Forgotten Fathers and Mothers: Rethinking the History and Parentage of Progressive Education

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Abstract:
Progressive Education was a salient educational movement from the late 1800s until the 1950s. Numerous remnants of progressive education are in practice today in various forms. Until recently the father or progressive education was attributed to either John Dewey (1859-1952) or Colonel Francis Parker (1837-1902). During the past two decades the paternity of progressive education has come into question, particularly with regard to race, and an interest in its maternity has surfaced. Because of social conventions during progressive education’s heyday, contributors to the movement with regard to race and gender were underreported. The purpose of this article is to expand the history of progressive education through the inclusion of an African American father, Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), and a forgotten Caucasian mother, Julia S. Tutwiler (1841-1916).

Keywords:
Progressive Education; African American; Women; History

1. INTRODUCTION

Educational historians have continually attempted to determine the parentage of numerous educational movements. Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827) has been described as the father of elementary education [1–6]. Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) was considered the father of kindergarten [7–10]. G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924) has been regarded as the father of American developmental psychology [11–14] and Edward L. Thorndike was an undisputed father of educational psychology [15–18]. Until recently, the paternity of progressive education was attributed to either John Dewey (1859-1952) or Colonel Francis Parker (1837-1902) [6, 13, 19–22]. In every example represented here, the founding parent was a privileged, white male. Only recently have attention and credit been given to founding fathers of color [23] or pioneering mothers [19, 22, 24]. The purpose of this article is to expand the idea of founding fathers and mothers of progressive education to include those who were originally marginalized or ignored because of race or gender.

In this document, we focus on Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) and Julia S. Tutwiler (1841-1916)
who are representatives of many other marginalized progressive education founders and parents. We chose to highlight their contributions for the following reasons. First, their ideas predated most of John Dewey’s contributions. Second, they were both presidents and innovative leaders of progressive education institutions that later became universities. Practical applications of progressivism at their respective schools are described here. Finally, they both died before most of the leading progressive educators began to research or practice and before the formation of the Progressive Education Association. Indeed, both Booker T. Washington and Julia S. Tutwiler were architects of progressivism at the inception of the movement [19, 23].

2. BOOKER T. WASHINGTON (1856-1915)

Booker T. Washington was the major leader of African Americans in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century [25–28]. Born a slave, he eventually made his way to Hampton Institute where he received his education. He later became the president of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute which became Tuskegee University. He was strongly criticized for being an accommodationist by W.E.B. Dubois and other African American leaders of his day [29]. Generals [23] defends the criticisms of Washington as someone who tried to lift the African American population out of slavery and poverty to succeed within the structural confines of the times in which he lived. It was during his tenure as the president of Tuskegee from 1881-1915 that Washington developed his educational ideas, which should be recognized as the beginning of the progressive education movement [23].

Only in the past few years has Booker T. Washington been considered a founding father of progressive education. He “is perhaps the most significant among the so-called architects of progressive education, yet his story is distorted and this represents a sad omission to the legacy of educational reform in this country” ([23], p. 2). The year Washington died, John and Evelyn Dewey published Schools of Tomorrow (1915) highlighting the history of exemplary progressive schools in the early 1900s throughout the United States, but Washington and his innovations at Tuskegee were not mentioned in this volume. “Although the professional life of Booker T. Washington corresponds with these years and his educational accomplishments at Tuskegee are substantial, he is virtually ignored in the body of literature known as progressive education” ([23], p. 4). In fact, there are numerous examples of Washington’s progressive ideas that predated John Dewey’s. Ten of the most salient of these are described here.

2.1 Object Learning

One of the first applications of progressive education Booker T. Washington attempted was to use Pestalozzian ideas. This included object learning which meant that students studied objects in their natural environment [30]. Washington applied this concept with the students at Tuskegee. The study of the land and the natural resources of Alabama were part of the curriculum. Mathematics was taught in relation to problems of shop and field [31]. Before Dewey began applying Pestalozzian principles, Washington was actively engaged in the process [23].

2.2 Experiential Learning

Washington also incorporated experiential learning before Dewey described “learning by doing” in Schools of Tomorrow [32]. As Martin [30] explained, “Tuskegee ideas could not have been influenced by the thinking of John Dewey” (p. 88) because Washington’s experiential learning was already in action
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Learning by experience involved both manual and academic training at Tuskegee. Washington believed that a lofty education of the classics should not replace education for the real world. Most learning experiences at Tuskegee revolved around authentic learning and learning through experience [31].

