

What's New:  
Practitioners' Inquiries into Curricular Innovations

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Presented at the  
Australian Association for Research in Education  
Conference

Newcastle, NSW, Australia  
December, 1994

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ABSTRACT

Changes in curriculum are often called innovations, in reference to ideas of progressive improvement. For this study, a group of

practitioners in the US conducted action research about curriculum changes in their elementary and secondary schools. Journals and classroom projects were collected and reviewed. Briefly, we found models of curriculum change that were more cyclical than linear. In this report, we discuss some ideas underlying these models and indicate some contrasting implications of these differing approaches to curriculum change.

## EPIGRAPH

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter - tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther....  
And one fine morning -

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

(Fitzgerald 1925, p. 121)

## WHAT'S NEW:

### PRACTITIONERS' INQUIRIES INTO CURRICULAR INNOVATIONS

Mass public schooling is frequently believed to be a way of improving human beings individually and collectively across succeeding generations by making incremental progress toward ideals of knowledge and being. A concise expression of this belief can be found in the concluding passage of John Dewey's *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897/1972, p. 95):

I believe, finally, that the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life.

I believe that every teacher should realize the dignity of his [sic] calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of right social growth.

I believe that in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God.

Dewey's declaration of faith in education as a direct route to social

and spiritual fulfillment has deep roots in a late nineteenth-century ideology which amalgamates Protestant religion and idealistic philosophy. Ideology is here taken to mean "a body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class, or culture" (American Heritage Dictionary 1992).

Inscribing the needs and aspirations of his place and time, Dewey's idea of social progress through education is a distinctive historical construction with specific implications; many ideologies have fostered such ideas (Dodds 1973, Ginsberg 1973, Nisbet 1980). In contrast to Dewey's era a century ago, present-day ideas of educational progress seem less connected to religious fervor and philosophical optimism (Cremin 1988, Fullan & Miles, 1992, Lasch 1991, Popkewitz 1991, Sarason, 1990). Amidst such reconsiderations, it is pertinent to examine school curriculum for presences and effects of progressivist ideology. In short, what do educators think, say and do about ideas of progress?

Many studies of reform and change in curriculum and instruction focus upon policy considerations (Apple 1993, Cuban 1990, Ellis & Fouts 1993, Popkewitz, Tabachnick & Wehlage 1981), while practitioners' perspectives are addressed in a growing body of works emerging from action research movements in Western nations (Altricher, Posch & Somekh 1993, Ben-Peretz 1990, Carr & Kemmis 1986, Clandinin & Connelly 1992, Hollingsworth & Sockett 1994, Tabachnick & Zeichner 1991). In this study, practitioners' reflections about changes in school curriculum were analyzed through discussions and journal-keeping about various implementations of a touted innovation called "inclusion," pertaining to curriculum for students eligible for special education (National

Association of State Boards of Education, 1992 Udvari-Solner 1993). Our project was structured as curriculum action research along lines of similar projects published by practitioners (Noffke, Mosher & Maricle 1994, Wood 1988).

As part of graduate courses in teacher education at a university in the midwestern region of the US, we discussed action research and conducted curriculum projects. At the end of the course, one of us - the instructor - sought volunteers for an extended project in which we - among others - responded to a prospectus identifying the theme of curriculum innovation, with particular emphasis on ideas of progress. We then kept journals and held meetings to consider aspects of our teaching that we or others said or heard would be "new" and "better." In the following sections, we will briefly describe our topics and findings.

## IDEAS OF PROGRESS

The passage from Dewey's Pedagogic Creed quoted above epitomizes an idea of progress that is here called "linear," in that it explicitly involves incremental steps toward an ideal end (e.g., the "Kingdom of God"). Such ideas form the foundations of many kinds of science,

politics and religion; as Gould (1987, pp. 10-11) summarizes them, At one end of the dichotomy - I shall call it time's arrow - history is an irreversible sequence of unrepeatable events. Each moment occupies its own distinct position in a temporal series, and all moments, considered in proper sequence, tell a story of linked events moving in a direction.

