

## Co-Creating a Progressive School: The Power of the Group

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Wickliffe Progressive Elementary School

### Abstract

Drawing on the past and current practices of a group of educators that just celebrated its 40th year as a progressive elementary school in a suburban public school system, the article begins by considering the role that various groups have played in sustaining the school's success for over four decades. These groups include a long-term university partnership, practitioners of whole language, and parents. Then, after describing the critical role of two important group created documents, the Ten Principles of Progressive Education and a triangular graphic depicting the Curriculum of Progressive Education, the authors describe the relationship of how the power of these groups have used the documents to intentionally stay centered as well as move them "off balance" in order to continue to evolve and strengthen their progressive education practices. Finally, the article shares two classroom examples where teachers use the group and the documents to conduct authentic curriculum classroom studies.

**Keywords:** progressive elementary schools; collaborative inquiry; integrated curriculum; educational partnerships

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*For excellence, the presence of others is always required.*  
Hannah Arendt

*It is nearly midnight, and we, along with over four hundred parents, teachers, and former students, have just completed a two-day event celebrating forty-years of progressive education, known as the “Informal Program”<sup>1</sup> in our public school district. This anniversary is no small thing given the program’s history of internal and external struggles over the decades. However, more often, the power of the group has sustained and grown progressive education in our politically conservative community. During the last forty years, many progressive schools, particularly public ones, have closed or have been restructured and returned to what most of us think of as traditional, subject-centered schooling. So as tonight’s celebratory evening ends, we paused and wondered: Why is the Informal Program still standing and might the answer to this question serve to help other progressive educators working in schools today?*

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After reviewing the Informal Program archives which consists of forty years of local news coverage, conversations with former students, parents, and teachers, as well as back issues of *Thought Ramblings*, a newsletter authored by the principal-directors of the program that focuses on the interplay of theory and practice, it is clear that our success is due to neither a purely top-down or bottom-up change model. While traditional business leadership literature has often pointed to a charismatic, “lion like” figure leading an organization to glory (Murphy, 1988), this has not been the case for us. Nor has the Informal Program emerged and sustained itself solely because of energy garnered from the grassroots level. Instead, in looking back, the process that has sustained the program over the years has not been because of heroic leaders from the top or bottom; rather, our journey resembles a murky alchemy of *groups* held together by a *learning relationship* to one another (as opposed to hierarchical power).

What was the nature of these learning groups and who exactly were they? Our conception of a learning group is heavily influenced by work of the Making Learning Visible project at Project Zero, a research group in the Harvard Graduate School of Education. We have documented our longstanding partnership with Project Zero’s Making Learning Visible initiative elsewhere in a research report and companion DVD (Burton, et al, 2011), but for our purpose here, our use of the phrase *learning group* is characterized by two of the four features of a learning group outlined by Krechevsky and Mardell (Project Zero, 2001, pp. 286).

- 1) Members of learning groups are engaging in the emotional and aesthetic as well as the intellectual dimensions of learning
- 2) The focus of learning in learning groups extends beyond the learning of individuals to create a collective body of knowledge

These groups, three of which we will describe in more detail below, have over time collaboratively created an ongoing “collective body of knowledge” where university faculty, public school educators, and parents have co-created and developed pedagogical ideas and given them a push in our school as well as serving to challenge our conceptions of teaching and learning. In addition to deliberately creating organizational “noise” – i.e. creative disturbances that challenged our thinking -- these groups have also played a supportive role at times by backing the program faculty at many critical moments in our history. At other times, these groups supported us by their simple presence - e.g. as former students return to the school as parents and enroll their own children. However, not all of these learning groups

were physically present working with us at the school; instead, they were proximate as movements and were *historically* felt. Finally, it should be noted that these groups didn't just have a cognitive affect on the development of our school. We want to make it clear and even overstate that our relationship with the various learning groups was an alchemic mixture of thought, action, *and* feeling over time.