2.3 Project Learning

William Heard Kilpatrick (1917, 1918) was described as the major architect and developer of the project method [13, 20]. Booker T. Washington was incorporating the project method at Tuskegee Institute during the 1880s before Kilpatrick began writing about it [23]. According to Mathews [27], “Without any elaborate discussion of sociological principles or of psychological or pedagogical theory, he made all the work at Tuskegee an integrated process of projects geared to supply community needs” (p. 117). Projects were practical and were used to meet a direct need at Tuskegee Institute and the neighboring community. Projects were “a way of life at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. Buildings were constructed by the students and for the students. The physical expansion, the management, and the development of Tuskegee were integral parts of the curriculum” ([23], p. 17).

2.4 Integrated Learning

At Tuskegee, “there were no isolated independent courses” ([23], p. 52). Washington had to educate the faculty at Tuskegee in learning “experimentalist-progressive ways of building a comprehensive and integrated curriculum connected to life needs” (pp. 52-53). Perhaps the biggest criticism Washington received concerning integrated learning was the fact that manual training was integrated with academic learning. Even faculty members at Tuskegee had trouble accepting this [27].

2.5 Background Knowledge Learning

Washington insisted that learning must take into account the background knowledge of the learner. That is, learning must move from the known to the unknown. “This process of inductive reasoning enabled the students to first come into contact and establish understanding with the familiar and then slowly extend their understanding to the unknown or less familiar” ([23], p. 54). This led to another principle of Washington’s which can be called connection learning.

2.6 Connection Learning

In order for students to excel in both academics and manual training, Washington believed they must make connections between what is learned in the classroom and the real world of work. And, for students to return to their communities as educated and productive citizens, they must experience what they have learned in order to make connections. Connections were encouraged through learning by doing. What was learned in a classroom was immediately connected to the outside world through practical activity and service learning on campus and the larger community [26].
2.7 Here and Now Learning

Booker T. Washington’s “mantra was, ‘Cast down your buckets where you are’ which is a reflection of the Darwinian belief that survival requires the ability to adapt to your immediate environment” ([23], p. 11). Long before Lucy Sprague Mitchell implemented a “here and now” curriculum through the Bureau of Educational Experiments [33, 34], Washington developed a curriculum that dealt with the practical needs of Tuskegee in the here and now [27, 28]. For example, as part of their education, students constructed the buildings on the Tuskegee campus and were taught everything beginning with the here and now [23].

2.8 Social Justice Learning

Washington also was involved with a number of philanthropists who were interested in social change and the transformation of society through democracy. Through Washington’s connections and associations with several wealthy businessmen, he was able to finance social change at Tuskegee and fund many of the programs at Tuskegee that encouraged equity and social justice. Still, Washington often was considered an accommodationist for the ways in which he dealt with wealthy, white philanthropists [28]. While Washington’s goal was to raise the economic level of African Americans, he was very familiar with the social and political conventions of his day and knew how to navigate them to help his cause [27].

2.9 Education Extension

Booker T. Washington recognized “the schools’ responsibility to the culture and the community” ([23], p. 22). His “education extension work was a mainstay of his curriculum. He understood the importance of reaching the remote areas…His extension work was geared to meeting the scientific needs of the farmer and also meeting the educational needs of the masses” (p. 22). Washington’s education extension extended instruction throughout remote, rural areas, to people of color living in poverty [35, 36]. His model of education extension became popular throughout the Southeastern United States and in other places such as Puerto Rico, Cuba, and parts of Africa [27].

2.10 Manual Training and Mental Learning

At the beginning of Washington’s career at Tuskegee, education was clearly divided between manual training and mental education. Washington believed that this arbitrary division produced an incomplete education for both those who were in manual training and students who focused on academics. One of the main precursors to progressive education was an attempt to erase the dichotomy between the manual and the mental [20]. Just two years before Washington became president of Tuskegee Institute, Calvin W. Woodward pushed for manual education at Washington University where he was teaching. “The Manual Training School of Washington University, established on June 6, 1879 as the first of its kind in the United States, represented the fruits of his efforts” ([20], p. 27). By 1884, manual training was established in three cities and then spread throughout the United States. In 1881, Washington had begun his own exemplary program of manual training at Tuskegee; however this was never mentioned in Cremin’s seminal text, The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957.

Booker T. Washington was never given credit as a father of progressive education, but he was not the only forgotten parent. Julia S. Tutwiler was also actively spreading progressive ideas in another part of Alabama. The next section describes her contributions to progressive education before John Dewey was
fully involved in the movement. She, too, became a marginalized pioneer of the movement [19].

