An Opening Thought, Maybe Two

American discussions of diversity and difference did not begin in the last twenty-five years. They have played a part in American attempts at national self-definition since the turn of the twentieth century. Some of these discussions originated within the Progressive Education movement. I have written this essay in order to add some personal and biographical notes to that historic dialogue.

Love on a Snow Day in 1954

I was the only child in my class to make it into school. By noon it was clear that this was turning into the biggest snowstorm to hit New York City in my ten years of life. My fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Heymann said, “Go home, Michele. Go home.” But I didn’t want to.

All morning Mrs. Heymann had been mine. Together we had worked on building up a papier-mache version of the Rocky Mountains for the class’s three-dimensional map of Our American West. The snow could keep coming down until dark, for all I cared.

I loved Mrs. Heymann for a number of reasons. Like the three-dimensional map, all her social studies units were active and project oriented. When we read about Our Latin American Neighbors we also learned their songs, danced their dances and made tacos for Mexico, hot chocolate for Bolivia. She told us stories about her travels which included delicate insertions of her own inner processes. In this she was one of the few adults I had known who shared something of her interior life. In general, I usually found adults to be mysterious and dangerous, their motives mostly obscure. In my moments of childhood miseries which were many, I would promise myself that I’d always remember what it was like to be ten years old, which, of course, I have not been able to do. In any case, Mrs. Heymann seemed knowable. For example, once when she was in France she overheard two Frenchmen talking about the marvels of the Grand Canyon. Why didn’t she join the conversation? She usually loved to talk with strangers in French. She was embarrassed. Here she was an American who had never been to the Grand Canyon. And so she vowed she would go there the following summer, and she did. The story of her donkey trip to the bottom followed because after all we were studying Our American West.

On the day of the big storm I was starting to mix up a particularly satisfying version of seagreen paint in order to start work on the Pacific Ocean when somewhere far away on Livingstone Street the Board of Education finally decided to close all the schools. Mrs. Heymann insisted I leave. At the time I thought she had to follow the rules even though she was as sorry about it as I was. Later, perhaps later that day or maybe years later, I’m not sure which, it occurred to me that it wasn’t just because of what the Board of Education had said; it was because she was eager to go home herself.
It was some consolation that I got to leave by the special polished wood staircase near the Principal's office. The janitors had not bothered to open the ordinary metal doors on the side of the building, the ones for the children. The ornate entry was usually reserved for honored guests; I had never been through it. The only time I had observed it in use was when Helen Keller had come to speak to us. She was very old and it had been difficult to understand what she said. I knew she had been brave as a child but why the grownups thought so much of her now was another of those baffling puzzles.

A Hot Day in July 2002 I Am Sitting In Front of My Computer

It is now almost fifty years later. I am a teacher myself, older than Mrs. Heymann was when she taught my class but I hope I am just as lively as she was when, at recess, she would jump into the middle of a dodge ball game and play on the girls' side. For many years I taught adults who had been wounded in some way by the conventional educational system. My students were those who, as young people, were at worst neglected, at best uninspired by the public educational system. For them school was a place of tedium, sometimes shame, often failure. It is my job to offer them (finally) an alternative learning experience.

Over these many years I have often thought about Gerry Heymann and her best friend, close colleague and sort-of-co-teacher Mrs. Florence Polakoff whom I had in sixth grade; they led many of our studies together, Mrs. Heymann directing the literature, Mrs. Polakoff leading the music. I have thought of them when reading articles which disparage the American public school system. I have thought of them when one of my daughters had a gifted public school teacher and I have thought of them when another daughter did not. I have thought of them when a friend or a magazine article claimed that multicultural education was a new innovation from, say, nineteen-seventy, or when I discovered scholars who, like me, know that American discussions of difference and diversity have been going on as long as non-English speaking immigrants have been arriving on our shores.

