American Progressive Education and Yutori Kyoiku

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Abstract

Few groups in the history of education have been as influential as the American progressives, who were part of the broader wave of Progressivism that swept the developed world in the late-19th century. It is often seen as an American movement, but its roots lay in the Prussian welfare state. American intellectuals educated in Germany in the 1800s were inspired by the Prussian model of an efficiently organized society under the leadership of experts backed by the power of the state bureaucracy. They returned home imbued with ideas about a paternalistic state, and began to advocate similar changes in the US. Since Japan's yutori kyoiku (education free from pressure) owes more than a passing debt to Progressivism, Japanese teachers should familiarize themselves with the origins of this philosophy. To paraphrase Leon Trotsky, you may not be interested in Progressivism, but Progressivism is interested in you. This paper will introduce key elements of American progressive education and four men considered its early architects: Stanley Hall, John Dewey, Edward Thorndike, and David Snedden. Their work set the stage for the child-centered movement, educational psychology, and educational sociology. They ushered in "The Age of the Experts," the years just before and after World War I during which the movement's influence grew within academia and the teaching establishment. They used science to justify the differentiated curriculum, empower pedagogical experts, and redefine democracy. From 1910-1950, progressives oversaw a 60% reduction in academic content while "life-adjustment" courses rose ten-fold. They de-emphasized reading, put pupils' self-esteem over learning facts or developing good habits, and established an ongoing hegemony over teacher education. Similarly, yutori kyoiku reforms reduced the school week from six days to five, and cut "the educational requirements by a third." In both the US and Japan, academic performance declined significantly.

Few groups in the history of education have been as influential as the American progressives, who were part of the broader wave of Progressivism that swept the world in the late-19th century. Progressivism arose in response to the rapid industrialization and social upheavals of modernity. It is often mistaken as an American movement, but its roots lay in the welfare state engineered by Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. American intellectuals educated in Germany in the late-1800s were inspired by the Prussian model of an efficient society run by experts backed by the power of the state. They returned home advocating similar changes in the U.S. (Rahe 244). Progressive educators based their ideas in part on Rousseau's assertions about the nature of children, learning, and teaching. Since Japan's *yutori kyoiku* (education free from pressure) is progressive, Japanese parents, teachers, and policymakers should familiarize themselves with the origins of this philosophy before deciding if it is good for Japan.

This paper begins with the results of progressive education in America and of *yutori kyoiku* in Japan. It traces the rise of Progressivism, then introduces key elements of American progressive education and four men considered its early architects: Stanley Hall, John Dewey, Edward Thorndike, and David Snedden. Their work sparked the child-centered movement, educational psychology, and educational sociology. They used science to justify the differentiated curriculum, to empower pedagogical experts, and to redefine democracy. Stevenson and Stigler write that from 1910-1950, progressives reduced academic courses in high school "by 60% while…[life-adjustment] courses increased tenfold" (108); they also discredited heroes and cultural role models in "a deliberate effort to expose models' feet of clay" (86). They de-emphasized reading, put pupils' self-esteem above learning facts or developing good habits, and established an ongoing hegemony over teacher education. We then turn to Japan, where *yutori kyoiku* reduced the school week from six days to five in 2002, and cut "educational requirements by a third" (Nakai). In both countries, academic performance has declined significantly. Progressive education results in a two-tiered system with well-educated elites on top, poorly educated masses underneath, and lower overall academic achievement, as is demonstrated in the U.S. and Japan. This is not a bug, it's a feature.