3. JULIA S. TUTWILER (1841-1916)

Julia Tutwiler was born to Henry and Julia Tutwiler. Her father was a professor and head of ancient languages at the University of Alabama. Henry “believed that women were the intellectual equals of men and should be educated as such” ([37], p. 1). Julia Tutwiler was a member of the first class of Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. “Tutwiler’s stay at Vassar was short lived and she returned to Alabama to teach at the Greensboro Female Academy” ([38], p. 55). She became the president of the Alabama Normal College for Girls which eventually became the University of West Alabama. As a mother of progressive education she initiated and implemented numerous reforms. These include her work with students, universities, prisons, and professional organizations. Each of these is briefly addressed here.

3.1 Work with Students

Julia Tutwiler moved to Livingston, Alabama in 1881 to become the co-principal of Livingston Female Academy and the Alabama Normal College for Girls [39]. She soon became the first woman president of a college in Alabama. From the beginning, the college implemented a progressive pedagogy. Livingston Female Academy “espoused progressive educational theories that students should be treated as individuals and exposed to broad cultural and educational experiences” ([37], p. 3). In Tutwiler’s work with students, she originated and applied several innovative progressive ideas. These included school excursions, combining academic programs with teacher training, and adding vocational education to the curriculum.

“Before John Dewey discussed experiential learning with Lucy Sprague Mitchell who implemented the theory at the Bureau of Educational Experiments with young children, Julia Tutwiler established the innovation of school excursions” ([38], p. 56). Shortly after arriving at Livingston, Ms. Tutwiler inaugurated a plan for excursions. Students at Livingston were required to participate in purposeful field trips, many of these out of state, as part of their learning. According to the Catalogue of the Alabama Normal School for Girls (1887-1888), these excursions “confirmed the Principals in their belief that a week’s excursion of this kind, under experienced guidance, teaches a pupil more than ten months of mere text-book instruction” (p. 21).

Ms. Tutwiler also combined academic study with normal school training. According to [39], “Miss Tutwiler was at least half a century ahead of her time in developing a program of teacher education that is recognized as standard today; namely, that basic general education, which Miss Tutwiler called ‘culture,’ must be joined with professional study in order to develop good teachers” (p. 10). This meant teacher trainees took the same classes with college students except for their methods courses and practice teaching.

By the end of the 19th century, Tutwiler had also added vocational education and manual training to the curriculum. Tutwiler became “such a strong advocate for industrial and technical education for women that a new institution was formed...the Alabama Industrial Institute, which later became the University of Montevallo” ([38], p. 57). Again, before Dewey advocated vocational education, both Julia Tutwiler and Booker T. Washington were actively applying both manual training and academics at Livingston and Tuskegee.

The progressive ideas with students described up to this point have concerned Tutwiler’s work with adults attending the Livingston Female Academy and the Alabama Normal College for Girls. However,
Ms. Tutwiler also applied progressive ideas to the education of young children. Specifically, she “instituted pedagogical methods, such as educational games and simple handicrafts, that she had learned in Germany in a kindergarten department that she established for Livingston’s preschool children” ([37], p. 3). In additions, she wrote children’s stories that would be considered, even today, developmentally appropriate for early childhood education. Her writings appeared in *Appleton’s Journal* as well as *St. Nicholas Magazine* [40].

### 3.2 Work with Universities

Julia Tutwiler’s progressive ideas did not stop at Livingston but extended to other colleges and universities. For example, one of her projects was “the integration of women into the all male University of Alabama in 1893” ([38], p. 57). After the integration of women into the University of Alabama, Ms. Tutwiler insisted they be given housing. The first women who attended the university stayed in the Julia Tutwiler Annex [40]. And, as previously mentioned, Ms. Tutwiler was instrumental in founding the Alabama Industrial Institute which later became the University of Montevallo.

Tutwiler always was committed to social justice and equity. While women were being admitted to the University of Alabama, Ms. Tutwiler began accepting men to the Alabama Normal College for Girls. The name was then changed to just the Alabama Normal College [39]. She also “recruited outstanding young men for the program. One of her recruits was named Frank L. Grove who was the first male to graduate from the college. Frank had a stellar career as a teacher and writer. He was the secretary of the Alabama Education Association and an editor for the book, *Library of Alabama Lives*” ([38], p. 11).