Recently, in a spate of reading about Jewish women (of which I am one) they re-entered my consciousness as unusual, usual Jewish women of their era. Usual because teaching was the preferred and almost only professional choice open to first generation Jewish daughters in New York City in the years between the two world wars. Ordinary in that, as a group, Jewish women teachers tended to be particularly interested in what was then called "education for democracy" or sometimes "world consciousness."

Yet they were also unusual because neither had children and Mrs. Heymann was divorced, something almost unheard of in that time and place.

I did not and do not know whether or not they chose biological childlessness. In either case they conveyed an impression to us of lives permeated by choice rather than fate. The teaching profession offered them the possibility of a personal freedom particularly rare for women at that time. Their personal sense of vocation at work and their independence - they both traveled extensively during the summers - was also rare. No adult I knew at that time, my parents, my friends' parents, my numerous uncles and aunts, had ever traveled anywhere, except in the army which somehow didn't count. Not only that but no one particularly wished to travel. Europe with its wars and antisemitism was suspect. Israel had recently been born and was dangerous, sort of socialist. The immigrant grandparents had traveled from the middle of Poland, the north of Latvia or Estonia, places so remote and hostile you didn't want to imagine them. That was enough traveling for a few lifetimes, and anyway, those places were unseen now because they were behind the Iron Curtain where, we figured, they belonged. I'm reporting here on the norms of my family which were perhaps typical of some first generation Eastern European Jews; my own norms had yet to be formed.

I didn't know the phrase "progressive education" when I was ten but I know now that Heymann's and Polakoff's pedagogy around social studies and literature were examples of progressive education at its finest. They were progressive educators even though in their classrooms, as in all the classrooms of our school, the desks were nailed to the floor. Even though every morning we stood at attention and said the Pledge of Allegiance. Even though Mrs. Heymann failed me in penmanship because I didn't round the humps on my capital ems. They were progressive educators because their teaching used an interdisciplinary project orientation and they stressed community and openness to all cultures.

In order to study the wider world we made maps, learned songs and the music of Norway, Ireland, Brazil, Spain, Portugal and many other countries. We were guided into a kind of Whitmanesque passion for the diversity in the United States. This included a cantata based on Leaves of Grass which we then presented in assemblies for the younger grades and a special one for our parents. The cantata began and ended with the lines, "I hear American singing, the varied carols I hear."

When I decided to find out more about these teachers my general questions went like this: Where did they learn to do this kind of teaching? Who supported them in it? Were they the only teachers in New York, in the United States to do this kind of cultural work in a public school? Did anyone else have such teaching? I located a Mary Dollinger who had taught one of the younger grades in the same years and who I was told had been a good friend of Gerry Heymann. I also browsed in old issues of the journal Progressive Education and read in the history of the movement. What follows is the
additional information I learned about the larger context of their work within our school and within the progressive education movement.

An Ordinary School

P.S. 69 in Jackson Heights, Queens then, as now, is nothing special. The building was erected in the nineteen-twenties. It is four stories high, an imposing brick rectangle with fake crenellations at the top of each roof corner. The neighborhood it serves was and is neither rich nor poor. When I lived there the general population was comprised of children of immigrants, like my parents, who had made it out of the ethnic enclaves of Manhattan or the Bronx. Housing restrictions were still legal and there were some apartment buildings that would not rent to Jews (and perhaps other minorities as well, I’m not sure). The New York public school administration was dominated by a slow-moving bureaucracy and a complex system of patronage.

In the case of P.S. 69, in the early nineteen-fifties, Mary Dollinger reported that the principal and assistant principal hand-picked as many teachers as they could, somehow finding a way to evade the bureaucratic hierarchy or use it to their advantage. Thus, for about a decade these two administrators were able to accomplish something of what must have been their educational vision. The teachers they chose were mature women (in their late thirties, early forties), most but not all of whom were Jewish.

Mary Dollinger was a member of this group. When we spoke, in 1997, she was eighty-six, the mother of three adult children, recently widowed.