Today, we still consider ourselves American open educators heavily influenced by the Informal classroom practices of the British primary schools (McKenzie, 1975). Although in our early years, we read books by John Dewey we had an easier time understanding and sharing with parents the progressive wisdom found in the writings of Vito Perrone (1989), David Hawkins (1974), Roland Barth (1991), and various monographs from the North Dakota Study Group (1970s). Along the way, we have always had a great desire, and sometimes a desperate need, to stay connected to other progressives beyond our school and state. Consequently, we were delighted in the 1980s to have learned about the Progressive Educator Network (PEN), a loosely organized national forum for those committed to child-centered learning. In the spring of 1988, twelve teachers from our program attended the PEN Conference held in Chicago (and again more recently in 2011). Organizations like PEN and Project Zero continue to contribute to the thinking, development and vitality of our program to this day.

As we reflect back on our four decades of progressive education, there are three examples of learning groups that have especially served to sustain, challenge, and inspire us: a local university partnership, the "whole language" literacy education movement, and parents.

### **The University Partnership: A Theory-Practice Learning Group**

Although there were important precursors to our program's founding, that is, teachers and parents who provided the spark for the beginnings of the Informal Program, it was a long term partnership with faculty members in the College of Education at The Ohio State University that continually fanned the flame of our program for our first twenty years. When our school district officially started the Informal Program in 1972, OSU launched a field-based, teacher education program called the Educational Program for Informal Classrooms (EPIC). Prior to that time, OSU had established a tradition of supporting progressive education in that its College of Education had housed a progressive University School that had started in 1930. EPIC, with its emphasis on preparing pre-service teachers to plan learning experiences around integrated themes of study emerging from children's interests was a beneficial arrangement for our program. Many of these university faculty members also conducted teacher workshops in using children's literature to teach reading, writing and spelling instruction that was grounded in their daily lives, as well as ways to immerse children in concrete science process activities.<sup>2</sup> In addition to providing the Informal Program teachers with a series of ongoing workshops, this university partnership sustained our program over the years by providing us with student teachers who were being taught basic tenets and practices of progressive education. We of course provided the university with a progressive school setting for pre-service teachers who were often hired by our school district to teach with us in the Informal Program.

### **Learning Groups From Afar: The Whole Language Movement**

While The Ohio State University faculty members and our teachers formed a day-to-day, close working relationship with each other, we also found inspiration from movements that became part of our teaching and learning sociocultural context. During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a great deal of exciting research in the area of children's language and literacy development taking place. For us, the work of two language researchers and

advocates of whole language education, Ken and Yetta Goodman, had a profound effect on our practice and program. In the Goodmans, we had found a voice from afar that not only championed how we were teaching reading and writing through authentic, curricular experiences rooted in children's interests, but we were also using their research to legitimate and provide evidence to school district officials and parents about our practices. Although we were not always using the term "whole language," we were certainly using the spirit and practical advice that was emerging and growing from numerous TAWL (Teachers Applying Whole Language) groups, a national network of teachers, parents, and university faculty that the Goodmans had inspired. This work complemented what we were learning from our OSU faculty, friends, and mentors and also resulted in leading us to other new voices in literacy learning (e.g. Graves, 1983; Holdaway, 1979).

### **The Co-Educator Learning Group: Parents**

When we began the Informal Program, some parents in the school district were fascinated and curious about our progressive approaches. However, many who decided to place their children in our school started out with us as a bit skeptical. Still other parents, those who didn't have children in our school, developed an adversarial stance with a few parents even working to stop the spread of this "new thing." In all, most parents who chose to enroll their children in our program were products of traditional education themselves. It's what they were familiar with and what they understood as school. So while they cheered us on, many of these same parents became friendly critics who continually asked us to reassure them, explain what we were doing and why, and generally pushed us to reflect more deeply about our organizational structure (e.g. multiage classrooms) as well as our daily classroom practices. Many of the questions that parents asked forty years ago are still being asked today. These questions represent recurring anxieties. These are questions like: "How can we be sure our children will be learning without spelling tests?" "What happens when my child leaves this school and goes to the more traditional middle school?" and "Why isn't my child bringing home any papers?" These were and are fair questions. Sometimes we chose to answer these questions by organizing parent workshops, placing them in the role of active learners. At other times we found it helpful to organize meetings in which other parents, ones that had been associated with the Informal Program for several years, shared their perspectives and answers to these questions. The result has been a learning group where both parents and teachers learned from and with each other and worked through the various practical knots and dilemmas of living and learning in a progressive, child-centered classroom. Also, as a result of teachers and parents learning together as co-educators, our program gradually gained support and legitimacy. These parent experiences filtered out into the larger community through social groups and conversations.

