

Applied Holistic and Progressive Learning Theories in Middle-Level Practice:

The Middle-Level Program at The Children's School

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Abstract

This article examines the development of a middle-level program at The Children's School, a progressive K–8 institution now in Oak Park, Illinois. Informed by socio-politically consensus-driven frameworks of educational practice, the program is designed to support pupils as they navigate the complex transition from childhood to adolescence. Emphasizing “learning how to learn”, it engages students through play, embodied inquiry, and interdisciplinary encounters rooted in lived and local contexts. The curriculum foregrounds democratic participation, pupil voice, and responsive learning pathways, while contending with institutional constraints such as standardized assessment and curricular rigidity. Through relational, reflective, and ecologically situated learning, the program fosters agency, interdependence, and collective sense-making. This article traces the program's entanglement with progressive pedagogical traditions, illuminates its core practices and material impacts, and situates it within broader discussions on educational becoming and equity.

Keywords: *Progressive Education, EducationMiddle-Level Program, Play-Based Learning,*

Introduction

This article describes some of the theoretical foundations of the middle-level program at The Children's School (TCS) within broader Holistic and Progressive Learning frameworks. The article draws on the author's experience as a co-founder of the program. Interior development and ecological responsibility are methods and outcomes of Holistic Learning (Miller, 2000). Democratic participation, shared inquiry and agency are

methods and outcomes of Progressive Learning (Dewey, 1916).

Together, these two broad theories of learning outline what might be called a spiritual democratic practice (Rockefeller, 2019). Spiritual in the sense that a person understands life as having a deeper meaning than a series of individual successes or failures: A form of public life grounded not only in rights and procedures but in compassion and care. Such integration of ethical meaning into learning methods is not an

enrichment or an add on, it is a foundational condition for a democratic society to exist (Jefferson, 1785/1984).

Just over 10 years ago, The Children's School, then located in Berwyn and now in Oak Park, Illinois, opened its middle-level program. This was the culmination of five years of a community coming together to build the program from the budget on up. The task was both practical and philosophical. The expectation was to create an environment for learners moving from childhood into adolescence while protecting the integrity of an already flourishing and progressive K-5 program.

The examples that follow come from daily life in the middle-level program and show how progressive and holistic learning theories influence practice. The examples are meant to show how ideas about learning shape choices made in the classroom.

This article is based on a series of letters and other documents created together with the community, the summer before the middle-level program at The Children's School opened. The author would like to acknowledge and thank Daniel Ryan, Christina Martin, Brian Schultz, Will Hudson, Gloria Mitchell, Pamela Freese, all the amazing learners from whom the author learned more than could ever be communicated, and the entire TCS community for the opportunity to co-realize this program with them.

Play To Learn

Play is a voluntary, intrinsically motivated, socially mediated and meaning-making activity. Through play, humans experiment with ideas, rehearse social roles and construct symbolic worlds (Bruner, 1986). Play creates an environment where behavior can be tested without

fear of irreversible failure. For adolescents, this psychological safety can be decisive (Vygotsky, 1978).

Example

Two learners approached the community meeting (held each morning with all middle-level learners, teachers and support staff present) with a proposal to start a cardboard sword fight club at recess.

The proposal was opened to group discussion by learners and teachers together. Would it be safe? Would it lead to conflict? Would it become chaotic? Does it promote violence...

The two learners with the proposal listened carefully as concerns were raised. Then they presented the safety rules they had already designed. Swords would be made only from layered cardboard. No face contact would be allowed. Protective gear would be required. Pretend is not the same as real...

Once approved, the club became one of the most popular offerings during recess.

From a Holistic perspective, play engages thinking, emotions, the body, and relationships simultaneously (Miller, 2000). From a Progressive perspective, it models democratic life through shared inquiry and collective problem solving (Dewey, 1916). At play, people practice negotiation, leadership, followership, cooperation and competition: skills necessary for any sustained collaboration, including in democracy.