She was willing to talk to me about the past but rather as a favor; she was not particularly eager or particularly cherishing of those years. Rather, she conveyed, those years had been one segment of a full life. In contrast, a somewhat younger retired teacher, Audrey Tarr, whom I contacted in order to locate Mary Dollinger, told me that when she came to P.S. 69 and saw the children’s work up on the bulletin boards she thought to herself, “Thank God, I’ve been saved.” Meaning, she said, that the work indicated here was a school with which her educational ideals might be realized.

Mary Dollinger confirmed that she had been very close to Jerry Heymann who, after the school day would often come to the Dollinger home and stay through dinner. Even at an advanced age, Mary Dollinger’s life choices contained some of the same cosmopolitan enthusiasms that Heyman’s and Polakoff’s had. She lived in Manhattan because she was within easy reach of public transportation to museums and theaters. She hated the idea of going to Florida or to retirement villages but, she said, to placate her son she consented to go to Florida for the three worst months of winter.

As Dollinger described it from memory the school was divided into two groups, one of which conceived of teaching as a vocation. The predominately Jewish teachers were “... a close, clubby... little clique, we were a progressive group, extremely interested in the job we were doing, to do it the best way we could... We shared ideas. I remember in my third grade period if I suddenly had an idea that functioned very well in the class, I would go into Yetta Kalickstein’s room which was next to mine and say, ‘Yetta, this is really a wonderful way to do thus and so...’ So the story was, I always used to say my class didn’t have one teacher, they had two.”

The “other side” consisted of individuals attracted to the job for financial gain. “They were really not interested in teaching. They were young girls who came in hoping to furnish homes and then leave... there were also teachers who would read the newspaper all day and another who was afraid to use her voice...” In the nineteen-sixties there were men “who hoped to get ahead... more in terms of financial interests.”

Dollinger used the word progressive when I inquired where she and her clique had learned some of their methods, but on further questioning she did not mention or recall any theory or specific training course that had influenced the group’s ideas or curricula. Instead she maintained an individualist interpretation of their work in the classroom. “Your attitudes – what you liked. I loved English. That was my strong point. That was my emphasis all my life. I loved reading. But math came second. And Gerry, reading, music – she traveled extensively – and so she enriched your lives with her experiences through the world. Florence, with music more. That was her strong point.”

Nevertheless, I learned through reading in old issues of the journal Progressive Education that many of the highlights of my fifth and sixth grade experiences were typical of the best progressive practices described by other teachers in the nineteen-forties.

The Wider Context

Although each woman followed her individual interests when she taught she was also doing it from a broader perspective that she had probably learned in the 1930s. All the women in the little clique were graduates of New York City’s only free college for women, Hunter College. This decade was also the heyday of the Progressive Education movement as an influence on public educational policy. According to the education historian Nicholas Montaldo, in 1938, at the height of interest in ethnic diversity, the Progressive Education Association “... attained its peak membership of 10,000, and Time Magazine ran a cover story on the Association which remarked how progressive education had grown from ‘a crackpot movement quarantined in a handful of private schools,’ to the stature of ‘a dominant influence on U.S.
education.'” It was also the point at which the movement was most oriented toward social issues as they impact education. The pages of the journal Progressive Education in the nineteen-thirties and forties contain numerous articles which advocate teaching about other cultures. “Let Them Know The People of the World;” “The Orient – A New Educational Frontier;” “What Will We Say About Russia?” “What Shall We Teach About India?” “Be Realistic About Latin America.” And on.

Most of these articles are theoretical or describe curricula used in expensive private schools. However, two articles were stories of actual successful activities within public school classrooms, according to the writer. In these articles a Jewish woman (this is how she describes herself) named Anna Maskel describes her class’s social studies curriculum which is much like the one I was taught a decade later. “We studied the contributions that immigrants have made to the growth of the United States... We studied the cultural contributions of nineteen immigrant groups. We wore their costumes, participated in their folk dances, sang their songs, and tasted their delicacies; and at our miniature World’s Fair we displayed more than 300 artifacts from thirty countries of the world.”