By any objective standard, American education is in crisis. The 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress tests of 4th- and 8th-graders show that performance has flat-lined (Paulson, Education). In a related story, most California 4th-graders are unsure which is bigger: California or Los Angeles (Paulson, Which). Bloomberg reports the 2012 average SAT reading score has fallen to 496, the lowest since data became available in 1972. Writing, at 488, is the lowest since it was added to the test in 2006. Math remains at 514 (Lorin). U.S. scores have also declined in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). In math, the US slipped from 18th out of 27, to 25th out of 30 countries. In science, the U.S. dropped from 14th out of 27, to 21st out of 30 countries. In the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, scores have declined in every subject in both grade levels studied (4th and 8th) since the tests began in 2000 (Coulson, Conflicting). U.S. students are still number one in self-esteem. American teachers blame inadequate support. However, as performance declined from 1970 to 2009, staffing doubled and total inflation-adjusted spending per student for K-12 public education increased from $55,000 to $151,000 (Coulson, Impact). Tests sometimes give misleading results, but for 40 years?

In Japan, "declining scholastic abilities of Japan's children and university students—formerly ranked at the top of the world—is said to be a failure of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) policy of *yutori kyoiku*" (Nakai). Japan's free-fall shocked the nation.

Japan PISA Ranking (*PISA*)

	Math	Science	Reading
2000	2	2	8
2003	6	2	14
2006	10	5	15

This occurred as academic contents were slashed and class size was reduced from a post-war average of 50 to the current 35 (Wada & Burnett).

American progressive education

The late-19th century was a time of social instability. Traditional governments contended for political power with monarchists, nationalists, social democrats, and communists. In Prussia, by the 1870s, Bismarck needed to blunt the appeal of the Social Democratic Party and its reform program while modernizing and meeting the demands of German nationalism. He staved off the opposition by gaining the Kaiser's support for welfare-state legislation in the early 1880s that provided token health, employment, and education benefits to the masses in exchange for expanded government control and curtailed individual liberties. As Bismarck told William Dawson, "My idea was to bribe the working classes, or shall I say, to win them over, to regard the state as a social institution existing for their sake and interested in their welfare" (Ebeling 4). The results were an ostensibly rational Statism in which the needs and rights of individuals were subsumed under, and superseded by, the needs of the state.

At the end of the century, similar ideas were also gaining currency in the U.S. Criticism of the goals and methods used in American schools increased, culminating in a series of muckraking articles written by Dr. Joseph Rice and published in the monthly magazine, *The Forum,* in 1892. Rice was a pediatrician who studied in the central-German cities of Jena and Leipzig from 1888-90. He returned home full of ideas about the "science of education," which he successfully parlayed into a collection of sensational essays (Cremin 4). The picture he painted of American schools was a bleak one in which children studied useless subjects, taught by indifferent or authoritarian teachers, for obscure purposes. Much of his criticism was valid—there actually were bad schools, bad teachers, and bad practices. At about the same time, the National Education Association (NEA) formed the "Committee of Ten" to address admissions standards for universities. Its 1893 report fed public discontent. The committee recommended that secondary schools provide a high-quality, liberal education to all students. Implicit in the committee's work were three assumptions: 1) rigorous study disciplines the mind; 2) this benefits all students; and 3) studying the cultural, scientific, and religious heritage of the nation adds value to the society and uplifts the community as a whole. The committee explicitly stated that the high schools "do not exist for the purpose of preparing boys and girls for college," but nevertheless it opposed a differentiated curriculum, noting that, "every subject which is taught at all in a secondary school

should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil so long as he pursues it, no matter what the probable destination of the pupil may be, or at what point his education is to cease" (Ravitch 42-3). Despite the committee's clearly stated intent, critics charged that the report was elitist and would result in forcing most children into the drudgery of academic studies irrelevant to their needs.