Some linear ideas of progress refer back to an ideal past, or Golden Age, while others point to an ideal future, or Utopia (Foucault 1970, p. 262; Manuel & Manuel 1979).

Most linear ideas of progress assume gradual and systematic improvement; for a great many thinkers of Dewey's era, Darwinian evolution provided convincing proof of their ideas of inexorable progress. As historian Henry Adams (1918/1983, p. 926) recalled, He felt, like nine men [sic] in ten, an instinctive belief in Evolution.(...) Unbroken Evolution under uniform conditions pleased everyone - except curates and bishops - it was the very best substitute for religion; a safe, conservative, practical, thoroughly Common-law deity.

Adhering to this faith, Adams's and Dewey's statements exemplify a convergence of religious and social ideas of progress that were the taproot of nineteenth-century science and technology.

In manifold forms, linear ideas of progress have long imbued Western science (Lindberg 1992). Many modifications of these ideas have been developed, notably concepts of paradigmatic and punctuated revolutionary change articulated by Kuhn (1970) and successors, particularly in educational sciences (Popkewitz 1984, Shulman 1986). Lasch (1991, pp. 47-48) summarized these varieties of linear progress as follows:

Once we recognize the profound differences between the Christian view of history, prophetic or millenarian, and the modern conception of progress, we can understand what was so original about the latter: not the promise of a secular utopia that would bring history to a happy ending but the promise of steady improvement with no foreseeable ending at all. The expectation of indefinite, open-ended improvement, even more than the insistence that improvement can come only through human effort, provides the solution to the puzzle that is so baffling - the resilience of progressive ideology in the face of discouraging events that have shattered the illusion of utopia.

Linear ideas of progress, with various forms of beginnings, motions, and endings, all assume that time forms an irreversible narrative.

In contrast and currently in the minority are cyclical ideas of

progress, in which past and future do not fit into long-term sequential order; as Gould (1987, p. 11) further summarizes, At the other end - I shall call it time's cycle - events have no meaning as distinct episodes with causal impact upon a contingent history. Fundamental states are immanent in time, always present and never changing. Apparent motions are parts of repeating cycles, and differences of the past will be realities of the future. Time has no

direction.

Cyclical ideas of progress are as old as recorded literature, religion or philosophy, and as new as contemporary cosmology (Eliade 1954, Hawking 1988, Morris 1984, St. Maurice 1993, Sloterdijk 1981/1987); often, they have been labeled "eternal recurrence," notably by Nietzsche (1883/1954, p. 270), whose Zarathustra declaims, "Must not whatever can happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before? (...) are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it all that is to come?" Such ideas of progress assume a large-scale recurrence of time beyond human recalling or foretelling, a cycle that absorbs small-scale causes and effects much as the daily and annual movements of a planet are submerged in the movements of galaxies in the universe.

Lacking master narratives extrapolated from local events, cyclical ideas entail continuous doubt and conflict; as Popkewitz (1991, p. 227) states,

Viewing change as historical and pragmatic denies progress in an absolute sense. (...) the political struggle of the intellectual lies in the tension between engagement in and autonomy from particular social movements.

Cyclical progress demands constant self-reflection, in the manner of Nietzsche's Zarathustra or the characters in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Whereas linear ideas assume the past is a prologue and the future an epilogue to individual or social actions, cyclical ideas assume such constructions to be "useful metaphors," in the words of Rorty (1989, p. 9), which is to say, what has happened before and what will happen next may be related, but not within narratives which human beings can fully discern and affect. In cyclical ideas of progress present events are best treated as aids to reflection upon their contexts and contingencies. The main educational implication of such ideas of progress is that critical reflection is not a means to an end but an end in itself, the best possible outcome for human thought or deed.

