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"Learning by Doing, by Wondering, by Figuring Things Out:" A New Look at Contemporary Homeschooling and Pedagogical Progressivism

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**“Learning by Doing, by Wondering, by Figuring
Things Out:”**

**A New Look at Contemporary Homeschooling and
Pedagogical Progressivism**

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Advised by Professor Eric Morser

Prologue:

A Homeschooler Walks into a Talk Show...

In 1981 the popular daytime television program, the *Phil Donahue Show*, was on its 15th season. Hundreds of guests had appeared on his show from Muhammed Ali to Johnny Carson to Bill Clinton which cemented Phil Donahue's legacy as a daytime host and his show as a fixture in millions of American homes. His pioneering style of direct conversation with a live studio audience was revolutionary as those tuning in felt closer than ever to the action. Donahue's dynamic style of presentation made him a renowned public figure. One of the show's main demographics was stay at home parents who in the 1980s were predominantly mothers. Beyond hearing the musings of celebrities and out of control teenagers, Donahue also tailored his show to the concerns of families.

Millions of households tuned in across the country in 1981 to hear a different kind of guest. While not a major celebrity, John Holt had a cult following. Holt was a career homeschooling and unschooling advocate, and thousands of viewing parents across nationwide leaned closer to their television screens, curious about how to better educate their children. 1981 was a year of flux for America. The inauguration of Ronald Reagan's ushered in an era of new conservatism, Walter Cronkite signed off for the last time on March 6, and the economy began to tumble in June to name a few pivotal events. If anything, 1981 seemed to mark the beginning of a new era in American history as the nation now moved towards a new millennium. In the beginning of his interview, with a backdrop of a captivated audience, Donahue asked Holt a simple but fundamental question: in one sentence, how would he fix public schools? He sat up in his chair and gave a quick but thorough response which was surprising considering the complexity of this changing world. Judging by his mannerisms, he had been asked this question

many times. He confidently asserted that schools should be smaller, teachers should be the bosses of their own classroom, and parents should have a variety of school choices. Although Holt was a committed homeschooling advocate, his words spoke more deeply to his dedication as an educational reformer. His response was especially prescient to 1980s audiences. With the rise of technology in an increasingly globalized and complicated world, a simple answer was something that many were ardently seeking. In examining the underlying context of Holt's words, one can bring into view the elaborate and deep history of American education reform.

The history of American education is a rich and complex topic that touches millions of lives every year. Starting with the first compulsory schooling laws in 1852, the American public education system has become one of the largest government institutions. American public education is a complicated web of federal agencies, state governments, and municipal districts of which an overwhelming majority of American children attend year in and year out. In the last year alone over 56 million children, or over 85% of the overall American population under 18, attended a public school, rode the bus, ate lunch in a cafeteria, and crammed for a math test.¹

As with any public institution, there are always groups committed to reform and education is not exempt. Given the immense diversity of American children, whether it be by race, intellectual ability, income level, or any other identity, public education must satisfy a wide range of individuals. Holt's primary thesis in his answer, reforming the school to better focus on the child, harkened back to a specific educational reform movement: progressive education. Progressive education emerged from the progressive movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, promising that developments in science, social organization, and political philosophy would propel society into a prosperous new era. Progressive education's fit in progressive era

politics was that through education reform, progressive educators would create a new generation of creative, bright, democratic thinkers to lead the new world.

Progressive education had two distinct intellectual schools, administrative and pedagogical. Administrative progressivism refers to the scientific application of data analysis, a product of industrial revolution efficiency and economies of school.² Although strongly influenced by pedagogical progressives, administrative progressivism was primarily concerned with running the bureaucracy of schools more efficiently. Pedagogical progressive education refers to the philosophical and intellectual pedagogical theory of progressive education which grew out of the larger progressive movement most strongly associated with John Dewey.³ Pedagogical progressivism played a largely unacknowledged role in the rise, development, and philosophy of contemporary homeschooling. Dewey conceived that through a democratic education, the school would create the model citizen, fulfilling the vision of progressivism. He was heavily influenced by romanticism and built upon the ideas of eighteenth-century French intellectual Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others by using his progressive schooling as a way to unlock the democratic and intellectual potential of the child. Through pragmatic and hands-on learning, a new type of education could be formed one that is a “miniature community... [an] embryonic society.”⁴ Deweyism laid the groundwork of the pedagogical progressive education movement, contributing its most basic tenets of the potential of the child, individualized attention, and the physical transformation of the classroom space which, in the process, played a surprisingly and seemingly counterintuitive important role in the philosophies of John Holt and others who rejected public education. Dewey’s philosophies were the strongest driver of child-focused pedagogy that helped influence contemporary homeschooling.

Although Dewey contributed some of pedagogical progressive education's most essential traits, there were many other figures whose philosophies and experiences were essential to pedagogical progressive education and helped lay the groundwork for contemporary homeschooling. Helen Parkhurst played an indispensable role in the development of progressive education, but with far less acclaim. She was a pragmatist, primarily concerned with solving the issues in the classroom with logic and common sense. She worked closely with Maria Montessori and influenced other scholars like Carleton Washburne, who also paved the way for Holt. Carleton Washburne took individualized learning and scientific educational organization into a public-school setting. He strongly advocated for psychological services for all students, a fundamental part of his legacy which helped fostered discussions of student mental health and its relationship to the school. Looking at Dewey, Parkhurst, and Washburne together creates a more complete vision of pedagogical progressive education and each contributed essential tenets to contemporary homeschooling philosophy. While the progressive education movement faded in the 1950s after the Progressive Education Association (PEA) disbanded in 1959, a new generation of homeschoolers began to dominate the alternative education landscape having strong, understudied ties to progressive education.⁵ Although historians have categorized homeschooling as a separate intellectual tradition and it did have significant departures from progressive education, it grew out of a larger progressive vision of education.

The definition of homeschooling is vague and malleable, but overall, homeschooling refers to an educational instructional method that is done in the home, outside of official institutions of learning with a tutor, parent, or other instructor. Homeschooling was a popular choice for Americans as far back as the colonial era, extending through the first years of the republic. Homeschooling was and still is a classed experience; even Thomas Jefferson had the

luxury of private tutors. During the early and mid-nineteenth century, homeschooling was widely practiced as rural children were needed on farms and compulsory schooling laws were decades away. Although homeschooling faded in popularity due to rising public school enrollment in the late nineteenth century, homeschooling found a niche, but strong community. In the twentieth century, many of the families who homeschooled were conservative Evangelical Christians buttressed by a strong leftist tradition of homeschooling under the tutelage of John Holt and other leftist pedagogues. As the conservative 1950s turned into the radical 1960s, homeschooling took on a new leftist look.⁶

Many scholars have studied progressive education and homeschooling from both a historical and contemporary perspective. From a historical perspective, the research is exemplary but sometimes too linear. The educational historian Milton Gaither offers in his recent book *Homeschool: An American History* (2017) a thoroughly researched history of American homeschooling. His work is well versed, but his narrow focus on the roots of homeschooling is limiting. He traces the origins of homeschooling to the first settlers in colonial America all the way up to John Holt and the contemporary homeschooling movement. What he fails to interrogate is that homeschooling had roots in other pedagogical movements, namely progressive education. In Lawrence Cremin's work, *Transformation of the School* (1961), he painted a similarly linear picture of progressive education, one that follows a clear arc from Horace Mann's revolutionary idea of universal education to the disbandment of the Progressive Education Association in 1959. He claimed that while progressive education had lost its viability in the 1960s, perhaps its rebirth only needed "the reformation and resuscitation that would ultimately derive from a larger resurgence of reform in American life and thought."⁷ And this is exactly what would happen. The reformist spirit of the 1960s led to a resurgence of

homeschooling and the creation of unschooling, a homeschooling philosophy geared toward an entirely student directed learning experience where all teaching stemmed from the topic a student was interested in. Even the religious homeschoolers who became the face of homeschooling in the late twentieth still trace their roots back to pedagogical progressive education. While Cremin and Gaither are excellent scholars, they overlooked important links between progressive education and homeschooling.