Many of the detractors came from academia itself, chief among them Stanley Hall (1844-1924). After receiving his Ph.D. in psychology, the first ever awarded at Harvard, Hall studied with Dr. Wilhelm Wundt at the University of Leipzig. Wundt was of the view that people are animals "devoid of spirit and self-determinism" (Lionni & Klass 13). Wundt's work inspired the Behaviorism of Pavlov, Watson, and Skinner. Hall returned to America in 1883, and established a psychology laboratory at Johns Hopkins University where John Dewey was among his first students. Hall was a devotee of the French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the enlightened genius who sent his own five illegitimate children to foundling homes before sitting down in 1762 to pen his extended sermon on childrearing, *Emile, or On Education.* Rousseau drew the child as a Noble Savage who would achieve authentic greatness if only he were liberated from the oppression of the family and society. Rather than stale academic exercises, the child would learn by doing. According to Rousseau, "Emile at the age of twelve will hardly know what a book is" (Ravitch 170). French philosophy was not the only thing European that fascinated Hall. He was an admirer of German authoritarianism, was attracted to the idea of *Das Volk*, had a taste for Social Darwinism, advocated selective breeding and forced sterilization of undesirables, and believed individualism was bad for the U.S. (*Brief*). Had he lived a decade longer he could have seen similar pseudo-scientific theories of racial eugenics and social efficiency writ large on the German stage. Hall and his students collaborated with Edward Thorndike in establishing the field of educational psychology along lines laid down by Wundt (Lionni & Klass 17).

Hall is also credited with starting the child-study movement. His 1883 article, *The Contents of Children's Minds*, proclaimed the Rousseauian faith in the purity and wisdom of children untainted by the civilization that has corrupted their parents. He felt that children should learn in free, unstructured play, guided only by their interests. To discover what those interests were, Hall

organized teachers and parents to survey children and share findings through the NEA. Ravitch reports a contemporaneous response to these "Hall Clubs" from the Ohio Commissioner of Education, who observed, "To be told that a careful and scientific investigation has revealed the wonderful fact that Santa Claus appears to have a strong hold upon the hearts of boys and girls of all ages makes us tremble at the dense ignorance in which we have all been living" (72). Hall attacked the academic curriculum as harmful, and disparaged mathematics, geography, and language arts, preferring in their stead woodworking, sewing, and other useful subjects. He suggested it was unnecessary for most children to learn to read but that, if they must, they should not do so until at least the age of eight. He advocated different courses of study, also starting at age eight; one for the chosen few going on to college, and another for those destined for work.

Hall's most famous student was John Dewey (1859-1952), who eclipsed his teacher and towered above all other progressives. His stature was due to his longevity, to the sheer volume of his writing, and to his social and political contacts. Henry Commager wrote in 1950, "So faithfully did Dewey live up to his own philosophical creed that he became the guide, the mentor, and the conscience of the American people; it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for a generation no issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken" (Ryan 19). He became president of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1899. In 1904, Dewey moved to Columbia University, where he remained until he retired in 1930. He believed the purpose of education was social reform for which he campaigned actively. He wrote a series of paeans-cum-travelogues from Russia in the twenties. Throughout the thirties and forties, he and his protégés helped guide, support, and staff New Deal programs. In the sixties, President Johnson, who referred fondly to Dewey as "Dr. Johnny," invoked his theories to push his Great Society (Miller 37).

Dewey rose to prominence when he became chairman of the new department of philosophy and psychology at the University of Chicago in 1894. Shortly thereafter, he and his wife founded the Chicago Laboratory Schools, where he experimented with pedagogical theories that embodied the ideas of Rousseau, whom Dewey admired. Students learned by doing projects that sought to integrate knowledge and skills from different subjects. Unlike the later Project Method, the highly trained staff at the school paid close attention to the goals and objectives of the projects, and the

curriculum was tightly linked from one year to the next. Like other progressives, he believed reading should be delayed until children were older. His book, *The School and Society*, published in 1899, is basically a progress report on the laboratory school, complete with pictures of children's drawings, diagrams of ideal school buildings, and a chart depicting the "isolations of the school system itself" (60). There is much to be admired in the book and in the school he oversaw, and his students were no doubt engaged in novel ways that enhanced their learning. Having said that, *The School and Society* reveals the beginnings of what became a pattern for Dewey and his followers. Dewey wrote,

> We are apt to look at the school from an individualistic standpoint, as something between teacher and pupil, or between teacher and parent…Yet the range of the outlook needs to be enlarged. What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy…Here individualism and socialism are at one. Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself. (3-4)

Introducing what he termed the "New Education," Dewey began to make the case that the individualistic, family-centered school of the past was antiquated, selfish, and undemocratic. In place of the "isolations" of the old system, he proposed modern definitions of self-fulfillment and democracy in which individual identity and freedom may only be realized collectively. Dewey shifted the locus of control away from home and school and towards outside experts who supposedly knew more about children than did their parents and teachers. Applied to a single experimental school in the Midwest, staffed with brilliant and dedicated teachers, these ideas would not have mattered much. In less capable hands, and applied throughout the country his New Education was less benign.