This distinction between linear and cyclical ideas of progress will be used here to analyze our reflections about specific parts of our school curriculum. It must first be said that we did not limit our action research to ideas or events labeled "progressive," which - as Williams (1985, p. 245) pointed out - is applied to political or educational movements "more frequently now as a persuasive than a descriptive term." In many discourses with myriad labels, we found several instances in which ideas of progress took specific shape in school curriculum. In this report, we will focus on their incidence and effects in the particular case of "inclusion" programs at three different levels: kindergarten, middle school, and high school.

## INCLUSION

Inclusion is defined as "keeping special education students in regular education classrooms and bringing support services to the child, rather than bringing the child to the support services" (Smelter, Rasch &

Yudewitz 1994, pp. 35-36). This service delivery model differs from "exclusion" models in which students attend all sessions in segregated special education programs, and also is distinct from "mainstream" models in which eligible students attend separate special education classes but also spend some time in regular programs.

In many circles, inclusion has lately been called an innovation: for example, it is described as a "relatively new, (...) critical element in special and general education reform" (Udvari-Solner 1993, p.1); and, "a new way to organize special and general education" (National Association of State Boards of Education 1992, p. 4). In fact, the term itself has appeared prominently in US case law and Federal statutes over the past twenty-five years (Franklin 1994, Weintraub & Ballard 1982), notably in a Federal mandate for "progressive inclusion in the least restrictive environment" (P.L. 94-142 US Federal Register 1975). It is noteworthy that "inclusion" is not indexed in the Eighty-Eighth Yearbook of the US National Society for the Study of Education (Biklen, Ferguson & Ford 1989, p. 64), appearing therein only as an opposite of "exclusion." Instead, the term "integration" is used extensively, defined as assigning students with special needs to "the same environments and (...) activities as their nondisabled chronological age peers." Perhaps the term "inclusion" absorbed and superseded "integration" because the latter too directly refers to controversial cases and statutes pertaining to racial desegregation, an implication made by an editor of the Eighty-Eighth NSSE Yearbook (Biklen 1989, p. 15):

In light of the civil rights origins of P.L. 94-142, it is ironic now that the law and practices that flow from it may be partially responsible for the stereotyping, discrimination and isolation that labeled students experience.

It is hard to say just when and why "inclusion" assumed its current meaning for US educators, but it is clear that both the concept and term have been in wide use for at least two decades.

In our group, we agreed that the term and corresponding idea are not as new as advertised: a kindergarten teacher wrote,

Inclusion is really a philosophy - a believing that everyone is involved. I really don't think anyone in our district truly believes that children with special needs should be separated into a room and stay there all the time. I also think that many teachers believe what we have been doing all along is some sort of inclusion. If full inclusion is complete acceptance of every child in school, I think we have that to a great degree.

Likewise, a special education teacher at a secondary school said that, Inclusion means that special students belong in activities with peers, not just in buildings. I think that's been the law for a long time, it's just that it's not been done enough.

Obstacles to inclusion or integration are well-known; as "Sally" (this and all group members' names used here are pseudonyms), another special education teacher at another secondary school, wrote:

The theory sounds great - get these kids out into activities and the curriculum with their peers who can serve as models of appropriate behavior. The kids get the benefits of social situations, or shall I say peer pressure to be normal and fit in. What I've found, though, is that often a student who has an emotional disability can disrupt a regular classroom too much, which interferes with other students' learning.

Despite practical problems such as Sally pointed out, inclusion policies are consistent with egalitarian ideologies in mass public schooling, as manifest in the US over nearly two centuries' worth of words and deeds by generations of policymakers, practitioners and theorists such as Dewey.

In short, inclusion is a name for specific ideas and practices that extend an egalitarian ideal to students with disabilities. These ideas have long been upheld by special educators; for example, over four decades ago the editors of the Forty-Ninth NSSE Yearbook (Kirk, Baker, Charters, Martens & Stullken 1950, p. 13) declared that, If a child can be accepted by a regular class and profit by instruction in the regular class, with needed special services brought to him [sic

] there, he may well remain there. If, however, his enrolment in the regular class is detrimental to his own development or that of the other children, then he should be placed where his growth can be best furthered.