Through the lens of John Holt and the unschooling movement, this study links the progressive education movement with leftist homeschooling tradition and in later iterations of contemporary evangelical homeschooling. In the 1960s and 1970s, Holt saw many of the same issues in education that Dewey saw in the 1890s, but Holt applied his observations and arrived at a radically different conclusion: homeschooling was the best way to address the problems of public education. The method of progressive education was creating a democratic community through individual and classroom reform, but Holt saw change through unstructured individual learning. Although community was important to Holt, he saw less utility in using a classroom setting as he felt that so many students had been scarred by the emotional and physical violence of schools.

While some scholars have overlooked these connections, this thesis offers two important contributions. For one, both of these movements interrogated similar issues of education reform, namely student freedom, individualist learning opportunities, and the mental hygiene of the student. These traits are the core to their similarities despite being discounted by other scholars. Although historians have typically viewed them as distinct movements, the lines between them may be more blurred than previously considered. This study reveals in a larger sense the ways the different educational movements communicate. This study asserts that contemporary

homeschooling both implicitly and explicitly borrowed from progressive education, representing deep intellectual ties between the two movements

To highlight how contemporary homeschooling emerged from the principles of progressive education, this project begins with a brief history of progressive education and its overarching beliefs. The three subsequent sections outline and analyze the ideas Dewey, Parkhurst, and Washburne and how they paved the way for homeschooling. These sections establish the major tenets and developments of progressive education, creating a holistic view of pedagogical progressive education to help understand its role in the formulation of contemporary homeschooling. Although progressive education's popularity fell in the 1950s, it still held a strong influence over the development of contemporary homeschooling. A subsequent chapter on the rise of homeschooling and an analysis of Holt's philosophies of homeschooling theory reveals unstudied connections between the homeschooling movement and progressive education. This chapter also includes a discussion of how the homeschooling movement evolved after Holt, and still drew upon its connections to progressive education. To conclude, the thesis suggests that the lessons learned from this comparative analysis can aid in the recovery of education in a post-COVID environment. While still the current moment, the applicability of pedagogical progressivism and contemporary homeschooling reflects its ongoing pertinence, and that current education is still in dialogue with these historical movements.

Chapter 1: On the Origins of Progressive Education

To foreground a discussion of progressive education and how it influenced homeschooling, it is essential to evaluate the educational and historical context by which progressive education arose. Massachusetts passed the first compulsory schooling laws in 1852, initiating a trend that would spread to the entire country. Early advocates of public schooling

such as Horace Mann pioneered universal access to public education. Mann believed that the best way to turn children into good American citizens was through compulsory public education, not unlike what Dewey believed decades later.⁸ Educational reformers sought to unlock the potential of children through access to education as there was a strong belief that a common, basic level of education would be the great societal equalizer.⁹ By the mid nineteenth century, public school enrollment reached new heights, with over 65% of all children aged five through seventeen enrolled in public school.¹⁰ Reconstruction was a time of dramatic transformation and experimentation in education as so many children were in schools and the scope of the federal government increased. While early education reformers like Barnas Sears, J.L. M. Curry, and Calvin Woodward preceded the progressive movement, the work of Woodward was an early whisper of progressive education.¹¹ In 1874, he pioneered a “hands-on” education style, contending that the future demanded “not only men of knowledge, but men of skill.”¹² While hands-on learning and apprenticeships had existed for centuries, he was one of the first to conceive apprenticeships as pedagogy.¹³ Woodward’s manual training movement preceded progressive education as it was late nineteenth and early twentieth century industrialization that created the social, economic, and political conditions that prompted reformers to look at schools more critically as a laboratories to create democratic citizens.

The rapid pace of technology moved millions of unskilled workers and their families into cities. From the expansion of railroads to Alexander Graham Bell’s telephone in 1876, the late nineteenth century technology was an era of rapid technological and societal change propelling the United States towards a cosmopolitan future. Unrestrained capitalistic labor practices forced these millions of families into horrific working conditions, alarming romantics and liberals alike.

To the reform minded romantic, nature was receding in favor of the city and the soul of humanity was deteriorating.

The rise of progressive education was a consequence of these societal changes. The progressive magazine, *The Forum*, in its 1892 edition found that schools were underfunded, understaffed, and importantly, lacked creativity.¹⁴ *The Forum* also noted that schools were still rife with earnest, hardworking teachers who were victims of an uncaring system, providing hope to a dire outlook. In the eyes of progressive educators, the combination of rapidly expanding capitalism and ineffective schools was a recipe for disaster for future generations.

Progressive education had many definitions, contributors, and detractors but there were a few central traits that guided all reformers. First and foremost, progressive education was child focused with an emphasis on hands-on education to make the teaching experience more practical. Pedagogical progressives sought to make the schooling experience more useful for children by focusing on connections between the school and industry. Most closely associated with John Dewey, social responsibility and democracy were to be cornerstones of the learning experience. His belief that school reform could create a competent, democratic citizen, one prepared for an uncertain technological future became a pillar of progressive education. Progressive education was also forward looking, seeking to predict the needs of the future by educating the children of the present. But most important were the impulses and interests of the student. Pedagogical progressive education's break with Victorian style of teaching was that student interest was of the highest priority. But these core tenets and dogmas did not appear overnight; beginning with Dewey, the development of progressive education and how it evolved created a complicated history that other reformers and movements like contemporary homeschooling have adopted.

Chapter Two: Dewey's Pedagogical Progressivism

John Dewey is undoubtedly the father of pedagogical progressive education. He was born in 1859, coming of age in the midst of late industrialization and the Gilded Age, and the consequential societal change drove his fervent reform efforts. He, like other scholars in this study, began his career as a public-school teacher. In 1879, Dewey graduated from the University of Vermont and took a teaching position in Oil City, Pennsylvania.¹⁵ After he decided he was unsuited for primary school teaching, he pursued a PhD in philosophy at Johns Hopkins University. At Johns Hopkins, his educational philosophies developed under the influence of socially minded philosophers G. Stanley Hall and George Sylvester Morris.¹⁶ Although Hall informed Dewey of the importance of experimental methods, Morris was the stronger influencer of the two. Morris' neo-Hegelian worldview allowed Dewey to think in an interdisciplinary way and he was able to view philosophy as not just an intellectual exercise, but one that could foster social change.¹⁷ This kind of interdisciplinary work allowed Dewey to reconstruct history as a tool that could bring tangible social change to the present.

Dewey's career began to flourish upon his graduation from Johns Hopkins in 1894. After a brief stint teaching at the University of Michigan from 1884 to 1894, he took a position at the newly minted University of Chicago in 1894. By the time he was teaching at the University of Chicago, he had already published two well received texts, *Psychology* and *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*. His experience with social philosophy expanded his horizons and he would pull from this experience to create an interdisciplinary philosophy. Perhaps Dewey's most important introduction was to Jane Addams of Hull House. Hull House was the first of hundreds of settlement houses in Chicago, housing the overwhelming new population of urban poor.¹⁸ Dewey served on the board of trustees for Hull House, commenting that it exposed him to the

reality of “low wages, [the] labor of women and children, bad factory conditions... [as] characteristics of capitalistic oppression.”¹⁹ To cultivate a solution to these ills, Dewey looked to the school.