Over the years, we've tried *not* to view our parents as partners because often when school personnel say this, what they *really* mean is: "We want you as parents to raise money for the school, get homework returned on time, and do other things like read to your child every night for twenty minutes." Instead, in our better moments, we see parents as co-educators, who are members of our learning group and through collaborative and sometimes very spirited conversations, we learn from and with them.

### **The Importance of Staying Centered and Moving Off Balance**

Groups can be dangerous. We have tried not to forget one of the lessons learned from reading Lawrence Cremin's (1966) seminal book and history of progressive education, *The Transformation of the School*. In this book, Cremin lists seven reasons that led to the death of the progressive education as a movement. His seventh reason, that "progressive education collapsed because it failed to keep pace with the continuing transformation of American Society" (p. 350), has become especially important to us. Perhaps one key to

answering the question we posed earlier, “Why are we still standing?” after all of these years, is that we’ve made serious efforts as a learning group to develop a core set of Ten Principles (see Appendix A) that serve to keep us centered and insure that we rise above our individual interests. They help us to remember that we, as a group, are contributing to something larger than ourselves. At the same time, and this is the danger, we want to keep Cremin’s advice in mind and avoid becoming insular. We developed a program motto to keep this creative tension in front of us: “Living the progressive tradition today.” The idea here is that we want to be, simultaneously, centered and off balance.

For the last two school years, our staff has developed a “throughline” – i.e. a set of two provocative questions that we return to periodically to keep us “off balance” and learning as a group. They are:

- 1) How are we interpreting the Progressive tradition today?
- 2) What happens when our learning community collectively faces the continuing challenge to interpret the Progressive tradition in today’s culture?

Part of being simultaneously centered *and* off balance is engaging in ongoing deliberations about our own practices and beliefs. Throughout our history, from our program’s beginnings in 1972, we have continuously questioned ourselves through the development of core beliefs, principles and provocative questions. In 1997, the year of our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we engaged in a year long, spirited conversation and debate that resulted in the draft and adoption of The Ten Foundational Principles of Progressive Education found at the end of this article. These principles have served to keep us centered through some educationally turbulent times for the past fifteen years.

By placing our beliefs about teaching and learning at the center of our work, we are able to navigate the challenges presented by state and federal mandates. We are more likely to consider what we can control rather than what we cannot. For example, currently in Ohio, the impending reality of a Third Grade Reading Guarantee as well as the implementation of a statewide teacher evaluation system that relies heavily on student performance as measured by state achievement tests to rank and sort teachers affords many opportunities to become discouraged and disheartened. Yet, as we turn our attention toward facing these challenges, new ways of working together are emerging and energizing our group learning. For example, we have just begun a series of what we are calling “Making Use of Documentation” conversations (also known as MUD meetings since it can be messy!). These conversations allow us to take what we have learned in our work with Project Zero’s Making Learning Visible research, including the use of documentation practices and protocols, and apply what we have learned to collaboratively examine the work of both individual children as well as classroom and grade level data to inform our practices. This doesn’t replace the pressures we are experiencing, but it does buffer them somewhat and put in place a practice that is grounded in children’s work and thinking.

Similarly, as the standards movement has led to the ranking of schools and school districts, we have had to be mindful of the additional emphasis on how children perform according to the state assessments. The Informal Program never debated the importance of defining standards. As the standards movement has grown, we have strived to keep our principles and view of curriculum at the center, believing that doing so would result in our children performing well on state assessments measuring their achievement of state standards. In fact, children in the Informal Program have achieved at the state’s highest level on the State Report Card in each of the last ten years.

Our Ten Principles push us to collectively wrestle with the realities imposed upon

public school educators.