### 3.3 Work with Prisons

Julia Tutwiler was also a social activist for prison reform. Progressive education for Julia Tutwiler involved comprehensive education for everyone, which included prisoners. She was able to organize the Tuscaloosa Benevolent Association to “demand prison reform in Alabama” ([38], p. 58). She became the superintendent of prison work for the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and she was eventually appointed to be the prison inspector for the State of Alabama [40]. Some of her accomplishments regarding prison reformed included the formation of separate prisons for women. She also insisted and succeeded in the development of separate juvenile facilities that resulted in the formation of a Boy’s Industrial School [40]. But Ms. Tutwiler’s advocacy did not stop there. She was instrumental in providing educational opportunities for prisoners through night school and Sunday School. Finally, she was able to put an end to the convict-lease work program that used mostly African American men to work in exceptionally dangerous jobs [37].

### 3.4 Work with Professional Organizations

Ms. Tutwiler worked tirelessly with professional organizations to improve the state of Alabama. She helped develop standards for teacher education and certification in Alabama. She also was secretary of the Alabama delegation of the International Historical Congress of Charities and Corrections. Through her work with the Alabama State Department of Education, she advocated for higher entrance standards at Alabama colleges and universities and was a leader in the formation of the Association of Alabama Colleges. For all of her contributions, she became the first woman to receive an honorary doctorate in 1907 at the University of Alabama. However, Julia Tutwiler’s work with professional organizations was
far more extensive than just Alabama. Ms. Tutwiler’s contributions included service at both the national and international levels.

Long before the Progressive Education Association was formed, Julia Tutwiler was a leader in national and international professional organizations, elaborating her own vision of progressivism [19]. “In 1884 she was elected a national counselor at the meeting of the National Education Association in Madison, Wisconsin” ([39], p. 15). She also became the President of the Department of Elementary Education for the organization. During her presidential address, she discussed the importance of individualized education through grouping. “This address was given before the scholars made the great psychological experiments on learning and before the development of the individual intelligence tests” ([39], p. 15). According to Aldridge & Christensen [38], “this made Ms. Julia Tutwiler a pioneer in education and psychology before the child study movement and the theories of G. Stanley Hall. Her progressive educational ideas were forerunners to those of John Dewey’s” (p. 56). In addition to all of these examples, Tutwiler participated in the Congress of Representative Women of the World [19].

4. CONCLUSIONS

Until the late 1900s, the only controversy regarding the parentage of progressive education was whether its father was John Dewey or Colonel Francis Parker. Near the end of the 20th century, researchers began to question both the paternity and maternity of progressive ideas. For example, Lagemann [41] described the controversy concerning Dewey as the leading pioneer of progressive education in the following way. “Frequently claimed to have been the father of progressive education and otherwise to have had a profound impact on American education, Dewey may have inspired all sorts of people to do all sorts of things as a result of his ideas, but few examples of ‘Deweyan education’ were truly or accurately Deweyan” (p. 42). This was certainly the case with regard to Booker T. Washington and Julia S. Tutwiler. All of their ideas were developed almost entirely before Dewey began to solidify his ideas. The majority of their contributions to and writings about progressive education occurred before Dewey’s time. Still, most of Dewey’s ideas can be found in both the philosophies and practices of Washington and Tutwiler.

There are many other scholars and practitioners who deserve a place as pioneers and parents of progressive education. However, Booker T. Washington and Julia S. Tutwiler were chosen as salient examples here because their work predated John Dewey’s. They were both presidents of successful institutions that have developed into 21st century accredited universities with extensive undergraduate and graduate programs. Both Washington and Tutwiler implemented practical applications of progressivism at their respective schools before Parker and Dewey began their experiments with progressive education.

There are several possible reasons for the exclusion of Washington and Tutwiler as parents of progressive education. Educational researchers and historians should study what these possibilities are. However, the major reasons for the exclusion of Washington and Tutwiler are race and gender. The early days of progressivism have been described as a time when education was opening up to everyone. Indeed, only a small percentage of individuals attended secondary schools at the beginning of the 20th century. By 1930, the percentage was well over 50% in many areas of the United States [13, 20]. Education was rapidly moving from education for the elite to education for all with the inclusion of manual training along with academic learning [13]. Progressivism lauded education for the masses, including the large number of immigrants, along with children and adults of poverty. What was lacking in this conversation was adequate discussions and provisions for race and gender [19].

Researchers since the beginning of the 21st century have tried to set the record straight. Generals [23] has attempted to correct the legacy of progressive education with regard to race. Aldridge and Christensen [19], Sadovnik and Semel [24], and Staring [22] have tried to expand the story of progressivism in relation
to gender. Reynolds and Schramm [42] have tried to expand the progressive education record by reporting on contributors who were marginalized because of race and gender. Still, more work needs to be done to redeem the fathers and mothers of progressive education who have been given short shrift in the educational literature.

References


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