For Dewey, “a wasted education is a waste of a human life,” and he wrote extensively about his methods and possible solutions for modern schooling.²⁰ Contending that the “gravity” of the school was outside of the child, his gravitational metaphor became one of his most easily identifiable mantras.²¹ The mechanical nature of Victorian era schooling was uninspired with obedience and conformity prioritized over the practical and intellectual capabilities of the students. The “exorbitant desire for uniformity of procedure” was “the chief foe which the open-minded attitude meets in schools,” surmising that the current method of schooling was antithetical to the core of what learning meant.²² The main way to reform was to make the classroom where “he [the student] is the center about which... [things] are organized.”²³ Dewey found that when students were allowed to learn unconstrained from the demands of teachers and by their own impulse, school became “a joy, management less of a burden, and learning [as] easier.”²⁴ Dewey strongly focused on improving the experience of learning and this was the core component of his reform efforts.

Deweyism was chiefly concerned with the child’s individual wellbeing as it pertained to their position in the classroom and in the wider civic community. He conceived that the school should be an extension of the community, harkening back to an era where children were more communally raised. “Here [the school] individualism and socialism are at one” he proclaimed, tying the health of the student to the community.²⁵ He valued other members of the community, specifically parents, stating “what the best and wisest parents wants for his own child that must the community want for all of its children.”²⁶ The community was the first place of learning for

students as “the very process of living together educates,” representing his belief that schooling is a communal process in a democratic community.²⁷ Although advocating for school reform, Dewey remained close to the home, emphasizing that the health of the home and community was just as important as health in the classroom. This integrated focus opened the door for conversations about pedagogical progressivism in homeschooling. In reforming the classroom, Dewey provided philosophical and tangible changes.

In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey outlined a five-step process for instruction that would create the kind of democratically oriented, creative leader the future needed. This five-step process outlined his constructivist view of education. First, there would have to be a continuous activity which students were genuinely interested in and allowing for that interest to be spurred unconsciously. As a problem develops, solving this issue becomes its own stimulus of interest. The students must then work to possess knowledge to make observations and suggest solutions that must be developed in an orderly fashion. The final step was that students must have an opportunity to apply their observations to a new situation.²⁸ These steps were steeped in the Enlightenment tradition, following a scientific method of trial and error. What Dewey added to the classroom was this experimentation that would come to define progressive education. This process combined with genuine, unconsciously derived interest, would be the mechanism in which through genuine instruction would take place.

In a Deweyan classroom, there was a strong emphasis on hands-on learning. Dewey argued that while the innovations of the modern age were great, they have fundamentally changed the way society learned.²⁹ Learning was now an increasingly fluid exercise with more knowledge being produced than ever before, but the school had yet to fully adapt. The “present scheme of generous, liberal culture” that Dewey describes warns that schools were undervaluing

hands on learning like woodworking or cooking.³⁰ This kind of physical learning emphasized the process of creation which fostered a deeper understanding of the world for children growing up in an increasingly commodity rich society. Dewey identified that the issue with current schooling was that the typical subject matter did not naturally stimulate interest. For Dewey, good experience only occurs when “it partakes in the interests, purposes, and ideas current in the social group.”³¹ And good experiences were the core to education. For a student to learn, they must have some personal connection or interest in the subject matter. Artificially making students learn a topic that does not pique their interest is ineffective as it does not follow his view of stimuli. Unschooler John Holt would take this idea even further, advocating for entirely unstructured and student led learning. Dewey’s conception that learning must have some intellectual stimuli and physical process strongly influenced Holt’s ideas about an unschooled learner. Whether it be intellectual or manual, learning must be a social process that requires students to interact with themselves, the group and wider society. And so, community and experience were fundamentally intertwined, furthering Dewey’s constructivist view of education.

In, *The School and Society* (1900), Dewey provided several charts and diagrams which reflected the physical application of his ideas. Schools would be closely connected to the home, businesses, community parks and technical research.³² Dewey also called for an “industrial museum” where children could inspect and marvel at the innovations of the technical world. The confluence of the school, the community, and business was both a theoretical and tangible reform effort. As much as the philosophy driving education would change, so too would the physical landscape that students learned in. Dewey believed that students should learn by discovering and solving their own problems, an assertion that many future progressive educators and homeschoolers would echo. Dewey, like other progressive educators, was also concerned

with developmental milestones for children. As this kind of learning is highly personalized, Dewey promoted a balance between self-instruction and group work.

How Dewey separated himself from the larger progressive movement was that his solutions to the political, social, and economic issues that permeated through the turn of the 20th century was through education. Dewey saw that the world was fundamentally changing; “through it the face the earth is making over, even as to its physical forms; political boundaries are wiped out and moved about.”³³ His acute awareness of these changes added a layer of expediency to his ideas. Although a critic of the new era, he still saw potential for the future. To radically change society, one must look to the schools to create a new generation of bright, democratically oriented leaders willing to embrace reform. When Dewey was teaching at the University of Chicago, he had an opportunity to put these radical reform efforts into practice.

Dewey’s experimental laboratory school, which he operated between 1896 through 1904, has been called “the most important experimental venture in the whole history of American education.”³⁴ It was experimental in the purest sense, as its purpose was not to be a practical school; it was built to test his ideas with the ultimate hope that this school would become the foundation for widespread schooling reform. Dewey incorporated all of his ideas holistically: from organizing curriculum around the natural impulses of the child to promoting the future needs of an industrial and progressive society.³⁵ Within the classroom, learning began with the most fundamental human needs, prioritizing learning basic skills that pertained to food, clothing, and shelter.³⁶ These were considered occupations, not subject matter, and traditional subjects like literature, art, and history were seamlessly incorporated into the occupations.³⁷ Dewey presented a unique curriculum, one that was specifically intended to “converse, transmit, and advance culture.”³⁸

Dewey's conception and reconfiguration of history as a discipline provided a look into his overall views on pedagogy. He stressed the usefulness of history as an analytical method, one that children could utilize to think critically when faced with decisions outside the school.³⁹ For Dewey, teaching history was less about battles and dates and more about "how society has grown to be what it is."⁴⁰ Historical instruction operated on a linear path, beginning with pre-historic humanity and continuing to the use of iron and on Homeric Greece.⁴¹ His interpretation of history also expanded on developmental lines; as students learned more about other fields, specifically reading and writing, Dewey would complicate the narrative by incorporating the everyday lives of ancient Greeks. By approaching history in this manner, Dewey recreated history "as a means of social inquiry" in that history had new bearing on the present.⁴² In his own words, "by knowing the social and intellectual conditions which arose a given industrial device, plan of government, or type of scientific interest and theory, and by presenting that to the child in connection with its social and human content, we put him in the simplest and freest attitude towards it."⁴³ Dewey recreated subject matter to have literal purpose to the current moment. No longer would history be a mindless series of names, dates, and battles. It would serve a vital function in the development of understanding the most effective ways to lead the future. The function of this primacy was to promote a democratic education, one that was rife within his schools and his philosophy.

Democracy and education were intertwined for Dewey. To prepare students for an uncertain future, they must become creative, democratically oriented leaders who can challenge existing structures. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey presented three conceptions of education; the Platonic, the Enlightened individualistic education, and the rise of state education in the nineteenth century, none of which Dewey found entirely successful. But Dewey did

partially agree with the notion and utility as a function of state building. Dewey's "devotion to democracy" rests in the fact that he viewed democracy as not just a political system, but as a communal way of life.⁴⁴ A democratic education would perpetuate the democratic way of life. For Dewey, an ideal society was one in which "the interests of the groups are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which is interacts with other groups" must be assured.⁴⁵ In order to achieve this, schools must act as societal equalizers, ones where every student can be prepared for their corporate and philosophical futures.