Describing the World

The middle-level learning environment at The Children's School was designed for physical mathematical exploration. Learners encounter ratio, scale, tension, proportion, symmetry, and

angle as elements of a physical reality rather than simply as abstract rules. For example, music engages students in sensing the ratios between sounded notes/beats that create the experience of music for people. Another example is building projects that require learners to interact with measuring systems through load, resistance, collapse, and balance rather than through notation first. This sequence aligns with a wider pragmatist view, of which Dewey's is one, which treats ideas as tools shaped by use rather than as vessels of eternal truths (Rorty, 1989).

Example 1

Learners were challenged to install a 6-by-6-by-6-foot cube of water inside a classroom as part of a long-term submarine robotics investigation. The learners had to determine the total volume of water the cube would hold. They translated side length into cubic units, multiplied dimensions and converted the resulting volume into gallons... The group then confronted the realization that their cube would weigh several thousand pounds.

The learners now faced a question. Could the classroom floor safely support that amount of weight. At this point, the learners decided they needed expert help. They found a community member who was a builder. The builder taught the class about support beams and load distributing platforms...

Through these experiences formal notation entered the conversations. Algebraic expressions described forces that learners were dealing with. Volume formulas gave symbolic form to quantities they were already measuring. All learned that numbers are not merely answers but compressed stories.

Example 2

Complementarily, a learner in the program completed a multi-semester course in theoretical statistical modeling with the goal of taking college-level math courses beginning in their freshman year of high school with the further goal of a career in the sciences.

From a Progressive perspective, these are examples of experience reconstructed through reflection (Dewey, 1916/2000). From a Holistic perspective, learners discovered that mathematics is not an isolated school subject but one way human beings engage with reality and each other with precision and care (Miller, 2000).

Language, Meaning and Voice

Language learning during adolescence is about the formation of voice, identity, belonging and cultural participation. Linguistic systems develop slowly, including across adolescence, mostly through use rather than through memorization of codified rules (Bakhtin, 1981). This makes dialogue, storytelling, debate, reading, and shared authorship during this stage of development essential (Bruner, 1986).

The plan for the middle-level program at The Children's School emphasizes that English spelling and grammar are historical and cultural systems rather than technical codes (Baugh & Cable, 2013). Therefore, voice precedes correctness. And editing is an act of respect for the relationship between each author and an audience, rather than of compliance.

Wittgenstein's concept of language games clarifies this process. Words and grammar gain meaning not from fixed definition but from use within shared forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1953). Grammar is a logic of communal agreement.

Example 1

Learners collectively wrote, scored, produced, co-directed, and performed an original hour-long musical that explored gender identity and family conflict in a dangerous fictional world. From the earliest brainstorming sessions, language was the medium through which learners expressed who they were and how they understood one another. Small groups developed character backstories. They debated motivations, loyalties, fears... Dialogue was said aloud before it was ever written down as learners improvised scenes.

Questions of grammar and structure arose organically as the narrative took shape. Learners improved lines not because someone marked them wrong but because an audience during a rehearsal did not understand something. Editing became about clarity. Spelling and punctuation were tools that enabled an ensemble to rehearse.

Song lyrics developed alongside the script. Learners experimented with phrasing to match the story beats. They revised verses to support breath and cadence. Meaning emerged through use within the living language game of rehearsal and performance.

When the musical was staged at a local theater, grammar carried real consequence. In this context, language learning was no longer the memorization of rules but the formation of identity within a community of communicators cooperating to make one another be understood.

During this process, learners also studied the history of theater from pre-Classical modes of religious festival-based theatricality through the Greco-Roman-style of storytelling and performance that is most common in our culture. They also examined how what is termed as the “American” musical theater tradition is based on

aspects of African-American traditions of storytelling and performance.

Example 2

Complimentarily, a learner was awarded the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Award by the State of Illinois.

A Holistic language environment supports exploration, formal editing, individual voice and communal authorship (Miller, 2000). Progressive Learning theory contributes to the democratic ethic of open communication (Dewey, 1916). Together, they allow learners to experience language not as control but as participation in shared meaning-making.