Currently, as this article is being written, we are critically revisiting the Ten Principles to consider if they still capture our thinking about how we work with children and one another in our school. Are we living up to the principles? Do they still challenge us and provoke our learning? What other voices and perspectives should we consider (e.g. parents, students, fellow progressive educators throughout the world)? While these questions are sometimes inconvenient for us, we recognize that the process of raising them has been an important reason for our existence the last forty years.

### **Visualizing and Living a Progressive Curriculum**

A second framework that has guided our progressive practices is a representation of four distinct yet inter-related layers of the curriculum: 1) compassion, civility and community, 2) the subject or content-centered curriculum, 3) the interdisciplinary curriculum, and 4) the emergent, authentic curriculum. This framework, visually represented as a triangle and called The Curriculum of Progressive Education (See Appendix B), was inspired in part by Dewey's (1938) statement in *Experience and Education*:

The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative. (p.25)

In addition to Dewey's emphasis on educative experience, we also found Sobel's (1994) conception of the "authentic curriculum" useful. These ideas and the curriculum represented in the triangle have inspired us to pose and consider provocative questions such as: What is the difference in good progressive education and summer camp?

While creating a visual representation of the progressive curriculum has been important in helping us to communicate our practices with each other and those beyond our school walls, it is the lived examples and curriculum stories that breathe life into the symbols. The following stories of two classroom studies, what we are calling the *The Pencil Problem* and *I Can Make a Difference*, illustrate how both the Ten Principles and the Curriculum of Progressive Education triangle informed and captured the learning of children and adults. Each also has something to say about the power of learning groups in the classroom.

#### **The Pencil Story**

What happens when a teacher carefully listens to her students for opportunities to follow their interests and capitalize on the promise of an authentic learning experience? In Susie Nybell's third grade classroom, children's dissatisfaction with the pencils received as part of the school supply sale resulted in authentic learning about economics, mathematics, persuasive writing and how to go about affecting change.

Early in the year, students were noticing a number of problems with their new pencils from the Dixon Ticonderoga Pencil Company. Students began to share things like: "The lead breaks and falls off while people are writing and when you have the pencil and it falls, it cracks open. The pencils are hard to sharpen, and when you're erasing with these pencils, erasers just snap off."

Observing their frustration, Ms. Nybell wondered aloud with them regarding what they might be able to do about these problems. Students decided to survey other third, fourth and fifth graders in the school and found that most of the classes were similarly dissatisfied overall with their recently purchased school store pencils. They decided to write a business

letter to the president of Dixon Ticonderoga. Before doing so, they found and watched a video produced by Ticonderoga about how to make pencils. When questioned about their work after the study was over, one student shared that “We wanted to learn about how they make pencils to see if we could figure out what they were doing wrong.” The business letter was sent and classroom life resumed.

Thinking they would hear back from the Ticonderoga’s president “in three weeks maximum”, another frustration began to gradually set in. One student complained, “We’ve waited forty days!” while another classmate sighed, “We’ve almost forgotten about the pencil company.” Then, after eight weeks, students were met with an unexpected surprise. As one student said, “We thought it was a normal day when we walked into the room. Then we sat on the rug and Ms. Nybell said there were boxes waiting for us downstairs.” Ticonderoga had sent 1,440 pencils in response to the student letter. Ms. Nybell had received a phone call from Ticonderoga and learned they had moved the factory and had made some personnel changes. The third graders were thrilled and in written reflections made comments like: “We were so happy! They were amazing pencils! When we put them in the pencil basket, they overflowed! We loved our new pencils.”

When Ms. Nybell’s third graders delivered the new pencils to the other classrooms they had surveyed, they found that “It was fun handing out the new pencils because everyone was surprised. Handing out the pencils turned out to be a big success!” As students reflected on the learning experience in the digital learning story they later wrote and produced, their thinking went beyond what they had learned in the traditional content-sense. One girl shared how she “had become angry because the old pencils had broke and wouldn’t sharpen” and another felt “super happy because I was helping other people.” Others remarked that what they learned was “if you have a problem, fix it!” Finally, the learning story ends with these words from yet another student: “I was surprised that a world-wide company would respond to a third grade class from Columbus, Ohio. I learned that even though you are young, you can still change many things.”