Overall, Deweyism was the platform on which progressive education was built. Dewey balanced the requirements of a corporate future with a democratic education, creating students who would be prepared for a more diverse world. His conception of the child was someone who's desires, interests, and skills were essential to the future of pedagogy and wider society. He brought the community, individual, and industry into one building. More broadly, Dewey saw education as a process in which learning continued outside the confines of the school, helping lay the foundation for contemporary homeschooling. He strongly advocated for the professionalization of teachers, reflecting from his time at Hull House. A Deweyist education was also meant to be applicable to a diverse array of real-life situations. There were many aspects of Deweyism that would find their way into later pedagogical trains of thought, even those well outside the traditional classroom, and these effects are still being evaluated to this day.

Generations of scholars would debate, support, and decry Dewey, cementing his legacy in both education reform and popular culture. Dewey was one of the most influential American educators of the twentieth century, inspiring scholars decades later. One of the more curious aspects of progressive education was that for other figures, reform that helped build homeschooling came naturally. Helen Parkhurst, inventor of the Dalton plan, left a tremendous

legacy on progressive education as well, but the two never officially crossed paths despite Dewey's daughter taking a great interest in the Dalton plan and Parkhurst's own time studying at Columbia University. Through her own hands-on work, Parkhurst would come to many of the same conclusions as Dewey, calling for radical changes to both the physical space of the classroom and to the methods of teaching. Her pragmatic methods furthered the experimental aspects of pedagogical progressivism, tackling student needs as they came, while pioneering individualized work and maintaining a close relationship with student homes. These tenets differentiated her from Dewey while contributing to core philosophies of contemporary homeschooling.

Chapter 3: A Rural Wisconsinite Prodigy Becomes a Progressive Pillar

Helen Parkhurst was a progressive educator of a younger generation. Born in 1886, Parkhurst began her teaching career just as Dewey founded his laboratory school. Growing up in the small town of Durand, Wisconsin, she had long been interested in education and began her career teaching in 1904 at a rural school in Waterville, Wisconsin.⁴⁶ Her experimental style was perfect for this era as Wisconsin was a leader in progressive politics due in large part to the efforts of governor and future senator Robert M. La Follette. At the age of 17, and already equipped with a college degree from Wisconsin State Teaching College, Parkhurst began radically changing her classroom. She dramatically altered the interior of the classroom, bringing desks closer together to maximize her view of all students and encourage student collaboration, echoing Dewey's ideas about the physical reform of the school. Her time teaching in Waterville was brief but important as the rural class setting gave her almost unlimited freedom to experiment.

In 1905, Parkhurst moved to a larger school in Edison, Wisconsin and taught five classes, grades four through eight.⁴⁷ Many of the students in her early classes were farmers or the children of farmers, less concerned with the importance of education and more with their family farms. Her rural origins shaped her philosophies as she sought to embed herself in all aspects of the classroom, something that only a small and unsupervised classroom would allow. She saw problems and solved them in the most practical way she knew how: by attempting to provide what she believed the students wanted and needed. In the years after 1905, she attained her formal teaching certificate and spent time at Columbia University and then at the University of Rome studying under Maria Montessori, an experience that no doubt opened her eyes to other thinkers and likeminded progressives of her day.⁴⁸ Maria Montessori was the founder of the Montessori method, a scientific child focused pedagogical system that became widely popular throughout the world in the early and mid-twentieth century. Although Parkhurst or Dewey never mentioned it, Parkhurst completed her graduate work at Columbia while Dewey was a faculty member.

Her seminal text, *Education on the Dalton Plan*, described her philosophies and experiences teaching in Dalton, Massachusetts in 1912. Parkhurst's classroom in Dalton was the educational laboratory where she fine-tuned her work done in Wisconsin. In her own words, the Dalton plan "is a scheme of educational reorganization which reconciles the twin activities of teaching and learning," echoing the cooperative language of Dewey.⁴⁹ In *Education on the Dalton Plan*, she declared freedom and cooperation as the two most important principles.⁵⁰ Freedom to Parkhurst meant something very specific the freedom to undertake tasks and learn at one's own pace. She claimed that "a child never voluntarily undertakes anything that he does not understand," decrying the ways that schooling forced children to learn things too foreign to spark

passion.⁵¹ This ideology fell in line with Dewey's philosophy that the core of learning came from unconscious student interest and later unschooling advocates would take this idea even further, designing education entirely around the intellectual impulses of the student.

A Parkhurst classroom was an extension of greater society, declaring that the classroom was equal parts a fluid social community as it was a place of learning. Just like in civic society, one must contribute to that community to be accepted by it.⁵² Before children were students, they were actors in their local community, and there was no reason that civic community should end at the classroom. Here Parkhurst echoed Dewey views of the relationship between community and the classroom, representing a common understanding on the role of society in education.⁵³ Parkhurst also respected the agency and intelligence of the student, claiming that no student nor teacher should ever shirk from the responsibility they have within the community.⁵⁴ This responsibility also extended to their tasks, and much of her classroom had a corporatist, practical mindset. Her respect of the student was heavily influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson was a foundational American transcendentalist thinker, priding individualism against the constraints of society and promoting a liberal arts education to foster independent thinking. Parkhurst began *Education on the Dalton Plan* by commenting that Emerson was the first American thinker to realize that "our educational system was a failure because the ideals upon which it had been founded had lost their meanings."⁵⁵ Although a pragmatist, she was still enmeshed in a larger philosophical and, more importantly, pedagogical universe. An essential qualifier for Parkhurst's view of student freedom was a belief in their intelligence.

Parkhurst also contended that children were capable enough to see their entire educational path all at once, not broken into small pieces like a typical school did. She saw the incredible energy and potential within students to learn when in a proper environment, and the

Dalton plan was a means to hone that energy in a productive manner. This romantic view of the child, a being with untapped energy and potential, was an important tenet of progressive education's philosophy, aligning her with other figures like Dewey, Washburne, and John Holt, and perhaps in a surprising way. Perhaps Parkhurst's most important philosophy was that the classroom was a place of experimentation where it was perpetually subject to change according to the scientific method.⁵⁶ She would constantly shift lesson plans, reorder seating assignments, and introduce new projects to test their effectiveness, building on Dewey's belief in educational experimentation.

Parkhurst radically experimented in both the physical space of the classroom and in the ways that students learned. She shrank classes and created small groups of students to bring teachers closer to the students but allowed students to seek help from each other.⁵⁷ Changes to physical spacing achieved many different goals from encouraging collaboration to better classroom management as teachers could easily see and reach all students. For students and teachers, the most impactful physical transformation of the classroom was the approach to schoolwork. To best mirror the corporate world, students in Parkhurst's classroom would sign a contract with the teacher on when they would complete their assignment.⁵⁸ These contracts were also standardized, with all students regardless of grade or ability level signing the same contract, preparing students for a corporate future. These agreements strengthened the agency of the student as they were able to set their own expectations. Students were also able to renegotiate a contract with a teacher to achieve the most successful outcome. Although a teacher could override a contract if the students request was outlandish, her contracts represented the trust she had in a student's ability to take their own educational path. Despite Parkhurst's mission to

educate students for a corporate world may feel conservative in today's society, she balanced freedom and good experience with preparedness for the future.

Parkhurst also developed reform efforts geared towards teachers, with a specific focus on efficiency. For the teachers of the Dalton plan, she offered scientific innovations in organization. Her "graph" method was invented as a way to organize grading, attendance, and behavioral comments more effectively. She realized that her changes would put more pressure on teachers to conform to a new system, so helping them organize more effectively would be essential in order to be most effective. In her own words, these graphs would mark "his day on the basis of his accomplishment as he goes on, just as a time contractor is paid for his job."⁵⁹ These graphs became the most recognizable hallmark of Parkhurst's philosophy, as they clearly represented her combination of pragmatism, corporatism, and belief in student intelligence.

