is no unity between school and life' (Gramsci, 1986:35).

Teachers must impart facts, therefore, but more importantly still they must impart a disciplined comportment to life. How is this done? In the old school, teachers taught Greek and Latin not because they wanted pupils to be able to speak those languages, but 'because the real interest was the interior development of personality ... to inculcate certain habits of diligence, precision, poise (even physical poise) ...' (Gramsci, 1986:37) – in other words, the mental and physical habits, 'a second – nearly spontaneous – nature' (Gramsci, 1986:38); each person needs to become the famous Gramscian philosopher, the democratic civic ideal of communism, properly considered. We teach the facts of history, not because we want pupils to imbibe facts but so that they can imbibe, almost unconsciously, 'a historicising understanding of the world and of life' (Gramsci, 1986:39). It is the almost inadvertent learning of the important comportments – 'logical, artistic, psychological experience [was] gained unawares, without a continual self-consciousness' (Gramsci, 1986:39) – that is the true pedagogical school task of the teacher; think of it as a more expansive and generous version of Gee's instruction II. The difference, though, remains striking: for Gramsci the comportments, albeit the main purpose of education, are only to be approached 'unawares'

and by indirection through the teaching of facts; for the progressives the facts must fall away and the compartments become the entry point for each lesson, as we will see with Gardner below.

Progressive curriculum reform, in Gramsci's view, tackles the wrong object. It tackles the form of the curriculum instead of its content. To be blunt, Gramsci means we must throw out Latin and Greek and bring in science, maths, language and civics, but they need to be used in the same way. These are the 'relevant' carriers of the all-important mental skills in today's world. The idea that education is about the inculcation of these skills and compartments is not, should not be, the focus of education. When it does so become, then we fall foul of 'relevance' in the curriculum and vocational education – a diversification of the common school, its mission and its products. The result – and this is the crux of this whole analysis – will be a hardening and widening of class distinctions. That is precisely what the empirical studies of contemporary progressivism persistently find. This most durable of critiques of progressivism was first made by Gramsci, and no one has made it more eloquently: 'The most paradoxical aspect of it all is that this new type of school appears and is advocated as being democratic, while in fact it is destined not merely to perpetuate social differences but to crystallise them in Chinese complexities' (Gramsci, 1986:40).

To summarise: Gramsci would concur with Gee that the role of the teacher, devalued in progressivism, should be brought more to the fore. But where for Gee this role has to do mostly with shaping ('directing') the flux of experience gained through immersion, for Gramsci it should crucially provide the 'baggage', the facts, the raw material to be shaped and ordered. In other words, even Gee, in his bold retrieval of the teacher's role, conceives it in terms of skills and procedures only, not in terms of knowledge, as Gramsci does. The result is the characteristic, fatally flawed, progressive curriculum.

## Anything but knowledge

Schools are about many things, (progressive) teacher educators say ... self-actualisation, following one's joy, social adjustment, or multicultural sensitivity – but the one thing they are not about is knowledge ... educators will occasionally allow the word to pass their lips, but it is always in a compromised position, as in "constructing one's own knowledge" or "contextualised knowledge". Plain old knowledge, the kind passed down in books, the kind for which Faust sold his soul, that is out.... That dogma may be summed up in the phrase: Anything But Knowledge (MacDonald, 1998).

As we saw above, Gee lands himself in something of a pickle because, for instruction I, he can retain the orthodox progressive postulate that life and school – relevant everyday knowledge and school knowledge – are in principle isomorphic, whereas for instruction II this assumption has to be partly abandoned. Let us look more closely at how this key progressive postulate shapes the progressive curriculum.

The 'school subject' is the selector and orderer of knowledge in the traditional curriculum. It is an ensemble that suggests what is to be learnt and when. For progressivism this is a misleading description since it over-emphasises facts (knowledge). Rather, 'a subject is a collection of similar skills, cases, and facts that have been grouped together as an object of study' (*Engines for Education*, 2000). There are two things to note with this definition. First, it clearly prioritises skills that, from the traditional animus against facts noted already by Gramsci, we have by now come to expect. So much so, in fact, that the definition proceeds to define physics exclusively in skill terms: "Doing physics" involves a set of skills which range from timing the wing of a pendulum to constructing particle accelerators' (*Engines for*



*Education*, 2000).

Secondly, it turns out that this organisation of school experience is almost exactly the same as that of the ‘domain’, its equivalent in everyday life: ‘A domain is, like a subject, a collection of skills, cases, and facts’ (*Engines for Education*, 2000), only it is better because it will be more interesting for pupils. ‘Some examples are politics, trucks, and animals.... Any of the above domains can be used as a vehicle to teach the subjects of physics, biology, or history’. So, there is nothing special about the organisation of school knowledge that cannot be improved by organising it as everyday knowledge is organised: this is the core belief of curriculum progressives. It happens to be wrong, as I shall show below.

First, though, let us examine what a radical domainal approach looks like. The most famous exemplar is that of Howard Gardner (2000). All we need to teach our children, says he, is about truth, beauty, and morality; since depth is preferable to breadth, we can teach the first through evolution, the second through Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, and the third through the Holocaust. We can enter these domains through a variety of entry points derived from his theory of multiple intelligences – narrative, aesthetic, numerical, existential-foundational, interpersonal, or hands-on. It is not surprising that hands-on is a privileged mode, though Gardner does solemnly warn, ‘Hands-on involvement with the Holocaust must be approached carefully, especially with children’ (quoted by Eberstadt, 1999).