As it happens, class projects on cultures of the world which are then presented to the community of school and parents are exactly what was advocated and taught to teachers by the Bureau for Intercultural Education. The Bureau’s founder, Rachel Dubois studied at Teachers’ College at Columbia University with some of the leading lights of progressive education, William Kilpatrick, George Counts, Daniel Kulp and others. Her own origins were as an activist Quaker, initially focused on world peace. Her exposure to urban teaching led her to what would be a very early version of ethnic studies. Her doctoral thesis examined degrees of tolerance before and after students had received instruction in understanding Americans’ many cultural origins. She found that the most effective method was classroom work combined with school-wide assemblies, with the assemblies being the most effective single tool. The rest of her career was dedicated to teaching teachers how to implement this “education for democracy.” Then, as now, these efforts were sometimes sufficiently funded, sometimes under siege. They were always controversial. Then, as now, some educators viewed the study of ethnic diversity as divisive to national strength while others saw it a cornerstone of a robust democracy. In Dubois’ first year of leading school assemblies in intercultural topics in 1924 in Woodbury, New Jersey, Dubois was verbally attacked by the local American legion and pressured to resign her position. She was charged with Bolshevik leanings, refusal to salute the flag, belief in interracial marriage and support of the “cult of nakedness.” The accusations were wildly imagistic and, fortunately too, Dubois had numerous supporters in the school board. However, the level of anger and fear indicates the threat that openness to other cultures posed to some Americans.

Stories of Dubois’ successes and stories from the journal of Progressive Education also indicate that young people other than myself and my peers at P.S. 69 received this kind of education, at least in industrial Northern cities with large immigrant populations. I have never met any of these students, but they must be out there. Most of them would be somewhat older than I am because these efforts at intercultural education began to decline after World War II when the nation as a whole took a conservative turn. The Bureau lost its funding, the Progressive Education Association closed its doors in 1955 and its journal folded two years later. These were exactly the years that I was in fifth and sixth grade so what was an expansive opening for me was, in the wider world, the end of an era. Mary Dollinger put it vaguely but simply—“... later on you wouldn’t have found [P.S.] 69 as enthusiastic a place to remember...”

So What? Or: The Importance of an Ideal

Anna Maskel, Gerry Heymann, Florence Polakoff, Mary Dollinger all taught about other cultures in order to stress the similarities between people and nations. This is what was taught by the Bureau for Intercultural Education; it was at that time the less controversial point of view. Today’s multiculturalists stress difference. In part this was a reaction against the sentimentality and glossing over of difference and power inherent in the earlier approach, the one I was given. A connection between the two eras has been denied and two decades of support for intercultural understanding have been wiped off the slate of our collective memory. But I have always remembered.

I would like to suggest there was and is a connection between these two generations of world conscious approaches. There is certainly a connection for me, and therefore I assume that this is also true of other students who had the good fortune to get excellent teaching in “education for democracy” or “world consciousness.” The connection is disappointment.

I was led by my teachers in an energetic though somewhat naïve and sentimental way to believe that the United States was already a place in which all peoples and cultures were equally valued. Just as Whitman felt and sang, so all Americans agreed. When I grew to young adulthood and discovered that this wasn’t true, I was shocked, then disappointed, then angry that I’d been fooled. But I still had the vision of how my country should be; I believe in that ideal still. You have to have the idea of what should be better in order to try and make it so. That’s where the connection lies. One generation gave it; another is continuing to carry it on. Disappointment in an ideal can generate a lifetime of energy.
Coda

Throughout the writing of this recollection I have often been reminded of an epigram from the medieval Japanese poet Han-Shan which the American poet Gary Snyder loosely translated: “It is rare to meet with men of Tao, and so I have written these lines.” From the inked brush of an ancient Japanese troubadour, through the English print of an American eco-poet, as a Jewish woman I offer it in homage to these women, Jewish and not, who taught me so well.

Bibliography


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