Inclusion for the sake of equity is therefore a variation on a recurrent theme, often expressed as equitable access to opportunity regardless of ability, race, class or gender.

In our action research, we sought evidence of this theme and its variations in curriculum innovations and accompanying practices. A touted innovation involving one of our group was a school-to-work program for k-12 pupils with exceptional educational needs. A great deal of effort was spent by district administrators and teachers in planning and implementing a "new" career-education curriculum. The new district plan included a work-shadow program in which students spent part of each school day at community workplaces, observing and assisting workers. In the words of "Angie," another secondary special educator in our group, the work-shadow program was designed to adapt traditional high-school curriculum so that teachers would provide all students with:

an overview of what career options are available to them as well as the training/education needed to pursue those careers. It will provide career awareness, money management skills, development of interpersonal relationships, job appropriate behaviors, and basic educational competencies in a high-school setting.

In practice, the work-shadow part of this program provided time-honored kinds of experiences for students in special education programs by assigning them to relatively simple manual tasks; as one of Angie's students wrote in a report:

I think that this job is sometimes menial. The reason for me thinking

that is because of the type of work we do sometimes, for instance like planting and re-planting trees, bushes, etc. (...) but on the other hand about doing all this work they have us doing, is helping us to learn to work with each other better than we begin with. Another thing I think is erasing the hymnals, I honestly see no point in that, I do see it needs to be done though. I enjoy this work program but like I said I see some of the work we do is menial.

This student's experience, and the ideas and practices that surround it, reiterate issues often found in special and compensatory education programs. Over twenty-five years ago, an author in the Sixty-Sixth NSSE Yearbook (Smiley 1967, pp. 135-136) said that,

Vocational guidance, aimed at helping children in their junior high school years, is common to a number of programs for educationally retarded youth. Efforts to introduce children, several years before legal school-leaving age, to job and job-training opportunities antedate by some years special programs for the children currently identified as 'disadvantaged.' (...) These programs, because they serve younger, less highly motivated, and academically lower-achieving children than are usually found either in college-preparatory or in technical or commercial senior high school curricula, tend to have objectives graded according to their students' limited maturity and limited to relatively low-skilled tasks.

Last year, Angie encountered the same obstacles to her curricular goal of full inclusion in this so-called new compensatory program as have many previous generations. Despite declarations by advocates of this and similar career-education programs, equality of opportunity has not been accomplished.

When special education programs are designed to supplement regular curricula, they include assumptions taken for granted in regular classes. If educators base their plans upon racial, gender or class inequities, then adaptation of those plans will be correspondingly biased. Our action research documented many instances in which educators' processes of deliberation re-encountered familiar problems

such as finding appropriate work experiences. Another such problem occurred in an elementary school where "Diana," a kindergarten teacher, led a team effort to integrate students with disabilities into primary classes. At the end of the previous school year, administrators made statements that teachers took to be mandates; as Diana wrote in her journal,

I don't really understand what the administration is looking for by saying we will be full inclusion by next year. The terminology sounds scary, but I don't think it is all that much different from what we are doing or what we believe. I think the administration doesn't really have a good perspective of what goes on in each individual classroom and made this blanket statement and got everyone up in arms. They could have approached it in a much different way by saying this is working, and so let's try to add this because of this...

Of fourteen principles enunciated by the school administration, Diana

wrote that the three most important were: staff preparation; support for planning, training and evaluation; and shared responsibility. These concerns are recurrent in the history of special education: for example, the editors of the Forty-Ninth NSSE Yearbook (Kirk et al. 1950, p. 15) concluded that,

Children with special problems require teachers with special skills and abilities. These do not come without much study and preparation. Pre-service and in-service study are both important. No program of special education should be carried on in a school or school district without a plan for the improvement of instruction on the part of all teachers.