*The Pencil Problem* is an example of the depth of learning that can occur when teachers carefully listen and pay attention to what their children are saying, thinking about, and doing. To be certain, a number of discipline-centered state standards and grade level indicators were met during the study such as: 1) collecting information, organizing it, and using it to make decisions; 2) developing a clear main idea, a purpose and an audience for writing; and 3) determining how to make decisions in our economic system. But in what way did the notion of emergent, authentic curriculum play a role in *The Pencil Problem* and what impact did it have on learning? When asking Ms. Nybell to reflect on this question, she stated that:

Emergent curriculum is possible with an understanding of the state standards at my grade level and being observant and flexible enough to follow the children’s interests. I also have to be willing to not know where we will end up, which is increasingly more stressful with the current emphasis on standardized testing. We were lucky in this case because our project culminated with gratifying results, going “full circle” from frustration and dissatisfaction with our pencils to pro-active consumers and finally satisfied customers. I have to believe that the authentic aspect of this project led students to a deeper understanding of the economic concepts laid out in the Ohio state standards than any textbook or paper and pencil test could have provided.

In our representation of the Curriculum of Progressive Education, authentic and emergent curriculum rests at the top of the triangle as a way of showing its place of importance for student learning. It also occupies the smallest surface area and has led us to reconsider how

we might represent it in such a way that it occupies not only the largest space symbolically, but that it also touches all other aspects of the model. These experiences not only connect to the curriculum, but go beyond it. The emergent curriculum can be thought of as an inside-out process. It is not driven by a dry scope and sequence chart or by textbooks, characteristic of an outside-in process. Instead, it begins with the unique chemistry of the interests and passions of children and teachers.

*The Pencil Problem* also illuminates many of the Ten Principles that serve to ground our work with children. Referring to these Ten Principles, Ms. Nybell's students were engaged in "producing rather than solely consuming knowledge." Third graders developed surveys, produced graphs that depicted the results of these surveys, and wrote business letters that caught the attention of Ticonderoga executives. Ms. Nybell carefully "guided child-choice and decision-making," noticing their concerns and asking the questions that drove the emergent project. She also skillfully "raised their social consciousness by having them confront the issue" they were facing and helped them find a civil and effective way to go about having it addressed. Other principles including "the flexible use of time and space" (this learning did not occur in 45 minute blocks at the same time every day and in fact took place over several months) and "valuing reflection and self-evaluation by the children" were also important aspects of *The Pencil Problem*.

### **I Can Make a Difference**

Around the corner from Ms. Nybell's third grade classroom, Molly Hinkle's fifth grade students were concerned about a different problem: the school cafeteria had no recycling program. The seeds for this concern had been unknowingly planted months beforehand.

In September, students participated in a five-day, all-day, field trip experience at the Stratford Ecological Farm in central Ohio. During this experience, their awareness of ecological conservation issues was brought sharply into view. A particular aspect of the Stratford experience that resonated with them, according to Mrs. Hinkle, included *Messages from Stratford* strategically placed around the farm and drawing attention to specific energy resource concerns. One sign in particular struck a chord with many of the fifth graders. It was a message placed above the restroom sink about the importance of using only one paper towel after washing their hands.

Upon returning from Stratford, fifth graders were inspired to write their own "messages" as part of a display located just outside their classroom door. Some students began wondering about the lack of recycling in the school environment, including the school cafeteria. Their group discussions soon led them to explore other complex conservation issues within the school, including the use of electricity and water, overuse of air conditioning, a library that is difficult to heat, and the need for composting in the cafeteria.

Working under the curriculum study theme of *I Can Make a Difference*, and the essential questions of "How does our use of energy and resources today impact tomorrow?" and "How do we respond to a problem?" students began exploring the entire school and conducted an efficiency and energy audit. In doing so, they discovered problem areas that were photographed and posted on a classroom wiki. This enabled students to learn from and with one another and expand their view of school as an institution that they attended to school as *their* community. As the study progressed, students interviewed a variety of school and district-level personnel, including the Executive Director of Business Services and the Director of Informational Technology, to learn about the problems they had documented, allowing them to gain a wider perspective and context for the existing problems they had defined. Finally, students narrowed their focus by selecting one problem that most interested



them and engaged in research that helped them learn more about the causes behind the problems and develop solutions.

