

【BOOK REVIEW】

*The death of progressive education: How teachers lost control of the classroom*  
Roy Lowe, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon (2007), pp180, ISBN-10: 0-415 35971-6 (hbk),  
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『進歩主義教育の終焉ーイングランドの教師はいかに授業づくりの自由を失ったか』

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The name of Roy Lowe is known for a co-author of a book entitled “The English school: its architecture and organization,” which, originally written by Seabourne, is an excellent historical review of schooling in England from a perspective of physical settings and has been so long cited in academic works not only in UK but also in Non-Western cultures like Japan. As a postgraduate student of education interested in British secondary schools, I also occasionally referred to his work and enjoyed its attractive illustrations. Almost thirty years later, I am privileged to write a short review on his recent book, “*The Death of Progressive Education*.” It is an attempt to describe and explain the process of ‘teachers in England losing the control of what they do in the classroom’ (p.3).

The author occasionally visited Japan and has a human network with many Japanese researchers. I met him in two seminars, one in Kyoto in 2010, and the other at Mukogawa Women’s University in 2012, both of which were very good opportunities where I was able to know not only his academic stance on British history of education but also his friendliness and sense of humor.

Unlike the centralized education system which is so familiar in Japan, English tradition in education was until very recently characterized by a strong autonomy individual schools or teachers are allowed in deciding what is taught and how it is taught, with little intervention made by the central government and local authorities. Education was long considered a local enterprise that allowed individual schools an autonomy to run their own curriculum.

The author declares the death of progressive education and teachers’ loss of control in classrooms. What’s next? Deploing the freedom of teaching which they used to have does not seem to be the author’s position, because he professes that this book is not a nostalgic illustration of the lost ‘Golden Age.’

One of the things that make this book attractive is a personal perspective that is studded throughout the pages. It refers to the author’s schooldays, days as a secondary school teacher, a professor of teacher education, and so forth. Another attractive thing is that it is not simply an explanation of educational policy changes in the post-War period, and it also touches upon the developments in the day-by-day classrooms in schooling.

In Chapter 4, the author seems to draw particular attention to the middle of 1970’s when progressive education underwent a severe trial by the outbreak of William Tyndale school case and when Labour cabinet,

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Calahan, triggered the central government's commitment to day-by-day realities in schooling run by the government's funding. Ironically, it was not by the Conservative but by the Labour that put progressive education under attack. And the far stronger government initiative in educational reforms was taken over by the Conservative political leader, Margaret Thatcher, who, in the 1980's, established a current framework of educational policies characterized by the introduction of market principle, the central government's control, the empowerment of parents, and so forth. The author thinks progressive education was 'expropriated' into conservative education at that time.

Likewise, Lowe tries to interpret the developments of educational policies and classroom realities as the dynamism of different and often contradictory factors. This book tells us what kind of arguments took place on school curriculum and management in each period distinguished by policy orientations. On the whole, "The death of progressive education" is a well-balanced and excellent description on what happened in schooling in the post-War England.

In the last chapter of the book, the author summarizes his conclusions and prospects. His conclusion is that there have been the time-honoured tensions in schooling throughout the post-War period, and that the tensions are 'between those who wanted the popular education to be more focused on basics and those who took a more optimistic view of the possibility of popular schooling' (p.159). By using the term "tension", he tries to describe the presence of ever-lasting anti-progressive approaches in education, which seemed to overwhelm the English popular schooling after Thatcher took in office.

I agree with the author when he concludes that 'our schools can only be as good as the society they serve' (p.161). And if it is the case, 'our society needs a major rethink of what it considers to be the good life, of the ends towards which social policy is directed' (p.161). And he sees little prospect of the major redirection of English education system where all children experience the same schooling in a society within which power and resource are unevenly distributed. Admitting his basic recognition of the relationship between school and society, I still see the author's view too pessimistic. It is absolutely true that schooling alone cannot change a society, but it can do something more than reproducing given disparities. It can be a place where people learn new knowledge, skills, and values. It can serve to build solidarity among people by securing common experiences. Where else could we expect things like that?

It seems that the author, deeply sympathetic with progressivism throughout his career and wrapped up his last chapter by giving a cool-headed sociologist's comments.

As a reader living in a non-Western country, I have a question as to whether the progressive ethos of teachers in England would be so fragile as to be doomed in face of consumerism and emerging multinational corporations. Has schooling in England truly lost a tough bud of progressive education that was long witnessed by visitors to primary schools from overseas?

Looking at the current situation of schooling in Japan, it is quite common to set target values and control teaching process in similar ways to business world. However, it seems to me that teachers in Japan still manage to share, more or less, a child-centered perspective and the mind to try to make their schools enjoyable places to

children, which they learned from Western cultures mainly in the time of the post-War reform.

By reading the book, I come to a final question of what progressive education is all about. If it is something like ‘an ethos,’ by the Max Weber’s term, that means a teachers’ orientation towards child-centeredness or respect for learners’ interest and spontaneity, it is still possible in times of national standards firmly set and market forces in operation. If it is more than a certain orientation of teaching profession to the extent that every teacher has a perfect autonomy in creating a unique curriculum, has it ever existed in any education in any period? If it has ever existed, when was it? Apparently autonomous teachers should have always been controlled, more or less, by the influences of textbook publishers or professional bodies. Furthermore, can it exist in this century when people are required to learn more than what was traditionally thought of as basics in order to be good citizens? Can we think of a strong enough autonomy of teaching profession that can independently function without institutional technical supports from outside the profession? My propositional answer for it is negative.