Gardner assures us he is a ‘demon’ for high standards. But how would we know? With no content stipulations, how would we know what the pupils had learnt? The truth of the matter is, the content and coverage are tacitly assumed to be in place. That is, a success can be made of this sort of under-stipulated curriculum, but only if the teacher has a well-articulated mental script of what should be covered and if the pupils come from homes where they have been well-prepared to respond to such putative freedom – in other words, only in schools by and for the middle class: ‘It appears then that progressive educational ideology has come full circle. Born near the turn of the century in hopes of raising the downtrodden up, it survives now as the ideology of choice of, by, and for the educational elite’ (Nathan Glazer, quoted by Eberstadt, 1999).

## Putting progression back in progressive

We are back, then, to the question that originally gave rise to progressivism: What kind of curriculum and pedagogy will optimise the learning chances of the disadvantage? So far, the empirical evidence as well as the discussions on Gee and Gramsci have stressed that a more directive teacher is certainly one place to start. But is it enough? My answer is no. The discussion in the preceding section has shown how an overriding emphasis on learning and teaching as practical activities puts the focus on what both pupils and teachers should *do* at the expense of what they should *know*. If we are not to fall back into the trap of ‘facts’, the question of what pupils should know translates into the following: how should the knowledge in the curriculum be organised to optimise learning?

One answer is provided by the recent report of the Review Committee established to look into Curriculum 2005 (C2005) (DoE, 2000f).

The Report begins by distinguishing between two different ways that knowledge can be demarcated and ordered: lateral demarcation and vertical demarcation.

*Lateral demarcation* demarcates which knowledge clusters belong together and which do not. The curriculum design and challenge here is that of *connective coherence* (integration) – of how to ensure coherent linkage between clusters. The guiding principles are contiguity, worldly relevance, and interest. The designer’s job is to devise mechanisms that promote

these. As we saw above, domains are issue-organisers that select knowledge units purely on the basis of interest and relevance. In C2005 these are called programme organisers. Similarly, Gardner's 'entry points' function to select knowledge units on the basis of their relevance to a particular kind of cognitive activity or skill. In C2005 these are called phase organisers. As we saw from the critiques above, as pupils traverse these relevant knowledge clusters, there is no guarantee that key conceptual way stations are reached. The progressive concession, as we saw from both the empirical research and the concession by Gee, is to bring back teacher direction. The question then arises: how does the teacher know what the key conceptual way stations are, or what kind of knowledge might be relevant to understanding them?

Here a different notion of relevance comes to the fore, namely, 'relevant to conceptual development'. Connective coherence devices are no help. For that, the second form of demarcation and ordering must be considered. *Vertical demarcation* establishes which knowledge within each knowledge cluster must be learnt, in what sequence, and at what level of competence. The curriculum design challenge here is that of *conceptual coherence* – how to ensure coherent conceptual learning progression. The guiding principle is conceptual relevance, which determines sequence, progression and pacing. Apart from allocating responsibility to the teacher, progressive pedagogy is completely silent on conceptual relevance and coherence. The Chisholm Report found that, while the mechanisms of assessment criteria, range statements, performance indicators and expected levels of performance were intended to establish sequence, progression and pacing, they were understipulated and did not provide the necessary guidance to either teacher or pupil. Put bluntly, there is no conceptual road map in C2005. Nor is this a simple omission; it derives from core postulates of progressivism. The preliminary evidence shows that it is the children of the poor, not the middle class, who are disadvantaged (Taylor & Vinjevoll, 1999).

The Review goes on to say that different knowledge areas may have different requirements with respect to connective and conceptual coherence, and that part of the trick of curriculum design has to do with making sure that one set of mechanisms does not block the achievement of other requirements, as was the case with C2005. 'When learning areas with distinctive conceptual coherence requirements (like maths, science and language) are driven mainly by integration requirements, then the potential for conceptual progression is retarded' (DoE, 2000f:42). I will not explore this further here. My main purpose has been to put my finger on that field in which, as Gramsci (1986:41) said above, '...a certain dogmatism is practically indispensable'.

This is just what most contemporary curriculum reform has found. To quote a recent review of curriculum reform in Norway (Recent Trends, undated), 'The curriculum content is (now) precisely prescribed for each year, and with special attention to the progression-matters'. The picture is similar in Australia (Clements, undated) and in New Zealand (Education Review Office, 2000), two of our closest models for C2005. This raises the question of the criminal culpability of educational carpetbaggers who purvey for gain ideas in the developing world at the very moment that they are being discredited at home, but that's another story.

Summing up the argument made in this chapter, one could say that what is missing from progressivism is progression. The reasons for this have been variously suggested. Hirsch thinks that the Rousseauian 'natural self' in the forefront of progressive pedagogy makes progressivism recoil from any notion of progress that is not self-constructed (Stone, 1996). And if Gramsci somehow failed to persuade the left, the school effectiveness research and the TIMSS results have surely brought home the costs, personal as well as national, of keeping the self pristinely natural. A secondary reason for the omission suggested above is that there is

a distinct limit to what we can say about learning and teaching without having to refer to knowledge. The progressive inclination to define all knowledge events as skills, competencies and practices precludes talking about knowledge *as* knowledge. Since knowledge breathes now so fervidly down our necks, as it probably has always done, isn't it time that we moved to a less romantic, more effective, and more socially just, post-progressive pedagogic politics and practice?