Parkhurst's methods were well received, and her schools had high retention rates. Between 1912 and 1929, her laboratory school moved locations from Dalton, Massachusetts to various midwestern cities, and finally settled for good in New York City in 1929, where it continues to operate today.⁶⁰ From a small Wisconsin town to the Upper West Side of New York, her laboratory school became private adding a barrier for economically disadvantaged students. Economic inequality became an issue for private progressive schools with high tuitions and Holt sought to tackle these issues through homeschooling. Parkhurst herself was enmeshed in all facets of school life; from visiting parents and students at home to running her own classes, Parkhurst was described by a Dalton administrator as "a benevolent, creative, autocrat."⁶¹ Regardless, her presence was still very popular with students and families. Yet, even at a private institution, she constantly battled with school boards and oversight committees over her control of the school and these tensions led to her retirement in 1942.

The Dalton plan also found success and criticism internationally. From England to Denmark to Japan, it found likeminded teachers and enjoyed some mainstream success. Yet, international audiences were some of Parkhurst's harshest critics. In Ireland, commentator Thomas Corcoran commented that the Dalton plan was reminiscent of classic Irish education, with the worksheets and contracts too corporate for some.⁶² An English teacher by the name of Mary Hargrave commented that she changed the language around homework from "job" to "assignment" to lower the perceived stakes of homework, reflecting that the corporate language was harsh for some.⁶³ Some educators also found difficulty with the many graphs and tables used to keep contracts in order. What is clear is that the Dalton plan was niche. It came at a specific moment for a specific audience, requiring intense dedication from teachers and administrators to work cooperatively as the classroom dramatically changed. Corcoran considered the Dalton plan a knock off, a novelty idea rather than a real revolutionary movement despite its long-term success.⁶⁴

While the Dalton plan found some long-lasting success, contemporary scholars have not made strong enough distinctions between her and Dewey. A comparative analysis of Dewey and Parkhurst, however, highlights important differences between the two, representing Parkhurst's own distinct impact on progressive education and how her specific contributions helped evolve contemporary homeschooling. Although Parkhurst mentioned Dewey throughout *Education on the Dalton Plan*, she departed from him and created her own methods that shaped the way progressive education was implemented and radical education was conceptualized. For example, while Dewey believed that the community that increased freedom fostered under the Dalton plan was a secondary effect. While both agreed that students learn sociality through experience, Parkhurst saw that the free movement of students throughout the classroom was sufficient to

create a healthy community.⁶⁵ Dewey conceived that to create the democracy he so passionately advocated for, experiences had to be more structured. Both Dewey and Parkhurst would likely agree that free movement throughout the classroom was positive, but their differences were defined by how structured social interactions should be.

Parkhurst's interpretation of student freedom was less structured than Dewey, fostering community and good experience through creativity and independent thinking. She stood against educational indoctrination, claiming that "we must not limit the pupil by chaining him to our ideas ... and permit him to have ideas of his own."⁶⁶ This rhetoric is strikingly reminiscent of Holt's unschooling philosophies. Parkhurst's assignments were inherently individual, with the student and teacher coming to an agreement independently. Parkhurst's contracts were built on Dewey and Emerson's ideas of individualism and were furthered by Holt where in a homeschool, all assignments are inherently between student and teacher.

While progressive education was in part a political movement, Parkhurst furthered that many of the problems facing the classroom could be solved by practical solution, many of which homeschoolers would embrace. If not enough students were receiving enough attention, break them into smaller groups. If it would create better work to have students independently decide when their work was due then so be it. As illustrated above, Parkhurst was not without philosophy, but she had more pressing concerns. Progressive education was so much more than Dewey and by expanding progressive education to the work of Parkhurst, important parallels can be drawn with thinkers from different eras like John Holt. Additionally, by demonstrating the differences and influences of Dewey and Parkhurst it can more clearly illustrate the ways that their individual philosophies were adopted by contemporary homeschoolers decades later.

Helen Parkhurst was and still is an essential figure in progressive education scholarship. She was chiefly concerned with process more than she was with product, rarely seeking to alter curriculum and instead focused on modifying the way that students learned. She deconstructed the dense educational philosophies presented by Dewey and other thinkers and reconstructed them in a most practical way, reminiscent of Holt's straightforward style. Her practicality expanded the conceptual universe for progressive education, ultimately paving the way for future reformers like Holt to conceive of their reforms through similar methods. Her unique approach led to her international popularity as the Dalton plan's implementation did not require an intense overhaul of the curriculum. She popularized and articulated more simply the complaints teachers had been having for years and offered compelling reforms. She elevated progressive education onto larger platforms by combining the philosophies of progressive education with an individualist style of education which was her fundamental break with Dewey. This style was the foundation of other progressive educators, but also an inspiration for contemporary homeschooling as Parkhurst was tied more to her own work than to that of progressive education doctrine.

As Lawrence Cremin discussed in *Transformation of the School*, by the twentieth century, progressive education began to factionalize, with some educators clinging to their own ideas instead of listening to the pace of society.⁶⁷ One of the central philosophies that became contentious as the movement grew was the importance of the individual or the group. Some sought to combine both; by focusing on the individual, one could cultivate the correct democratic community. Parkhurst was committed to the individual and other scholars such as Carleton Washburne employed an individualist lens to his progressive school in Winnetka, Illinois.

Chapter Three: Carleton Washburne, A Midwestern Pedagogue on a Mission

Carleton Washburne was another important figure to the progressive education movement and his contributions to the pedagogy of contemporary homeschooling have been overlooked. Born in 1889, he was of Parkhurst's generation. He began his career as an educator and school administrator in the 1910s, right at the height of the progressive era but died before the explosion of the radical politics of the 1960s. Compared to Dewey and Parkhurst, Washburne was of a higher socio-economic class. His parents were committed to alternative education methods and he attended Chicago Illinois' Francis W. Parker School, a world-renowned private progressive institution.⁶⁸ As a child, Carleton was enmeshed in a world of progressive education which helped guide his principles. While he would focus his career on reforming a public-school system, he did not have a negative public schooling experience that those like John Holt had many years later.

Although Washburne received an excellent progressive education, he took a very Parkhurstian direction to his teaching career. He spent three years at Stanford studying medicine but realized in 1911 that medicine was not his calling.⁶⁹ He instead took a job teaching at a rural California school. His first teaching job in 1912 was at a two-room schoolhouse in La Puente, California, a rural, poor district east of Los Angeles. While his own educational experience did not expose him to the ills of the public education system that someone like Dewey or Holt would describe, his time in La Puente did. The entire school of about 50 children were confined to two rooms and taught by one man who acted as the teacher and principal.⁷⁰ This principal informed Washburne that he had lost control of the students as many of them were farmhands who came to school to avoid work.⁷¹ Washburne had his work cut out for him and behavioral modification became a core component of his Winnetka Plan.

In 1912, the state of California had yet to implement any restrictions on elementary school teachers and anyone with a college degree could teach. Like Parkhurst, Washburne was learning on his feet, but he had a strong progressive background to guide him. His classroom became a laboratory as he had little supervision and was able to change the classroom however he saw fit. As he was teaching every subject to the students, he could see beyond reforming single subjects, even conceptualizing how he might alter non-academic subjects like club activities, music, and art. Acting as teacher-principal, Washburne gained invaluable knowledge on the innerworkings of the school as a whole, something that Parkhurst and Dewey were also familiar with. But how Washburne came to create his experimental school was unlike the other thinkers.