Identical concerns over preparation and support have lately precipitated opposition to mandatory full inclusion in US schools (Sklaroff 1994, Smelter, Rasch & Yudewitz 1994).

Even when they have extensive support, teachers often retain deep doubts about full inclusion. Diana described one such experience when meeting with the mother of a student with cognitive disabilities: I presented the many social gains he has made and how much happier he seems, but she was concerned about his readiness for first grade. I discussed with her the fact that she might have to make a decision whether to keep him in the larger kindergarten class where the pace is too fast and the skills are more difficult for him, or move him back to the smaller special education class for some of the time to work on letter-sounds and names while the rest of the group moved on the sight words and reading readiness. She had to make a decision whether she wanted him in an environment where he made many social gains but minimal academic ones, or an environment where his gains would be vice versa. (...) Will children like this ever be able to have it both ways given the present structure of our educational system and the financial problems we have funding schools as they are? (...) Is full inclusion for all kids?

Diana's questions repeat long-standing and widespread concerns about tradeoffs that special educators, parents and advocates have faced, as well as dilemmas faced in educating women, racial, cultural and language minorities: is assimilation into the dominant culture worth the effort and pain it costs children and their families?

Universal access to public schooling, coeducation, desegregation, deinstitutionalization, mainstreaming and inclusion have all depended upon ideas of progress that presume to justify individual sacrifices as contributions toward some larger benefits, usually greater social justice or enhanced social status for downtrodden groups. To many teachers, these ideas of progress are among the attractions for them to their profession. Nevertheless, teachers often appeal to cyclical ideas of progress. In reference to inclusion, these ideas take shape as doubts whether individual students' needs can be met without denying others' rights. For example, "Jan," an elementary teacher, wrote the following opinion of a student found eligible for special services due

to a diagnosis of emotional disturbance:

I confess I was relieved when he moved away. It was just so much work to plan everything around him, knowing that he'd take up more of my time than any other kid and even then I couldn't be sure he'd learn. (...) There are always going to be individuals who take advantage of everyone. I don't want to punish them or deprive them of their rights, but I don't like depriving others of their rights just to placate a few, either. There's just not enough time and money to give everyone everything they want. I felt guilty about not doing a better job of teaching him, but, hey, that's life!

Jan's dilemma and its recriminations pose stark contrasts to ideas of progress such as Dewey's, which imply that teachers are not only able but bound to progressively usher everyone into "the Kingdom of God." In our group, these conflicts over the ends of education were more often discussed in terms of specific students, classrooms and teachers, rather than general goals such as "full inclusion" for aggregate groups of students, teachers and schools.

## FINDINGS

Our group found little real innovation despite claims to the contrary in curricula for full inclusion. Services for students declared eligible for special education were delivered in ways recognizable to any teacher in a US school during the past four decades since a wave of laws and policies mandating integration by race, gender or ability. Claims of innovation, laden with references to ideologies of linear progress, evidently inform such educational research and policy, but those ideologies are not congruent with everyday practices in schools and communities. Even when educators believe in linear ideas, their schools nevertheless remain social institutions which cyclically maintain particular characters defined by their communities and specific teachers, administrators, policymakers, students and parents. Because they feature ideas of progress as linear accumulations of knowledge and directed change, educational research and policy do not cohere with practices which feature ideas of progress as recurrent cycles. Attuned to the rhythms and themes of school days and years, we teachers experience our students' and our own learning as efforts which, in the words of Noffke and Brennan (1991, p. 187), are not 'reinventing the wheel, but ways one can take ideas from research into one's practice and bring one's own knowledge back into the analysis. (...) its ongoing, cyclical nature, with both 'constructive' and 'deconstructive moments' (...) does not impose artificial boundaries on the research process.