Dewey was a long-time member of the Socialist party, but was chagrined at its lack of popular appeal. Dewey's solution to the socialists' PR problem was to recast their ideas as "liberal." In a 1931 series of articles for *The New Republic*, titled "The Need For a New Party," Dewey argued,

> The greatest handicap from which special measures favored by the Socialists suffer is that they are advanced by the Socialist party as Socialism. The prejudice against the name may be a regrettable prejudice but its influence is so powerful that it is much more reasonable to imagine all but the most dogmatic Socialists joining a new party than to imagine any considerable part of the American people going over to them. (quoted in Miller 37)

Dewey was more direct in his 1935 essay, *Liberty and Social Control*. He wrote,

> The ends which liberalism has always professed can be attained only as control of the means of production and distribution is taken out of the hands of individuals who exercise powers created socially for narrow individual interests. The ends remain valid. But the means of attaining them demand a radical change in economic institutions and the political arrangements based upon them. (125)

Not to put too fine a point on it, but classical liberalism has never entailed the seizure of the "means of production," redistribution of wealth, or usurping individual property rights in the name of the state. Simply asserting that liberalism means any of these things does not make it so, even if "Dr. Johnny" is making the assertions. Publicly avowed Socialist or not, Dewey did everything he could do to push that agenda, whether openly as Socialism or Progressivism, or by stealth as liberalism. His real problem was that Statism rests on the supremacy of the state over individuals and civil liberty, ideas inimical to most Americans. Statists favor centrally planned, top-down, big-government solutions to the problems faced by citizens and society. Statists portray themselves as rationalists, believing their new ideas superior to traditional institutions and religion, but they are just garden-variety oligarchs.

Throughout his career Dewey spoke out on such topics as the child-study movement, the perils of the academic curriculum, vocational training for the masses, IQ testing, delayed reading for children, removing parents and teachers from their customary roles in schools, empowering

experts to control society and education, redefining democracy, curtailing individualism, the evils of capitalism, the glories of Soviet Russia, and the formation of progressive organizations and political parties. At many junctures a word from him could have ended some of the worst abuses of his fellow travelers. But he usually chose either to remain silent, or to advance the progressive project under his imprimatur. Great as Dewey was, however, he could not have done this alone. During his long career at Teachers College at Columbia University (TCCU), he worked closely with Edward Thorndike and David Snedden, among many others.

Edward Thorndike (1874-1949) received his Ph.D. in psychology from Columbia University in 1898, and spent most of his career at TCCU. In 1901, he conducted experiments that he claimed demonstrated transfer does not occur in learning—that skills learned in one context cannot be generalized to others (Ravitch 65). Progressives seized upon his findings as proof that a basic tenet of liberal education (i.e., that mental discipline trains the mind) was false. While his claims were later disproven, he did irreparable damage to the academic curriculum. Thorndike asserted that students would benefit more from learning life skills than pursuing academic subjects. He believed we were beguiled into thinking advanced courses made students into good thinkers when those students would have been smart no matter what they did. He said if good students took PE and art classes we would assume that PE and art make people good thinkers, too. Hence, he and other progressives concluded that it did not matter what students studied so long as they were engaged. Thorndike was a true believer in science and thought psychological testing could accurately measure students' capabilities and efficiently assign them to their future roles in society. He became president of the APA in 1912, but is best known for his involvement in the notorious Army IQ tests that began in 1917.