In 1914, after his time teaching at La Puente, Washburne returned to Stanford to pursue a graduate degree in sociology, but his introduction to Frederick Burk, president of the San Francisco State Teachers College, turned him fully towards education.⁷² Burk became Washburne's most important connection, and the two worked together for decades.⁷³ Under Burk, he published his first books on educational psychology, *The Story of the Earth and Common Science* in 1916. In 1917, the board of education in Winnetka, Illinois was searching for a new superintendent and the board had long been familiar with the work of Burk and the San Francisco State Normal School.⁷⁴ Burk and his colleagues recommended Washburne for the job, and in 1919, at the age of 29, Washburne became the superintendent of Winnetka public schools.

Winnetka was not like Edison, Wisconsin where Parkhurst began her career. It was a small wealthy suburb of Chicago, similar to where Carleton had grown up. The board of education was looking for a specific kind of superintendent, one committed to progressive education and reform. The members of the board were a group of well to do white men

committed to improving public education.⁷⁵ While socioeconomic class was not of great importance to Washburne, the disparities between him and Parkhurst and later Holt are stark. Washburne maintained a close relationship with the school board, and he had the time, space, and money to more greatly expand his ideas in a public-school setting. His ideas in Winnetka intrigued school districts around the United States, demonstrating the Winnetka Plan's widespread influence.

Washburne began the Winnetka plan with a question that he and his colleagues would spend decades trying to answer: how and why were students failing and what could be done about it? Looking back on his time in La Puente, he wrote vigorously about this issue, commenting that many students were not academically or mentally ready for the grades they were sorted into.⁷⁶ He broke down the Winnetka plan into reforming subjects. From arithmetic, to writing, to extracurricular activities, he sought to reform both the intellectual and the physical space of the school.

Similar to Parkhurst, Washburne was committed to an individual style of learning. The school day was broken into two equal halves, one where the student worked independently on their assignments and the other committed to group and creative activities.⁷⁷ For their individual work, students would work at their own pace, setting goals and boundaries with their teachers, reminiscent of Parkhurst's contracts. Harkening back to Washburne's fundamental question, why children were failing, these individualized learning plans would not abruptly end at the end of a year; if a student did not finish their work within a school year, they would pick up where they left off in the fall.⁷⁸ This would allow the student to remain in the same social groups that were fundamental to their development without being pushed beyond what Washburne considered

their “mental age.” Teaching to the correct mental age was a primary consideration in teaching every subject.

Peering deeper into Washburne’s reform of individual subjects creates a more complete history of progressive education and the ways he separated himself from his academic colleagues. Like many educators, Washburne was perplexed by how difficult it was to effectively teach arithmetic. While progressive education was mainly focused on using education as a social platform, there was still a distinct focus on other disciplines. For arithmetic, and true for all other subjects, students were to teach themselves at their own pace through a series of worksheets and self-correct.⁷⁹ This reflected a larger progressive tenet through individualized education could foster a child’s unique skills and talents. Individualized learning would take on new and more creative pathways under Holt’s unschooling method. Washburne had an inherent trust in children to correct their own work; a belief rooted in romanticism that strongly influenced pedagogical progressives. Similar to Pankhurst’s grading system, Winnetka teachers were expected to keep meticulous records of their progress in arithmetic showing Washburne’s commitment to a scientific reorganization of the classroom. One of Washburne’s most interesting solutions to the problem with arithmetic was derived from the fundamental guide of teaching other subjects: mental age. Teaching arithmetic to students below their mental age for the subject matter would be useless, further representing his adherence to developmental psychology as a means to reform education.⁸⁰ Washburne’s adherence to mental age reflected the wider progressive trend of turning to science and social science as a path towards education reform. Although Washburne claimed that these issues solved the teaching of arithmetic in Winnetka, he did not provide any direct statistics that supported this claim.

How Winnetka taught reading and language arts was also consistent with some strategies used to teach arithmetic while adding some truly radical experimentation. Washburne observed that his students were failing at their reading goals at similar rates to arithmetic and applied the same strategies used to teach arithmetic. First, he sought to reform the curriculum in which students would read certain books and learn writing skills according to their mental age, not grade level.⁸¹ He determined that six and a half years old was the correct mental age to begin reading and criticized overzealous teachers and parents for pushing students to read below their mental age.⁸² Most boldly, Washburne delayed language arts classes for three years to a group of six year old students to observe its side effects on language acquisition and sociability.⁸³ He discovered that these experimental students were behind in their reading level after a few years but approached reading with far more “enthusiasm and zeal,” perhaps commenting on the connection between unstructured learning and student vigor.⁸⁴ Washburne’s experiment pushed the boundaries of traditional education, contending that traditional methods were not always the most effective and foreshadowed Holt’s unschooling methods.

While this group of children was a footnote in *Winnetka*, his experiment was a precursor to an even more radical schooling tradition: unschooling. Washburne’s academic experiment closely aligns with the unschooling movement; a method of teaching through pure experience conceptualized and popularized by John Holt. Looking at both arithmetic and language arts, Washburne claimed that Winnetka’s assignments took far less time and produced better results.⁸⁵ With this in mind, Washburne then turned to what he believed was of equal importance in a classroom: group and creative activities.

Although the Winnetka plan is remembered for its academic reforms, Washburne’s changes to group activities reflected his belief that the school also functioned as a place for group

socialization and professional development. The Winnetka plan was primarily concerned with creating an individual learning system for academic disciplines and did not see a need for individualization for other activities, thereby promoting group activities as much as other facets of the plan. Washburne claimed that there must be “a *distinction* between (a) individual mastery of the commonly needed skills and (b) the opportunity to develop one’s own personality in the group” echoing Dewey’s claims that socialization in the school was just as important as the subject matter.⁸⁶ The interplay between individualized learning and group socialization was one of the core philosophies of progressive education and Washburne embraced this and built upon it.

Students managed their clubs like corporations where the students maintained democratic control. This organization was reminiscent of Dewey’s conviction to merge business and academic interests, Parkhurst’s corporatist philosophies, and Holt’s push for student control over extracurricular activities. For example, the Winnetka school newspaper was run and managed by the students where they were encouraged to think of profit and cost savings.⁸⁷ As the Winnetka plan evolved through the decades, club management was increasingly turned over to the students and the organizations of extra-curricular activities became more democratic. Democratic control over student clubs and organizations was a point of emphasis for John Holt in his later work *Freedom and Beyond* (1995). Besides emulating the work environment, its purpose to help socialize students in a highly individualized learning environment balanced the impact that a new classroom would have on students.

For students who had trouble adjusting to the new plan or for students with learning disabilities, Washburne pioneered an extensive system of social workers and child psychologists. His concern with mental hygiene was not just a hallmark of progressive education, but the

cornerstone of Holt's unschooling philosophy. Washburne outlined that when the faculty identified a student that showed "symptoms of maladjustment," the student would be extensively interviewed by a psychiatrist, given intensive individualized instruction, and have the opportunity to meet with the principle and superintendent.⁸⁸ These evaluations would work through the school's Department of Educational Counsel, a group consisting of a psychiatrist, psychologist, a volunteer pediatrician, and four social workers.⁸⁹ Mental hygiene was of the utmost important for Washburne and was a fundamental part of Winnetka. Holt also reflected these ideas, highlighting that the role of the school went beyond academics; it was meant to inform all aspects of the child. Washburne claimed that this extensive system of interviews, meetings, and individualized learning was highly successful, eventually shrinking the Counsel to a psychiatrist and a social worker as their services were less needed.⁹⁰ This kind of bureaucratic reorganization reflects Washburne's adherence to administrative progressivism as well as his belief in educational and developmental psychology. Most importantly, these services were available to all children on the Winnetka plan. Ensuring the mental hygiene of all students was fundamental to Washburne and Holt's philosophies, reflecting a shared belief that emotional health was a core component to the learning experience. Although Holt argued that the bureaucratic nature of the school was inherently harmful to children, Washburne's pioneering method of mental hygiene highlighted a conversation on the role of the school in educating the whole child, a conversation that Holt would continue.

