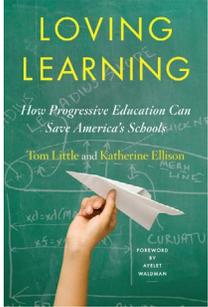


## Book review

# Principles governing progressive schools can be useful for all educators

Review by Dave Lehman, *Connections Executive Editor*



## *Loving Learning: How Progressive Education Can Save America's Schools*

by Tom Little and Katherine Ellison  
New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2015

Tom Little co-founded the Progressive Education Network (PEN) in 2005.

He was first a teacher, then head of school, at Oakland, California's Park Day School spanning thirty-eight years. He died from cancer in April, 2013, just after finishing this book with Katherine Ellison. The book is based not only on Little's experiences at Park Day, but his year-long tour throughout the country of 43 public and private progressive schools.

*Loving Learning* is an excellent summary and overview of the history and current status of progressive education, including the founding of the Progressive Education Association (PEA) in 1919 with its seven founding principles:

1. *Freedom to Develop Naturally*
2. *Interest, the Motive of all Work*
3. *The Teacher a Guide, not a Task-Master*
4. *Scientific Study of Pupil Development*
5. *Greater Attention to all that Affects the Child's Physical Development*
6. *Co-operation Between School and Home to Meet the Needs of Child-Life*
7. *The Progressive School, a Leader in Educational Movements*

The PEA dissolved in 1955, just three years after the death of John Dewey, a major influence – if not THE major influence – on progressive education.

Little defines progressive education as follows: “Progressive education prepares students for active participation in a democratic society, in the context of a child-centered environment, and with an enduring commitment to social justice.” Beginning in the late 1700s with European educators such as the Romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his book *Emile, or On Education*, Little draws on the rich history of progressive education. His overview also includes the German Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel who created the term “kindergarten” (“garden of children”),

and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi who challenged the Swiss emphasis on rote instruction.

Then in America, the Cook County Normal School outside Chicago was founded by Colonel Francis W. Parker, whom Dewey hailed as the “Father of Progressive Education.” Little also reminds us of others, perhaps less well-known, including powerful women in the heyday of progressive education from the early 1900s to the 1940s: Marietta Johnson, founder of the School of Organic Education in Fairhope, Alabama; Caroline Pratt, founder of the City and Country School in New York City; Agnes Hocking, co-founder of the Shady Hill School in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Lucy Sprague Mitchell, founder of the Bank Street School for Children, in Manhattan. Little's book also features Carleton W. Washburne, one of Dewey's most dedicated disciples and the celebrated superintendent of schools in Winnetka, Illinois. In 1930, Washburne, along with one of his principals, investigated educational innovations in Japan, China, India, Turkey, and Russia, compiling his research into the book, *Remakers of Mankind*, which Little has picked up as the title of Chapter 1 in *Loving Learning*.

Based on his review of the history of progressive educators and the numerous pioneers of the movement, Little enumerates his own “six core strategies,” noting they are still in “robust practice” at progressive schools today:

1. *Attention to children's emotions as well as their intellects;*
2. *Reliance on students' interests to guide their learning;*
3. *Curtailment or outright bans on testing, grading, and ranking;*
4. *Involvement of students in real-world endeavors, ranging from going on field trips to managing a farm;*
5. *The study of topics in an integrated way, from a variety of different disciplines; and, not least;*
6. *Support for children to develop a sense of social justice and become active participants in America's democracy.*

Little uses these six core strategies as chapter titles in *Loving Learning*. He said the list “floods his mind with vivid memories, forming a ‘pedagogy of joy.’” Each of those chapters begins with a personal account or story of some learning experience from his own Park Day School. For ex-

ample, Chapter 2, “The Rug: Teaching to the ‘Whole Child’” begins with this story:

*“A dozen six- and seven-year-olds sprawl on the ten-by-ten foot forest green rug in Susan Erb’s first-grade classroom at Park Day School. Half of them manage to hold still, but the others are constantly moving. They rock back and forth, play with their hair, bump into each other, and, gasping with impatience, wave their hands to get Susan’s attention..*