With the foundations of educational psychology laid by Hall and Thorndike, and Dewey's child-centered approach well established, the stage was set to apply new scientific principles to the whole of society. David Snedden (1868-1951) began his education and career in California. In a speech titled "The Schools of the Rank and File," he posited that most students would follow the lead of a small elite, that schools would assume roles previously performed by the family and church, and that vocational training was more important for the masses than was a liberal education (Labaree

8). Snedden embraced Herbert Spenser's theories of Social Darwinism, and by the time he completed his doctorate at TCCU in 1907 he was a well-known champion of social efficiency and the differentiated curriculum. Ravitch (82) boils down Snedden's position to four main points which may be paraphrased thus: 1) different groups (separated by gender, occupation, and ability) need different kinds of education; 2) after the age of twelve, but no later than fourteen, all children need to be in vocational training; 3) academic programs are "useless, elitist, and of little value to a democratic society" save for those few who will lead; and 4) these views are scientific and enlightened and all others are ignorant, if not evil. Arguably, Snedden did more than anyone to destroy the academic curriculum. He is also credited with helping to found the field of educational sociology.

Finally, these four men helped end the traditional approach to reading in the common schools. From 1836-1920, one of the hallmarks of American education was the McGuffey's Readers series. It sold 122 million copies, second only to the Bible. One of its goals was to develop appreciation for great literature, which it did through excerpts of classics like Aesop, Shakespeare, Hans Christian Andersen, Charles Dickens, Daniel Defoe, and Longfellow. It included patriotic selections from Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin, and Lord Tennyson. The series was so successful at creating common cultural understanding that "[w]hen Theodore Roosevelt lambasted critics as 'Meddlesome Matties' a generation of Americans recognized the allusion" (Ravitch 22). Many at TCCU denounced the series as jingoistic and irrelevant to modern children, preferring instead the dumbed-down "Dick and Jane" style of readers that used sight words and the "whole-language" approach.

Many Americans who studied in Germany in the late-19th century returned to the U.S. and led the progressives' effort to transform American society by remaking schools. Rather than a unified set of principles, they advanced a disparate collection of ideas summarized broadly by Ravitch as follows:

- First was the idea that education might become a science and the methods and ends of education could be measured with precision and determined scientifically. This was the basis of the mental testing movement.

- Second was the idea that the methods and ends of education could be derived from the innate needs and nature of the child. This was the basis of the child-centered movement.

- Third was the idea that the methods and ends of education could be determined by assessing the needs of society and then fitting children for their role in society. This was the basis of the social-efficiency movement.

- Fourth was the idea that the methods and ends of education could be changed in ways that would reform society. Proponents of this idea expected that the schools could change the social order, either by freeing children's creative spirit or conversely by indoctrinating them for life in a planned society. The first version was the faith of the child-centered movement and the second was the basis of the social reconstruction movement. (60)

Though the theories were inconsistent and frequently at odds with one another, and their advocates were often self-contradictory, people who espoused progressive education eventually came to dominate the institutions that trained most of the nation's teachers, notably at TCCU. The philosophical foundation laid by Hall, Dewey, Thorndike, and Snedden over a century ago now forms the basis of teacher education throughout the U.S. Just as the Prussian model shaped American Progressivism, so American progressives now influence the rest of the world. Anyone educated in an American school of education is indoctrinated with the deep unwisdom of Rousseau and Dewey.