Compared to the Dalton plan, the Winnetka plan was more successful domestically and Washburne claimed that the United States Department of Education was interested in his ideas. In Washburne's own reflections on Winnetka, he claimed that over 550,000 copies of Winnetka's individualized workbooks were sold by 1963.⁹¹ Students, faculty, and administrators

held the Winnetka plan in high esteem, and the plan continued for decades. The Winnetka Plan still exists in spirit in Winnetka, Illinois today as one of their elementary schools is named after Carleton Washburne. The New York City public school system also took cues from Winnetka and consulted with Winnetka educators to create their own individual education program.⁹² But perhaps Washburne's most important contribution to the school system was the proliferation of social workers and therapists for students. Mental hygiene was a core component of the Winnetka plan as Washburne became an early advocate for individualized mental health services in schools.⁹³

Winnetka had mental health services available for every student, reaffirming his and progressive education's commitment to mental hygiene. Only a few decades later, John Holt wrote extensively about how accessibility to mental health services was still lacking. Although Washburne sought to aid student mental health in the school and Holt removed the child from the school, there is a consistent line of thinking that represents the impact that thinkers like Washburne had on unschooling advocates. Between reform in arithmetic, language arts, and group activities, the Winnetka plan was the confluence of individualized learning, group activities, and mental hygiene that was intended to fulfill the progressive vision. While Parkhurst pioneered individual learning out of necessity, Washburne carefully honed his pedagogy into a thoroughly described philosophy. Although Winnetka was an example of success, it was still niche, but it reflects an important legacy when considering the connections between progressive education and contemporary homeschooling. Winnetka, Illinois was and still is a wealthy Chicago suburb with a reform minded board of education, cooperative teachers, and the financial resources to implement Washburne's reforms. These advantages in Winnetka would be obstacles in other progressive schools, and the 1960s saw the fall of progressive education.

Chapter Four: The Death of Progressive Education?

By the 1960s, progressive education suffered a sharp decline in popularity and even progressive educators observed these trends. The co-author of *Winnetka*, Sidney Marland, commented in a later chapter that “perhaps the progressives made the mistake of too closely following... [the] persuasion that teachers should dare contrive a new social order.”⁹⁴ Here Marland highlighted one of progressive education’s fundamental challenges, that pushing for dramatic social change is often met with pushback. Perhaps some did not appreciate teachers as the arbiters of social change. By the mid twentieth century those opposed to large government, both federal and local, saw education reform and expansion as an extension of a bloated government. The difficulties presented to both educators and administrators with a progressive platform required specialized training, usually limiting progressive schools to wealthy counties or small communities. While beyond the scope of this project, racial and class-based inequality are inherently intertwined throughout all forms of education. Pedagogical progressive schools are inherently inaccessible for millions of lower income students, many of whom are people of color. These inequalities still inspire education reformers to fight for inclusion to this day. In Lawrence Cremin’s *Transformation of the School*, he provides a multifaceted answer to how and why progressive education began to lose its influence. His first claim was that of distortion. By the 1950s, progressive education was fractured, and these divisions were highly publicized with progressives moving farther from Dewey.⁹⁵ Without a cohesive voice, progressive education struggled to find its footing as an established ideology. A general swing back towards conservatism after the Second World War diminished the influence that radical political projects had, and progressive causes were not exempt from changes to societal values.⁹⁶

While not all of Cremin's theories for the fall of progressive education are relevant to this study, his claim of the normalization of progressive education is absolutely critical when considering the link between progressive education and contemporary homeschooling. As progressive education's ideology spread, many educators began to accept progressive education as good practice. Like many other radical movements, its more moderate aspects became adopted into the mainstream. Progressive education lost some of its appeal as a radical subversion of mainstream culture, both legitimizing and diminishing its influence. Perhaps Dewey's claim in *Experience and Education* that one day progressive education would become synonymous with good education partially came true.

This two-fold analysis, both acceptance and rejection, did not mean the progressive education's ideology disappeared. Progressive education lingered on at the Dalton school and in the minds of many educators while leaving a significant impact in overlooked movements like contemporary homeschooling. Beginning with the radical social change of the 1960s, education reform once again became a contentious issue. Mass protest, feminist movements, and the struggle for civil rights threatened American exceptionalism and some Americans turned back to a familiar institution to project their fears for the next generation: schools. Parents found similar issues with education in the 1960s that they had in the 1880s: understaffed schools, oversized classrooms, and little individualized attention for their children. This time, a new educational movement, imbued with progressive rhetoric and the social revolution of the 1960s emerged, finding strange allies with the religious right. Perhaps the death of progressive education had been exaggerated. It was making an unsuspected comeback by way of homeschooling.

Like progressive education, homeschooling was a fractured movement that both embraced and rejected societal norms. But unlike progressive education, homeschooling has had

a far longer history in the United States. Homeschooling proliferated in rural areas during the nineteenth century where public school infrastructure was low and subsistence farming required all members of the family to work. But this did not mean that these early homeschoolers were uneducated or that it did not have an important place in society. By 1860, well over 90% of Americans were literate and the cheap production of books made reading more accessible than ever before.⁹⁷

Nineteenth century industrialization was not limited to major cities. Small farmers in the Midwest could not keep pace with rapidly industrializing farms that mass produced food necessary for an exploding population. The fear of industrialization drove some small farmers to revert to “simpler times,” and one way that these rural families could hold onto their ways of life was to homeschool their children.⁹⁸ Few records exist on rural homeschoolers in this era, but many homeschooled out of necessity. Rich families with access to private tutors homeschooled their children to impart social grace while poorer families homeschooled to keep their children working on farms.⁹⁹ By the turn of the twentieth century, cheap printing methods and increased consumer buying power proliferated home education boxes complete with textbooks, workbooks, and guidance materials for parents.¹⁰⁰ Homeschooling was becoming an industry, but one that was met with challenges from compulsory schooling laws. The precedent set in *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923) based the legality of homeschooling on religious freedom, limiting opportunity for secular homeschoolers. It would take decades to settle the debate on the ability of homeschooled children to access state resources or attend college without state accreditation.

In the 1950s, something interesting began to happen. In 1952, homeschooling parents Norbet and Merion Schickel of Ithaca, New York, became one of the first families to send their homeschooled children to college.¹⁰¹ For years, homeschooled children had needed to navigate a

complicated web of school boards and local bureaucracies to receive the necessary high school accreditation, but the Schickel family proved the legitimacy of homeschooling. Their legal victory also coincided with other fundamental societal changes of the 1950s.

The GI bill led to an explosion of home ownership, giving millions of mostly white Americans access to an American dream that was rooted in the nuclear family and traditional gender roles. The proliferation of suburbia emphasized the child and the nuclear family more than ever before, elevating the importance of the homestead. Additionally, as Cremin outlined, a general societal swing towards conservatism fostered distrust in state institutions, pushing some towards homeschooling. While Dewey would have likely supported the rising importance of the nuclear family as a way to create a stronger community with the school, homeschoolers took the proximity to the school even closer.