As in *The Pencil Problem*, the *I Can Make a Difference* example helps illuminate the depth of learning that can occur and the connection to the Ten Principles. Mrs. Hinkle listened carefully to her students and observed their work in order to “*guide child-choice and decision-making.*” This study also showed how the teacher worked to “*integrate thematic units of study and foster authentic learning opportunities.*” Science concepts of energy, resources, and conservation were integrated with scientific inquiry, social studies research methods, as well as literacy skills like reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

The *I Can Make A Difference* study also served as an example for how to “*structure experiences that actively engage the child in producing rather than solely consuming knowledge.*” To fund the solutions they had generated, fifth graders wrote and were awarded a service-learning grant to begin a cafeteria composting process for the fall of 2013. In addition to composting buckets, they established a garden area for the compost that would be collected. The grant also allowed them to purchase recycling tubs to be placed throughout the playground, outdoor field areas and in the cafeteria.

The program’s eighth principle, “*we value on-going reflection and self-evaluation by both children and adults*” is demonstrated through Mrs. Hinkle’s comments about this yearlong journey:

The learning was authentic in every way – it grew out of a five-day environmental experience we had in September at Stratford Ecological Farm and followed and then expanded upon their concern about a lack of recycling in the school cafeteria. Students viewed the lack of a recycling program in the cafeteria as a real problem. While our focus remained small, these are real-world issues that are confronted every day in larger arenas.

It would be presumptuous of us to say that our Ten Principles and Curriculum of Progressive Education are at the center of *everything* we do *every* day of the school year. Our classrooms spend a great deal of time preparing for and taking an endless series of state tests as well as numerous assessments required by our school district. In addition to time spent assessing, teachers now also participate in required district professional development centered in the new Common Core Standards. These external factors, referred to by many teachers as “pressures” create a tension when held alongside of our principles, symbols, and group learning conversations. These challenges push us off-balance and we’re not always happy about this. However, we cannot overlook the fact that these very same challenges and our responses of adapting to them creatively may be a contributing factor to our program’s success over the past forty years of existence. Indeed, these pressures and our willingness to embrace them through group learning serve as a catalyst for re-centering our work together. We are a learning community that embraces the power of group learning and we acknowledge the critical role that core principles and symbols play in these conversations. We hope by doing so, we will be around for another forty years.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Informal Program, a name taken from the “informal classrooms” of the British Primary schools that appeared after WWII, was started by parents and teachers forty years ago in Upper Arlington, a small suburban public school district located in Ohio. It is housed in two, K-5 elementary schools. There are 248 children that attend Barrington Elementary School which also shares the building with district’s traditional program and Wickliffe Progressive Elementary School, a once empty school building that had to be opened due to increased numbers of parents choosing the program for their children.

<sup>2</sup> It is also significant that one of the faculty members who founded EPIC, children's literature expert Charlotte Huck, had attended a progressive school in New Trier, Illinois as a student. Moreover, another OSU faculty member who became vital to EPIC was language researcher Martha King who had on several occasions visited the "informal classrooms" in the British Primary school at a time when many Americans were flying across the ocean to observe these intriguing examples of child-centered education. Finally, Marlin Languis, an OSU professor with an expertise in science education reform of the 1960s and early 1970s also contributed a great deal as he conducted science workshops for our teachers.

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Appendix A

**Wickliffe Progressive Community School  
Ten Foundational Principles of Progressive Education:**

1. We structure experiences that actively engage the child in producing rather than solely consuming knowledge.
2. We integrate thematic units of study and foster authentic learning opportunities.
3. We provide opportunities for the arts to occupy an integrated place in curriculum as an essential way to acquire and express knowledge.
4. Teacher and children use time and space in a flexible manner.
5. We respect diversity among children and variation in their development.
6. We collaborate with parents as co-educators in meeting children's needs.
7. Teachers raise children's social consciousness by encouraging them to examine and confront complex issues within society.
8. We value ongoing reflection and self-evaluation by children and adults.
9. We guide child-choice and decision-making.
10. We view our school as a center for teaching and learning for all ages.

Appendix B

**The Curriculum of Progressive Education**