Japan's *yutori kyoiku*

Japanese teachers and policy-makers, many of whom studied in the U.S., have imported much of the progressive agenda. In the 1970s the phrase "7, 5, 3" was used to describe the ratios of students who understood their classes, i.e., 70% of elementary, 50% of junior high, and 30% of high school students (Nakai). Problems appeared in the schools such as violence, bullying, and nonattendance. Japan's "*gakureki shakai* (educational-background society), exam hell, and the whole system of force-fed education were seen as likely causes for these problems" (Nakai). MEXT devised *yutori kyoiku* in the 70s and 80s to relieve pressure on students. They reduced academic contents and planned to cut the school week. They used the same justifications heard 60 years earlier in the US, namely that students do not benefit from academics, and that "life-adjustment" classes would suit them better. College entrance exams were modified, high school courses simplified, and teaching made more flexible. In April 2002, new guidelines (including the 5-day school week) were enforced as planned. MEXT issued guidelines that called for improved scholastic achievement, but the *yutori* concepts were not mentioned this go-round. This was a policy shift for MEXT, which seemed to step back from its previous embrace of the relaxed approach. Despite hedging its bets publicly, MEXT marched ahead.

The results were quickly apparent. Japan had always prided itself on its performance on international tests of reading, math, and science. Top Japanese students were not the most brilliant in the world, but the rigorous regimen given to all students gave Japan a much higher average than other countries. When academic contents and teaching time were cut, the students affected most were those at the bottom, the very group that had previously out-scored other countries' lowest performers. The latest guidelines that went into effect in April 2012 increased class hours and restored much of the previously scrapped curriculum. Whether MEXT is serious remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Progressive educators dress up their weak curriculum with happy-talk about critical thinking, interdisciplinary problem solving, and diverse global multicultural whatever—all the shibboleths of the Left. But the results prove Rousseau and Dewey were wrong. American progressive

education and *yutori kyoiku* share strikingly similar problems. Take one final example, "integrated learning." Writing in 2011, Wada and Burnett reported,

> The *Sougouteki na Gakusyu no Jikan* or Integrated Learning Lesson was [a] major component of the reform package which unfortunately has been the focus of considerable confusion and debate. While the integrated nature of this component of the curriculum was designed to take the form of a rich-learning activity involving multiple disciplines, many teachers have been unclear on how to actually teach these classes as there is often no textbook, no set form of evaluation and no details recorded on student report cards. Although a very small number of sample examples were provided as a guide by the authorities, many teachers have not been offered the necessary training for this new form of pedagogy to succeed. (72)

This would not have surprised Arthur Bestor, former professor at TCCU, who wrote of American schools in 1953,

> What is falsely called 'integration' in most secondary schools is not this process at all. It is a futile and fallacious attempt to by-pass the stage of analysis entirely. The original problem or situation is never broken down into its constituent parts, and these parts are not studied separately and systematically. Instead the original problem remains the 'one great blooming, buzzing confusion' that it was to begin with, and children wrestle futilely with it year after year through an intellectual infancy indefinitely and artificially prolonged (53).

When students who lack basic knowledge in one area are asked to apply their ignorance to other fields, confusion is all too predictable. Many American and Japanese parents use their wallets to get around dumbed-down public education. In the U.S., there have always been private schools for those with money or connections. In Japan, families rely on *juku* (private cram schools) to prepare their children to enter elite institutions. Of course, this does not help the vast majority of children

who are stuck in public schools that fail to prepare students for anything beyond low-level jobs. The result is a system in which a few lucky students receive a high-quality liberal education, and everyone else receives mush. In other words, it produces exactly the kind of statist society Bismarck had in mind: clever shepherds tending a pliant flock. There is still, however, the problem of culture. Do Americans really want to be herded by their betters? If not, then perhaps schools using more traditional methods may yet prevail. Japan poses a different challenge to progressives. While top-down decision-making is familiar to most Japanese, radical change is not. After all, Confucian and Zen Masters are bywords for tradition. The Empire may strike back.

Elites have pushed progressive education in America, and *yutori kyoiku* in Japan, based on false assumptions about children, learning, and teaching. Under their leadership, academic performance has collapsed in the U.S. and will continue to deteriorate in Japan unless these practices are changed. Japan's decline in scholastic achievement followed a course similar to the decline in American academic performance when progressive "reforms" were put into place. Empowering experts over the objections of parents and teachers, reducing contents, and shortening study time inevitably results in poorer performance and a two-tiered system. It's not a bug, it's a feature.

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