*On the floor between the students and the teacher lie two plastic hoops, each no bigger than a child’s head. One is labeled ‘Needs’ and the other ‘Wants.’ There is also a pile of blue index cards, each written with a single word or phrase, including: ‘Air,’ ‘Clean water,’ ‘Clothes,’ ‘Dogs,’ ‘Toys,’ ‘House,’ and ‘Love.’ Taking turns, the students pick up cards and decide whether to put them in one hoop or the other.*

*Guided by Susan, whose cheerful charisma seems as fresh as it was on the day I first watched her teach nearly forty years ago, the students are learning about several things at once. Most obviously they’re figuring out the difference between needs and wants - with lively ancillary discussions about whether people always die from lack of shelter, how much easier it is for animals to bite you if you don’t have clothes, and how many days someone can live without food ....”*

Expanding on these stories, Little provides a nuanced discussion of each of his core strategies. In this case, the importance of social-emotional learning and the huge significance of strong relationships between students and their teacher is implied in the first strategy, “Attention to children’s emotions as well as their intellects.”

Little devotes chapter eight, “The Petition: Promoting Social Justice,” to his sixth strategy, “Support for children to develop a sense of social justice and become active participants in America’s democracy.” Little points out:

*“In many ways, the progressive tradition of encouraging social agency and awareness in students has never been more important than it is today. Despite unprecedented new challenges to young people’s futures – from dramatically changing job market to the growing risk of climate change – political apathy is rising among youth who by various reports are overwhelmed by the magnitude of these problems and skeptical that our current political leaders are seriously trying to address them.... Studies have found that young people are becoming less empathetic and more interested in getting rich.... At Park Day, one of our most important priorities is that **our students feel a sense of agency, that they can make a difference in the world and have a duty to try.**” [emphasis mine]*

He goes on to make the connection with John Dewey who “championed a strong role for schools in awakening students’ social consciousness and activism.... [and] believed that industrialization had awarded great wealth to a small group of people, rather than benefiting all of society, while he dismissed the two major political practices as

“the errand boys of big business.” This analysis unfortunately sounds all too familiar in our era of the “1%!” Little provides a call for students to become actively engaged

in addressing issues of social justice and inequities, much like that called for in the tenth principle of the Coalition of Essential schools:

*“Democracy and Equity - The school should demonstrate non-discriminatory and inclusive policies, practices, and pedagogies. It should model democratic practices that involve all who are directly affected by the school [meaning teachers as well as students.] The school should honor diversity and build on the strength of its communities, deliberately and explicitly challenging all forms of inequity.”*

Here we’re also reminded of the book by Ted and Nancy Sizer, ***The Students Are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract.***

In keeping with the book’s sub-title, ***How Progressive Education Can Save America’s Schools***, Little closes the book with the future. He’s concerned about the continual need for progressive private schools to charge tuition, particularly given their intent to have a diverse student population, economically, racially, and otherwise. Little reiterates efforts at Park Day and other private progressive schools to create a truly effective sliding scale tuition. Referring again to the Progressive Education Association’s seventh founding principle, “The Progressive School a Leader in Educational Movements,” he notes, “the goal is to make it bigger;” “restoring pride in the ‘P-word.”” [This strikes a familiar chord with me as the founding principal of a progressive public school, the Lehman Alternative Community School, and the thirteenth of our goals - “To act as a resource and forum for sharing our educational experiences within our District and beyond.”] Little calls for collaboration among a host of advocacy organizations who are all working for progressive reforms, including the Coalition of Essential Schools, Educators for Social Responsibility, Teachers 4 Social Justice, the Forum for Education and Democracy, and the Center for Educational Renewal. One collaborative goal that he notes would serve all of them/us well would be a new “Eight-Year Study” (the original study was commissioned by the Progressive Education Association in the 1940s), researching how progressive schools are currently serving their students.

***Loving Learning*** ends with two pictures from his Park Day School and a half-page description of how the school received and responded to the news of Tom Little’s death, including this brief tribute from one of the students:

*“You made many changes in the world.*

*You taught us many things.*

*You were helpful and kind.*

*I am glad you lived a happy life. Thank you.”* 

***“... our students feel a sense of agency, that they can make a difference in the world and have a duty to try.”***