

# The Progressive Teacher's Role in the Classroom

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### What Active Adult Involvement Does and Doesn't Entail

By Alfie Kohn

According to Michael Harrington and many other scholars, a careful reading of Marx's work makes it clear that he "regarded democracy as the essence of socialism." Soviet-style Communism, by contrast, corrupted socialism "by equating it with a totalitarian denial of freedom."<sup>1</sup> But, as Noam Chomsky has often pointed out, it served the interests of both the U.S.S.R. and the United States to pretend otherwise – that is, to equate the Soviet system with socialism, as if it represented the very apotheosis of Marx's vision rather than a cynical misuse of it. The Soviets wanted to bask in the glory of Marx's vision of bottom-up control and liberation from oppression, while the Americans wanted to make capitalism seem more appealing by linking the alternative of socialism to the tyranny of Lenin and Stalin.

I was fascinated by this paradox when I first encountered it – the idea that two diametrically opposed belief systems might

embrace the same (faulty) conclusion for entirely different reasons. And I recognized it again years later when I saw something similar playing out in the field of education.

Traditionalists believe that teachers should have absolute control over a classroom: Adults know more than children do and therefore ought to make all the important decisions – setting and enforcing the rules, managing students' behavior, planning the curriculum, dispensing knowledge, and so on. Groovy alternative educators, meanwhile, believe that children can be trusted to learn and grow and solve their problems essentially on their own, without outside interference.

Their prescriptions are utterly opposed. But both sides – direct-instruction behaviorists and Our Lady of the Fiercely Snapping Ruler, on the one hand; unschoolers and proponents of “free” schools like Summerhill and Sudbury Valley, on the other – share a key premise: *Adult authority is necessarily autocratic and power-based*. Their disagreement is about whether that's a good thing.

Progressive education – the tradition of Dewey, Piaget et al. – challenges that premise and, with it, the underlying false dichotomy concerning the role of the adult. In just about any dispute, the assumption that there are only two options often serves the interests of both sides. If I convince you to view a situation in binary terms, and then succeed in painting the other one as scary, you're left with whatever I'm selling.

Consider advice for raising children. One side says, “Look at those permissive parents, letting their spoiled kids get away with murder. It's scandalous! We need to assert our authority and impose some good old-fashioned discipline.” And the other side says, “Look at those brutal authoritarians, cracking down on kids just for being kids. It's appalling! We need to trust children to do what's right and stop bossing them around.” The specter of permissiveness is invoked by those who favor being punitive. . . and vice versa. Each side rallies support by

reducing the number of possibilities to two.<sup>2</sup>

Back in the world of education, traditionalists love to conflate all varieties of progressive pedagogy (and constructivist models of learning) with Rousseauvian romanticism. If you're not imposing a prefabricated curriculum and a set of rules on students – or if you're raising objections to practices such as grades, tests, lectures, worksheets, and homework – well, then, you obviously endorse a touchy-feely, loosey-goosey, fuzzy, fluffy, undemanding version of hippie idealism.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the very same arguments and scenarios offered by progressives can lead free schoolers to summon the bogeyman of authoritarian education just because the adult plays an integral role.

In reality, the progressive approach will play out somewhat differently depending on the ages being taught, the subject matter, and the needs of the individual students, some of whom may benefit from more structure and adult involvement than others (although no one benefits from being controlled). But there are some truths that apply across populations and circumstances, beginning with the fact that children are active meaning makers. They're not empty receptacles into which knowledge or skills are poured, nor are they beasts that need to be tamed and trained.<sup>4</sup>

However, our determination to avoid controlling children or treating them as passive objects doesn't obligate us to stay at the periphery of the picture most of the time. Those who insist on a purely reactive or observational role for the teacher lest we impede their freedom (or learning, self-expression, or growth) remind me of people who have lately denounced any mask requirements or social distancing restrictions during a deadly pandemic as assaults on their liberty.

The progressive educator says to the libertarian educator:

Active adult involvement can foster children's intellectual growth. Yes, their needs and interests should be the "center of gravity" in the classroom (as Dewey put it). But the process of understanding ideas is facilitated by being gently challenged to reevaluate one's assumptions. The teacher offers new possibilities for students to consider, to integrate, perhaps to rebel against. This prompts additional questions and opens up new avenues of discovery. The teacher also prepares the groundwork for students to more effectively learn with and from their peers than if they were left to their own devices, helping them to construct a caring cooperative community, providing guidance and, when necessary, teaching the skills that promote constructive collaboration.

