Progressively Worse
The pantheon of misguided educational philosophers grows

Getting It Wrong from the Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget
By Kieran Egan

Reviewed by Lynne V. Cheney

“Success has many fathers,” an old saying goes, “while failure is an orphan.” However, in the case of progressive education—a failure if ever there was one—the list of possible parents grows. To the usual names, Kieran Egan, a professor of education at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, adds thinker and writer Herbert Spencer, whose 1861 book *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* sold hundreds of thousands of copies during the late 19th century, when schools as we know them were being formed.

Probably because Spencer’s influence has been overlooked for several decades, Egan gives it special emphasis and often uses Spencer to represent progressive thought generally. Egan worries from the start that this will make his work seem “oddly balanced,” and it does. Before he can enumerate the fundamental flaws of progressivism, he must make the case for Spencer as a progenitor of progressive thought.

The most impressive evidence Egan offers is a series of quotations from Spencer that could have been plucked straight from the progressive textbooks used in education schools today. Spencer wrote that the student “should be told as little as possible, and induced to discover as much as possible,” a central idea in 21st-century progressive dogma. Spencer wrote that “our lessons ought to start in the concrete and end in the abstract,” a notion all too familiar to anyone who has followed the long obsession in social studies with the idea of “expanding environments”—the belief that children can learn effectively only if we start them with what they can see and touch and gradually expand their lessons to include what they can only imagine.

Why has Spencer so seldom been acknowledged as a forefather of progressivism? Egan’s explanation is that some of his other ideas were so embarrassing that people preferred not to recognize him as the source of theories they did embrace. For example, Spencer was against state sponsorship of education, which made it awkward for those interested in incorporating his ideas into state schools to acknowledge their heritage. Spencer was also a Social Darwinist, and his association with the idea that the poor and the weak should be left to their own devices made it impossible for progressives to align themselves with him.

Egan makes a plausible case for the sway of Spencer’s theories, but stumbles in showing the malign influence of Spencer and others. While some of the arguments he offers against progressive education are insightful, others seem to be based on a flawed understanding of progressivism.

Egan objects to “developmentalism,” a school of thought that he says is based not only on the writings of Jean Piaget, who is usually cited, but also on Spencer’s. Developmentalism holds that children can learn certain things only at certain stages in their development, a notion that Egan rightly believes has the damaging result that “children are...basically treated as though they can’t really think; they can only do—so we have all those ‘hands-on’ activities while their huge intellectual energy is hardly engaged with anything significant in the wider cultural world.”

But this is not Egan’s primary objection. His main concern is that developmentalism is theoretically misconceived. It is based, Egan says, on the false premise that acquiring skills and knowledge represents progress. Developmentalism, in Egan’s view, fails because it does not take into account “the cognitive costs to people in literate Western cultures of having writing and rationality.”

There are two problems here. First, of course, is the assertion that literacy and rationality are in any significant way
costly. According to Egan, one of the imaginative costs of an education that teaches us to write and to think critically is that we lose the ability to generate metaphors. But this is not at all clear. Is someone who can read and appreciate great poetry really less able to think metaphorically than a preschooler? Not even Egan seems to believe this consistently. “What we know forms a resource for our imaginations,” he writes later in his book.

The second problem is Egan’s claim that progressive educators regard literacy and rationality as unmixed blessings. This isn’t quite right, since Egan’s dismissive attitude toward literacy is most often echoed by progressives and their allies. Canadian scholar Frank Smith, a progressive known best for his contributions to the “whole language” movement, made this case rather famously in a 1989 Phi Delta Kappan article:

Let me stress at the outset that I’m in favor of literacy. I think that people who don’t read and write miss something in their lives. But I think the same about anyone who doesn’t appreciate some form of music. Nevertheless . . . I don’t see buttons or bumper stickers saying, “Stamp out unmusicality,” and I don’t bear lack of musical ability referred to as a national disgrace. Furthermore, I don’t think music would be helped much if war were declared on tone deafness.

Smith went on to claim that “literacy doesn’t make anyone a better person,” that “literacy doesn’t generate finer feelings or higher values,” and that “literacy won’t guarantee anyone a job,” and concluded that literacy was being oversold.

With its lavishly romantic views of childhood, with its belief that it is oppressive for adults to visit their knowledge on the young, progressive thought is the perfect seedbed for the notion that literacy is of doubtful benefit. That Egan is confused on this point is surprising.

A similar confusion pervades Egan’s last chapter, wherein he condemns empirical research in education. Now, there is certainly a lot of bad research in education, and some of it rides under the banner of empiricism. But there is also good empirical research that has provided valuable guidance. I think of the meta-analyses done by the National Reading Panel in 1999 that showed the benefits of systematic phonics instruction. I think of the late Jeanne Chall’s survey of 25 years of research comparing student-centered with teacher-centered instruction. “The methods with the highest positive effects on learning are those for which the teacher assumes direction,” Chall concluded.

Because Spencer’s misguided theories had a scientific gloss, Egan seems to entangle empiricism with progressivism. The truth is that empirical research is anathema to progressives today, since it undercut favored notions like whole-language instruction and child-centered classrooms.

Nevertheless, Egan’s general animus toward progressivism is redeeming. In a section called “The Joys of Rote Learning,” Egan observes that “the emphasis that has led away from rote learning, and in this way eventually learning by heart, has been one that gradually and greatly impoverishes minds.” He also makes a fine case for teaching history as a separate discipline, instead of lumping it together with social studies.

Egan should also be praised for taking up an important topic: “current education and how the persistence of powerful progressivist ideas continues to undermine our attempts to make schooling more effective.” But he would have done this topic more justice had he depicted progressive thought more accurately.

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Sensitivity Training
History and literature, heavily edited

The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn
By Diane Ravitch
Alfred A. Knopf, 2003, $24; 255 pages

Reviewed by Nathan Glazer

Broadly defined, “political correctness” means being excessively sensitive to the fact that almost anything one says or writes can be found objectionable if one searches far enough to find an audience that might object. This movement has been making inroads into education—in textbooks, curricula, tests, and teaching—for more than 20 years now, but The Language Police discovers that “PC” has reached further and deeper than we realize. For instance, for some time I have been using the increasing number of references to Harriet Tubman as an example of the rise of this kind of sensitivity. As an African-American heroine, she appears in texts, curricula, and tests more frequently than almost any other figure in American history. But it turns out that I am woefully out of date: according to The Language Police, the sensitivity guidelines for one major publisher warn against paying too much attention to figures like Harriet Tubman (along with Martin Luther King, Jackie Robinson, and George Washington Carver), because they are “acceptable to the European-American establishment.” To be PC, one must reach out to