Pluralities

Rudolf Steiner emphasized that teaching should cultivate freedom through the active shaping of the learning experience by the learner (Steiner, 1919/2000). Learners therefore pursue self- and group-chosen pathways that honor temperament, interest and developmental readiness. Within this structure, teachers function not as fountains of information but as co-designers, stewards – co-learners. Steiner described the teacher as an artist who forms conditions in which learners can experience meaningful activities (Steiner, 1919/2000).

Example 1

During a study of the history of the Chicago area, learners organized their inquiry around rivers. Learners began with the smallest waters they could trace by following narrow streams that fed into Salt Creek, for example. They mapped tributaries by walking, measuring, sketching,

photographing and recording: Knowledge created through sense experiences and physical effort.

Learners then walked through Mud Lake at a Cook County preserve and later hiked across Berwyn to visit a small remnant of the lake in a local park. The contrast between the preserved wetland and its fragmented urban remainder gave learners the opportunity to encounter how development reshapes space and the histories we tell each other.

From there the inquiry expanded. Learners fished in the Des Plaines River, learning how water quality shapes living systems. They studied historical fishing practices alongside present-day environmental regulations.

The learners later kayaked together toward the locks on the Chicago River. Learners observed engineered structures and studied how the river had been reversed. This raised questions about who benefits from controlling water and whose land/water was altered.

Throughout the study, tools such as mapping, water testing, journaling, kayaking, and researching were introduced as needed. Learning was extended to include comparisons between our society along our rivers with the “ancient” river civilizations found described in most middle school history books. Largely, learners learned history by walking it, ecology by sensing it, freedom by shaping paths of investigation.

Example 2

A learner was deeply troubled by the aggressive anti-North Korean messaging that permeated the media at the time. This concern prompted an extended discussion about what distinguishes North Korean society from our own society. Questions developed from this discussion morphed into a multi-week research project

examining the spectrum of political and economic theories used by humans to organize themselves. This included an extended didactic explanation of those theories by a teacher. The project culminated in a multi-room experiential installation for other learners in the school, with separate spaces representing South Korea and capitalism, the Demilitarized Zone, and North Korea and communism.

Democratic Practice

In a Freirean framework, knowledge is produced through dialogue rather than acquired from an authority. Freedom and choice are framed within a responsibility to sustained action promoting what can be termed healthy social conditions and the fulfillment of human needs (Freire, 1970). Through cooperative work, learners develop practical understandings of democracy as a lived practice rather than as an abstract concept (Dewey, 1916).

Example

One learner joined the 6th-grade at The Children’s School carrying a history of trauma. For months they remained withdrawn, rarely spoke in groups, and avoided social contact whenever possible. Over the years that followed, as trust deepened, they began to imagine a project for their graduation project, termed a “Capstone Project.”

They wanted to create a café for the wider school community to gather after school. A committee of teachers met with the learner to problem solve together. What would make people come. How would food be prepared. What would safety require. Was the project doable within the specified budget. How would responsibility be shared...

For five weeks, on Tuesdays and Thursdays directly after school, the learner ran a café. At

first, the community came largely out of support for the learner. People purchased snacks, stayed briefly, and offered encouragement.

By the third week, something shifted. People began making plans to meet there. Friends lingered to talk after school. Parents stayed to share conversation. Staff gathered without an agenda. The café became a living node of community life.

In addition, through this project the learner provided evidence that they possessed most of the mathematical skills required for graduation under the State of Illinois 8th-grade mathematics standards.

Conclusion

Both Holistic and Progressive approaches to learning informed the creation of the middle-level program at The Children's School. The goal is that play, mathematics, language, inquiry, and service function as an integrated socio-emotional-intellectual ecology.

When learning honors the whole person within the whole community, learners can come to understand themselves as participants in a shared moral and civic life. A spiritual democratic practice, in this sense, is expressed through relationships: Citizenship as a public ethical praxis.

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Author Bio

Paul Grajnert is a husband to Cathy Schroeder and father to Kazimierz Grajnert. Paul just received a Master of Social Work degree from Aurora University and is currently supporting individuals with chronic mental health issues succeed as independently as possible within their communities. He officially began teaching in 1992 and has learned with students in third grade through the undergraduate college level under many different management styles from Seattle to New York. He began his teaching/research career applying best-practice teaching techniques to the

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