"But," the progressive educator adds, turning now to the traditionalist, "note how radically different this kind of active adult involvement is from what *you're* defending – and, indeed, from the coercion that so often takes place in classrooms." (Because of that, I want to be clear that the two options I'm rejecting do not trouble me equally. There is far more to be feared from traditional education than from what is offered in the name of alternative education.)<sup>5</sup>

Eleanor Duckworth likes to say that great teachers know when and how to throw a monkey wrench into the gears, artfully complicating what kids have come up with, pushing them to think harder and better, rather than just supplying them with, or reinforcing, right answers.<sup>6</sup> In the Reggio Emilia model, meanwhile, "children are involved right from the start in defining questions to be explored,"<sup>7</sup> but teachers then help to clarify, amend, and reformulate those questions, sometimes combining one child's with another's. Reggio educators sometimes use the metaphor of having a teacher catch a ball thrown to them by the children (their original question) and then toss it back (after having helped to sharpen that question).

This general conception of the adult's role is actually much more challenging for teachers, both pedagogically and psychologically, than either a traditional didactic approach or a laissez-faire approach. It's harder to provide the *conditions* for learning, to devise challenges and, if necessary, help to illuminate what's interesting about those challenges. Teachers need to figure out on the fly when to offer guidance and criticism, directions and suggestions – and when to keep their mouths shut. Sometimes they reflect back to a student what she just said, perhaps subtly reframing her idea, using different words to bring out the underlying issues. In short, they are providing kids with what they need to take charge of their own learning – or, as a high school math teacher explained while I was visiting his class, the teacher is “in control of putting the students in control.”

As I say, none of this is easy to do, much less to do well. And this way of conceptualizing the teacher's task asks us to rethink the conventional wisdom about a range of issues: which (and whose) questions will drive the curriculum, who gets to (or is required to) participate in class, whether (and to what end) students' understanding is scaffolded, whether educational technology has a role to play, whether learning is “lost” when students are out of school for extended periods, and how we ought to judge the effectiveness of what has taken place.

A teacher in Michigan once asked her third grade class how many legs an insect has,<sup>8</sup> and a boy promptly replied that it might have “eight or ten or fifteen.” The teacher's impulse was just to correct him, but she decided it might be useful to “get a feeling for what he was thinking.” She asked if he could give her an example. He mentioned caterpillars, and this opened up a class discussion that suggested other students would have answered the same way he did. A long conversation ensued about adult insects versus larvae, and about the possibility of mutations (since, in fact, *all* insects don't

have six legs). The fact that the teacher asked a question rather than making a statement allowed this conversation to happen. She reflected later that it also gave her “ways of assessing what they know” without resorting to a test.

I delight in collecting stories like that one: stories that remind us of the importance of an active role for the teacher in helping students to think deeply – while also reminding us that this role is neither autocratic nor focused just on issuing instructions and supplying information.

## NOTES

1. Michael Harrington, *Socialism* (New York: Bantam, 1972), pp. 42, 187.

2. There’s more about this false dichotomy – along with other ways to think about these issues – in my book *Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason* (New York: Atria, 2005).

3. One specific example of this sort of bad-faith, straw-man argument is the assertion that anyone who criticizes the overuse of explicit phonics instruction must believe that all kids just pick up reading spontaneously...followed by vociferous denunciations of that belief rather than a defense of explicit phonics instruction for every child as the core of a reading curriculum.

4. The latter element of traditionalism reflects a dim view not only of children but of human nature, something I’ve explored in the context of discipline and classroom management (*Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community* [ASCD, 1996/2006], chapter 1) as well as character education programs. Related to this is the discovery by researchers that “individuals who are unsure of their own power, when placed in a position of nominal authority, are the ones who are most

likely to rely on coercive control tactics.” (See D. B. Bugental et al., “Who’s the Boss?”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72 [1997]: 1298.) Moreover, teachers’ “disciplinary experiences in their families of origin are predictive of the strategies they select for classroom management.” Those who rely on punishment, for example, are disproportionately likely to have been punished themselves as children and discouraged from questioning parental authority. (See Charles Kaplan, “Teachers’ Punishment Histories and Their Selection of Disciplinary Strategies,” *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 17 [1992]: 263.) In short, when children are controlled, it’s not because this actually benefits them but because of adults’ cynical (and inaccurate) beliefs and/or their own formative experiences and need to feel in control.

5. Because the traditional, teacher-centered approach is more prevalent than laissez-faire education by orders of magnitude – and also, I believe, much more damaging than erring on the side of giving kids too much freedom – I have devoted much of my career to challenging traditionalism rather than to inveighing against the excesses of some forms of alternative education. Likewise for parenting: I’m not a fan of permissive child-rearing any more than I am of hands-off teaching, but, as I’ve argued elsewhere, the dominant problem with parenting in our society isn’t permissiveness; it’s the *fear* of permissiveness that leads adults to overcontrol children.

6. Carolyn Edwards et al., eds., *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1993), p. 193.

7. Eleanor Duckworth, *The Having of Wonderful Ideas” and Other Essays on Teaching and Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987), p. 133.

8. Carol Miller’s account appears in Suzanne M. Wilson, “Deeply Rooted Change: A Tale of Learning to Teach

Adventurously," in *Teaching for Understanding: Challenges for Policy and Practice*, ed. by David K. Cohen et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), pp. 97-98.

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