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Progressive education parallels? A critical comparison of early 20th century America and early 21st century Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland is at a watershed moment. The task, in order to meet new global circumstances, is to encourage bold and innovative thinking on learning and teaching, lessen the attainment gap for socially disadvantaged learners and increase vocational learning. These challenges closely reflect those of early 20th century America, where administrative progressives with an interest in school governance and curriculum arrangements pursued an agenda at odds with pedagogical progressives, who encouraged by the multiple writings of John Dewey, afforded a greater emphasis to the interests of the child. Critically analysing these tensions, through a detailed review of the Gary Schools Plan in Gary, Indiana highlights many of the concerns and influences Scottish education needs to critically consider.

1. Introduction

A recent report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2015) notes that Scottish education is at a key transition point where the implementation period of the all-encompassing (3–18 years) learner centered, capacity building Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is complete and a new phase of policy enactment is beginning. The OECD (2015, p. 100) considers that a ‘degree of boldness’ is required to ‘empower our teachers to make the best decisions for children and young people’ (Scottish Government, 2016b, p. 1) and to avoid the negative consequences associated with micro-management tussles between central government and local (unitary) authorities over control of education and schools (OECD, 2015). Whatever changes are ahead they are likely to take place within existing comprehensive schooling structures, as the Scottish Government (2016b, 1) remains committed to this model of schooling as ‘evidence shows that co-operation and collaboration, not competition or marketisation drives improvement.’ The near uniform commitment to comprehensive provision can be viewed as an expression of Scottish unity and identity and ‘as a reflection of democracy and communal solidarity and demonstration that opportunities to succeed should be available to all learners’ (Byrce & Humes, 2013, p. 51). Such an allegiance is currently most evident in the relentless endeavour to achieve greater equity in education through closing the attainment gap for those learners disadvantaged by the effects of poverty and in plans to devolve increased school management to head teachers (Scottish Government, 2016a).

CfE aims to achieve greater curriculum coherence through learners developing four capacities (i.e., to become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens) with improved learning transfer intended across the ages and stages of child development (Scottish Executive, 2004). Since the announcement of CfE, emphasis and attention has been on articulating how the capacities can be developed through learning in specified curriculum areas (i.e., language, mathematics, science, expressive arts, social studies, technologies, religious and moral education along with the new disciplinary area of health and wellbeing) as well as emphasizing the *across* learning responsibility all teachers have in three particular areas – literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing (Scottish Government, 2008). These arrangements reflect a partial engagement with the therapeutic culture

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ambitions which are a particular concern of governments and supra national bodies with an interest in equity, social justice and the emotional wellbeing of young people (Thorburn, 2017). This is further evident through the merging of a traditional subject-based curriculum with the four newly set out generic contexts for learning (i.e., the ethos and life of the school as a community, curriculum areas and subjects, interdisciplinary learning and opportunities for personal achievement) which are collectively designed to help learners identify and take on more responsibility for their progress (Scottish Government, 2008). Additionally, there is an overarching 'skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work' focus, so schools have a responsibility as well for developing thinking skills across learning, personal learning planning and career management, working with others, leadership, physical co-ordination and movement and enterprise and employability' (Scottish Government, 2009). This emphasis was applauded by a recent Scottish Government (2014, p. 8) report that 'young people of all abilities should have the opportunity to follow industry relevant vocational pathways alongside academic studies.' This busy mix of influences and intentions highlights that as far as Drew (2013, p. 502) is concerned CfE represents 'a bold attempt to build on the strengths of Scottish education whilst introducing a radical new approach to prepare children and young people to address some of the challenges they would face beyond school in the twenty-first century.' Cameron (2013, p. 204) also believes that the CfE model has much to recommend it, as Scotland needs 'in a very short space of time to work together to turn the supertanker that is Scottish education around from a knowledge-driven, largely conformist curriculum to a skills-driven, explicitly personalised one.'