As is the case with every profession, teaching cannot help changing in given contexts under political, economic, and social circumstances. I wonder if it is all right to say autonomy of teaching profession, which was preferably called progressive, is persisting in a transformed manner in the age of accountability.



## **A RESPONSE TO HIROTOSHI YANO'S REVIEW OF *THE DEATH OF PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION***

Roy LOWE\*

I have had the privilege of pursuing a career as a researcher in the field of history of education for fifty years. During this time I have developed interests in adult education, school planning and architecture, the history of universities, the school curriculum, eugenics, and, most recently, in a series of books, the social history of schooling in England since the Second World War. The full listing of my publications appears in a special edition of *History of Education* (volume 42, no. 3, May 2013).

This broad range of interests has led me increasingly, late in my career, to make provisional judgements about the underlying characteristics of the English education system, characteristics which may well be, and probably are shared by systems in other parts of the world. My book on *The death of progressive education* is an attempt to make such a judgement, based, as Professor Yano points out, in part on my personal experience.

I thank him for his very careful reading of my book and for his sympathetic, thoughtful and very fair review. There is little in it with which I can disagree, although I sense in his comments an unease that I seem to be suggesting that 'progressivism' is not possible in the prescriptive school regime which had emerged recently. I have two responses to this. First, he is probably right in implying (although he is too polite to say this directly!) that I might have given a tighter and more detailed statement about exactly what I understand by the term 'progressive' right at the start of my book. The term has, undoubtedly, meant different things to different people at various times. The underlying assumption of my book is that in situations where they have more freedom to experiment and to determine both the curriculum and teaching method, teachers are more likely to identify teaching strategies and pupil activities which reflect the interests and needs of the developing child, rather than the needs of wider society. Secondly, it must be remembered that the national curriculum in England does prescribe both what will be taught and how it should be taught, although governments have backed away from too precise prescription of the latter in recent years. If we glance the global scene for a moment, it is difficult to see how education can be child-centred in any meaningful sense where the teaching of evolution is banned (as happens in several states in the USA), or where a particular religion is prescribed and favoured in school. How is contraception dealt with in the schools of the Roman Catholic church for example? So there are many pressures in the modern world which can reduce schooling to propaganda very quickly. Despite this, I do accept Professor Yano's point that it may be possible for the individual teacher to introduce an atmosphere of progressivism in the strictest regime, although I would argue that there are many teaching contexts where this must necessarily be strictly limited.

However, I would add that there are multiple factors which make this increasingly unlikely. First, the growing rift between rich and poor (which is now a worldwide characteristic) means that there are necessarily 'good and

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‘bad’ schools. Those who are wealthier and more privileged and powerful will always seek to ensure that their children attend good and well-resourced schools. The divided nature of the English school system, with private, public, local authority funded and government funded schools and ‘academies’ works only to intensify the contrasts between schools. These are reflected in every aspect of the school’s performance, be it staff recruitment, pupil outcomes, resources, or out-of-school activities. Secondly, in England particularly, the powerful inspection regime, ironically, makes teacher experimentation and innovation less rather than more likely. Thirdly, the repeated determination of government to tinker with education and to deride the involvement of the preceding government, has led to a series of contradictory policy twists and turns which defy consistent and steady development and improvement of the system. Fourth, these external influences have led education (and what constitutes a good education) to be seen as that which can be readily measured or assessed, and this means, all too often, the basics or the core curriculum. Each of these points can be argued in much greater detail, but I have time and space only to list them here. I hope my arguments in the book gave some substance to these general points.

Finally, I have one reflection which may help promote discussion and which goes beyond what we have discussed so far. This is a point I have reflected on a great deal lately and which, if I have the energy, might become the basis of one final book of mine. I have never expressed these ideas publicly before, so hopefully, brief as it is, what follows is new. As one of my general conclusions about schooling, I have come to the view, come to believe, that worldwide, there is an underlying contradiction contained within the debate on schooling. All round the world, politicians promote the idea that their school system is devoted to a fairer, more open society which promotes the more able, that schooling is one of the keys to social mobility, to opening up life chances for otherwise disadvantaged children. The reality is quite the opposite. School systems exist to limit and close down life chances by ensuring that the children of those already enjoying social and economic advantage receive the best education. There is no parent in the world who does not want the best possible education for their child. But in seeking to provide it, they contribute to a system which is necessarily tilted against the poor and the less powerful. Social and economic historians know that social mobility in Britain was reduced as a result of the coming of universal schooling. This is hardly surprising. But since then a succession of politicians and commentators have argued that schooling exists to do precisely the opposite of what it actually achieves. This seems to me to be the case worldwide. The point is a simple one, in my view blindingly obvious, but is overlooked or denied by almost all commentators on education. I think there is a need for serious discussion of why this is the case, not just in Britain, but across the globe.

I hope these comments help promote a lively discussion at your seminar in Japan. I send my greetings and warmest wishes to all participants.

17 December 2013