The action research cycle, taken literally, embodies cyclical ideas of progress. Teacher research involves endless criticism of ideas underlying research, policies and practices. As such, action, reflection and planning become ends in themselves.

In this project we scanned research summaries, policy statements and guides to practice about inclusion, and found practically no references to cyclical ideas of progress or even to cycles of teacher development

through action research. Discourses of special education, to an even greater degree than regular education, are predominated by linear ideas of knowledge and progress that shape the ways that most educators think and speak, even though many admit the incongruence of these ideologies with ideas and practices in schools and communities.

Special educators may be especially aware of the inadequacy of these ideologies, because that field often involves litigation and legislation, in which encounters with the ideas and rhetoric of law raise striking differences. Many legal scholars (Hutchinson 1989) argue that legal ideologies more readily admit cyclical rather than linear ideas of progress, inasmuch as it is assumed that law acquires its

force from its community, which is a contingent rather than an absolute frame of reference; as White (1985, p. 24) says,

Our thoughts about ethics and justice, about our practical social and political lives, must acknowledge that the facts, the imperatives and the motives of ourselves and others are not fixed but uncertain, in a sense always made by us in conversations with each other. The conditions for pure ends-means rationality never exist. The habit of mind that yearns for these methods and their certainties is bound to be delusive and ultimately - despite its claims to superior rationality - to be irrational, because it will not be in accordance with the nature of our world and our experience.

In other words, most lawyers argue for justice on a case-by-case basis, making selective appeals to specific precedents more than to fixed and overarching principles (i.e., "the Kingdom of God," or "full inclusion"). Most educators argue for learning by appealing to fixed taxonomies that portray ideas, policies and practices in incremental progressions.

It is a characteristic of cyclical ideas of progress that justice and learning are treated as contingent social constructions (Gould 1989, Lasch 1991, Popkewitz 1991). In the most extreme formulation of the idea of cyclical progress, Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, Zarathustra declares that the greatest imperative is to avoid delusions and face the immediate consequences of knowledge and action: "Become who you are!" (1883/1954, p. 351). In keeping with that spirit of inquiry, we set out in this project to examine our practices and ask, what does it mean to say something is "new"? At this point in the cycle, we have found that innovation is a powerful part of educators' ideologies, but innovators' hopes are not borne out in practical experiences; we therefore now ask, What good does it do to call something new? Or, in brief, What is new?

## CONCLUSION

There are many problems facing those who advocate full inclusion of students with disabilities into age-appropriate school programs: restricted resources, under-prepared teachers, inadequate support,

insufficient coordination and limited assessment and evaluation data. These problems have beset all educators since the earliest days of mass public schooling. Perhaps at least one less problem would arise if educators avoided building their proposals upon linear ideas of progress which imply incremental improvements for general groups, but entail difficulties and disappointments for specific children, teachers, parents, schools and communities.

Cyclical ideas of progress, which highlight immediate reflection and analysis in specific sites, seem suited to discourses and practices of inclusion, which focus on case-by-case planning and implementation. Instead of saying, "This new method will soon change all society for the better," proponents of inclusion could be saying, "This method can be tried here, as long as everyone involved understands how it works and has some say in what it does." Such approaches might help educators do the daunting work of making public education become what it is meant to be: school programs fully accessible to all students, with curricula that meet their needs with as little bias as possible. Those tasks become more difficult when strong belief in social progress justifies blind faith in innovation.

Ideologies and the faith and hope they foster are intricately woven into the fabric of social life of which schooling is a part. In action research, practitioners can locate specific places at which ideas take shape, and can inquire about actions and their effects. In this project, our small group set out to think about the ideologies embedded in such commonplace terms as "new" and "innovation." Using a simple

dichotomy of two kinds of ideas of progress, we made some specific findings but draw no conclusions, because teacher-directed inquiry has no conclusion. Every day we begin again practicing and analyzing our work in our classrooms and communities.

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Notes