A century ago educators in the United States of America (USA) faced similar challenges to present day Scotland. What characterised discussions between *administrative and pedagogical progressives* in the USA was the divide between administrative progressives interest in school governance and curriculum arrangements and *pedagogical progressives*, who informed primarily by the multiple writings of John Dewey, afforded a greater emphasis to the interests of the child. Tyack (1974) coined the terms 'administrative progressives' and 'pedagogical progressives', and this paper utilises these definitions by concurring with Labaree (2005) that the administrative category fits with a conservative and social efficiency emphasis and the pedagogical category fits with a liberal and social re-constructivist emphasis, with child development spanning the two. Cohen and Mohl (1979, p. 173) also consider that administrative progressivism should be seen 'as a conservative-orientated movement – one which sought to reassert the dominance of elites in society and politics, one which sought to restore the freedom of the individual which was fast disappearing before the forces of immigration, industrialization and urbanization.' This in a school context would manifest itself in empowering superintendents/Head teachers to use business methods and efficiency gains to secure stability and order during a time of change. By contrast, *pedagogical progressivism* is more focussed on improving the conditions of the poor through the efforts of those working directly in schools and through the implementation of legislation and government programmes which specifically benefit the disadvantaged.

Crucially, administrative and pedagogical progressives are despite their differences united in recognising that schools are fundamental to reforming society (Cohen & Mohl, 1979). This paper therefore examines the key features of administrative and pedagogical progressivism with particular reference to the Gary Schools Plan in Gary Indiana (a new steel making city on the southern shores of Lake Michigan) which was organised 'on the notion that schools should offer a maximum of education and social services while pedagogically running at full throttle, much like the nearby industrial plants' (Reese, 2012, p. 10). Under the leadership of William Wirt, the Gary Schools Plan merged a progressive focus on academic subjects and vocational education, with the combination of intellectual and practical teaching extending into the evening with further time available for additional work in areas of interest. By running classroom and vocational programmes concurrently schools could be efficient in the use of public facilities with twice the number of pupils (organised into platoons) being in attendance relative to the norm in other schools. This mix of work-study-play was also designed to integrate schools more closely with their local communities.

Given the above research context the paper aims to critically review:

- the development of administrative and pedagogical progressivism in early 20th century American education.
- the extent to which the Gary Plan was driven by administrative efficiency and/or pedagogical progressivism.
- the extent to which pedagogical progressivism can drive educational reforms in contemporary Scotland.

2. The development of administrative and pedagogical progressivism in early 20th century American education

Accompanying John Dewey and William Wirt's shared interest in education was the idea that new urban industrial-age living could stifle the growth of learners experiences and undermine the contribution rural living made in terms of 'character building, physical development and vocational training' (Cohen & Mohl, 1979, p. 11). Labaree (2005, p. 281) posits that the sense of threat to older country ways manifest itself in a new naturalistic 'pedagogy (which arises from the needs, interests and capacities of the child ...)' and a skill-based curriculum (which focuses on providing the child with the learning skills that can be used to acquire whatever knowledge he or she desires). These developments were advocated by pedagogical progressives on the basis that the developmental capacities of learners and the holistic potential of learning (taught through thematic projects) was preferable to the utilitarianism and social efficiency benefits of subject teaching advanced by administrative progressives. For example, the governance and structure concerns of the administrative progressives was on differentiating learners' abilities and matching these to the new occupational employment opportunities available. The most straightforward way to achieve this was to expand curriculum options according to learners' interests and changing vocational patterns. Sometimes changes along these lines were not easy to detect e.g., Angus and Mirel (1999) highlight that even by the 1930s learners were still learning through traditional academic subjects. Nevertheless, administrative progressives claim that a form of social reconstruction was being achieved, as subject teaching was more clearly accommodating courses at multiple levels with multiple entry and exit points. However, as the ability approach to differentiation could also reproduce social inequalities, pedagogical progressives remained perplexed by the inaccessibility of top-down curriculum

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