

21st- century learning, educational reform, and tradition: Conceptualizing professional development in a progressive age

Summary of article

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This paper explores the question: How can we conceptualize and speak about professional development in a progressive age? It draws on the history of education in Canada and on the work of John Dewey to understand the rhetoric of educational reform, particularly as it relates to 21st Century Learning. It explores a long-standing tension between progressivist and traditionalist thinking in education, which shapes the intellectual spaces and the conversations that frame teaching, learning, and professional development.

Progressivist educational ideology has historically concentrated on three aims: a) focus on the individual learner's aptitudes and interests rather than upon a rigid curriculum developed in a bygone age; b) engage the learner actively in the construction of knowledge, a process prohibited by the memorization and examination of content; and, c) commit to relating school life to the modern world and its concerns, not to the affairs of a world of the past.

Progressive education was a tour de force in the 1920s and 1930s, transforming the curricula of every Canadian province and again in the 1960s and 1970s, which marked a second wave of progressive education in Canada. In both instances, progressives pushed against so-called traditionalists, who were seen as overly concentrated on content, out of touch with contemporary society and trends, and focused on rote or passive forms of instruction. The third wave of progressive education is presently sweeping across the country and is, once again, pushing against a seemingly traditional and out of date school system. Its proponents, concerned with what is termed 21st Century learning, argue that society today is dramatically different from what it was in the past and that schools need to be transformed so that we must prepare our youth for the world of the future. While the themes of 21st Century learning are consistent with those of past iterations of progressive education, what is new is an unrivaled enthusiasm with technologies and their application to the school. This concentration is not led entirely by educational associations, as technology corporations are intimately involved as partners.

The tensions between progressive and traditional education are thus both persistent and rooted in the particular historical context in which they arise. The paper argues that a historically minded approach to educational reform is important for educational stakeholders and helps shape the way we think and speak about professional development. Our contemporary debates often have ancient tones to them, and the rhetoric of Canadian schooling has been consistently torn between the opposing forces, polarizing discussions about teaching, learning, and policy.