During the 1960s, two distinct branches of homeschoolers emerged from the pedagogical progressive tradition: leftists and evangelicals. To leftist homeschoolers, public schools were an impenetrable, hyper nationalist leviathan where students were indoctrinated with ideas of nationalism and capitalism.¹⁰² To evangelicals, public schools were becoming overly secular and liberal for their Christian sensibilities. Like the progressives before them, the new generation of leftist parents sought to use schooling as a way to combat the techno-capitalism of the latter 20th century. Through the lens of Holt, leftist homeschooling will be a focus for the remainder of this project while also interrogating pedagogical parallels between progressive education and conservative evangelical homeschoolers. While progressive reformers brought change to public schools, many of the same problems Dewey highlighted in the 1890s were still present in the 1960s. Schools were overcrowded, students were not receiving enough individualized learning, and little attention was paid to their mental and physical health.¹⁰³ Individualized learning was

the crux of the connection between pedagogical progressives and homeschoolers, both leftist and evangelical. They all found various faults with the school and their individualized philosophy which informed their own conception of correct schooling. The commercialization of home educational supplies, a new era of post civil rights politics, and the explosion of suburbia created an environment where families felt empowered to take education back into their own hands.¹⁰⁴ This ironically fulfilled Dewey's progressive vision by fixing a broken school environment but broke with him by removing the child entirely from the school.

While there were many leftist homeschoolers who embodied the spirit and ideology of progressive education in unexamined ways, none would articulate the ideology of the movement with greater clarity than John Holt. Beyond his status as one of the most prolific homeschooling voices of the twentieth century, his extensive writings were riddled with connections to progressive educators' decades before. Although his solutions to the schooling crisis differed from Dewey, Parkhurst, and Washburne, he identified many of the same issues while highlighting the Romantic, innate intelligence of children. There are also clear parallels between Holt's homeschooling system and the methods of progressive educators, representing that their ideas were both implicitly and explicitly carried through to later generations.

Chapter Five: Holt and the Homeschoolers

Holt had a privileged childhood where he received some of the best primary education in the United States. Born in 1923 in New York City, he grew up in a wealthy family and attended New Hampshire's Phillips Exeter Academy which was and still is a premier private school.¹⁰⁵ After he attended Yale, he joined the Navy to serve in World War Two and was honorably discharged in 1946. In his early years, Holt was a model American citizen and a well-educated Cold War patriot. But in 1950, he joined the United World Federalists, a leftist political

organization intent on promoting a one world government. He left the movement in 1952 after it failed to produce wide scale change.¹⁰⁶ Like many leftists in the 1950s, he was disillusioned with a new era of McCarthyism and mutually assured destruction, prompting his desire for reform.

Holt's privileged upbringing combined with his leftist outlook brought a unique perspective to homeschooling pedagogy, perhaps contributing to his groundbreaking popularity. Although he never earned an official teaching certificate, he had a storied career in both private and public education. In 1953, he began his first teaching job at the Colorado Rocky Mountain School, an alternative co-education school specializing in manual training as education.¹⁰⁷ Although not yet a proponent of homeschooling, his experience with alternative education exposed him to the experimental boundaries of education and brought him into contact with progressive thinking.

Holt's writings and experience were reminiscent of Parkhurst in that he was not overly concerned with ideology, a reality that which was reflected in a straight-forward writing style that proposed simple solutions to complex issues. He purposely crafted his books to be readable, as he believed that any parent was capable of homeschooling, reminiscent of Dewey's belief that parents knew what the best education was for their child.¹⁰⁸ Holt's writings made him something of a minor celebrity, appearing on talk shows and interview slots, even starting his own magazine in 1977, *Growing Without Schooling*. Holt expanded his unschooling ideology through his own experiences and from submissions chronicled in other books, continuing his activism until his death in 1982. His stream of consciousness writings, while appearing simple, reveals a complex philosophy that has substantive connections to progressive education. These relevant parallels both contribute to the rich legacy of American radical education and expand pedagogical horizons by connecting these two previously untethered movements.

Holt's primary concern, like that of pedagogical progressive educators, was with the health of the child and their ability to learn in a constrained schooling environment. He argued that children fail "because they are afraid, bored, and confused," a multifaceted argument that interrogates both the physical and mental health of students.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps Washburne would have agreed with Holt's assessment considering his innovations in mental age and push for psychological services. Importantly, Holt did not view these failings as the fault of the student. Rather, it was the fault of the school for not trusting the inherent intelligence of the child, claiming that "children are by nature smart, energetic, curious, eager to learn, and good at learning."¹¹⁰ Holt saw that children were by nature interested in learning, but something about the school crushed this unconscious interest. Trusting the intelligence of the child was the backbone of Parkhurst and Washburne's ideologies, both of whom promoted individual learning and social responsibility. The phrase that children are good at learning is an essential aspect to Holt's philosophy, as Holt believed in the inherent, Romantic intelligence of the child like the progressive educators who preceded him. Holt also strongly advocated for children's ability to self-regulate.

Alluding to a primary school in Leicestershire, England that he had visited in the 1960s, Holt claimed that children are responsible, reasonable individuals who maintain complicated social lives with the ability to solve their own problems.¹¹¹ Here, Holt echoes the philosophy behind Parkhurst's contracts where students were trusted with their own academic success, reflecting inherent trust and self-regulation in the child. This self-regulation was strongly connected to the belief that children deserved and required more freedom. The focus on freedom was paramount for Holt, reflecting that controlling the lives of young people took away from "what we might have learned from their doing it."¹¹² His interest in what children could do while

unconstrained took precedence over molding their behavior, and drove many of his homeschooling beliefs.

Similar to Washburne's early writings on his time in La Puente, California, Holt focused on his own experience in the classroom as his book, *How Children Fail* (1964) followed his time in a Massachusetts elementary school. Like Parkhurst, Holt began his teaching career as a pragmatist and a problem solver, teaching children with learning disabilities who he grew to see as victims of the school system. He was critical of how the administration of the schools he taught at labeled "abnormal" children as intellectually disabled.¹¹³ Ability and disability were also contested issues for progressive educators. While the discourse and vocabulary surrounding disabled children had evolved since the progressive era, progressive educators were still concerned with education for all students. Like Washburne, Holt was critical of the way that children were forced to either complete a year of education or repeat without an opportunity to show their learning differently or pick up where they left off the next school year. Holt repeatedly emphasized that schools should meet children where they are, and not where they should be which was the cornerstone of Winnetka's individual system. Putting theory into practice, Holt's experience working with a young student named Edward illustrated both his educational methods and his issues with contemporary schooling.

Edward was an elementary school student who consistently failed at math despite hours of individual tutoring. According to Holt, no tutor had ever asked Edward what he knew, only if he was able to complete the problem using the method that he had been taught.¹¹⁴ Holt was dumbfounded by this proposition, representing his trust in the innate intelligence of the child and adherence to classical romantic and progressive ideals. By asking Edward what he knew instead of if he was able to solve the problem using the teacher's method, he was able to effectively

work with him and solve the problem. His experience with Edward shaped his view on arithmetic as he saw it as something that children can and should use in their daily lives.¹¹⁵ Like Parkhurst, Holt was not as concerned with subject matter, but more with its ability to be applied and communicated effectively. To communicate arithmetic effectively, Holt, much like Dewey, Washburne, and Parkhurst, taught the subject through the lens of money and the economy, something he knew many children were interested in.

Holt's views on arithmetic were a microcosm of his overall vision of modern schooling. Although Holt was critical of capitalism and the constraints of the industrial economy, he recognized the importance of having learning reflect the current reality. The practical application of math reflected his feelings about the school itself as he viewed schools as "boring, threatening, [and] *cut off from any real experience or serious purpose.*"¹¹⁶ Holt sought to teach math through the lens of money and finance, things that many children were interested in. This reflected his belief that real learning was a result of genuine student interest, not possible through disjointed curriculum. Holt viewed the school as a vehicle for complacency and mindless rule following, echoing progressive complaints about the regimented Victorian schooling of the late 19th century. These views were reminiscent of how pedagogical progressives viewed the school representing his lineage in this wider academic tradition.

Holt had a negative view of modern public schooling, much of which was reminiscent of what progressive educators had conceptualized decades earlier. Just as Dewey sought to have the school mirror the nature of children, Holt saw the modern school as inherently antithetical to human beings' natural inquisitive nature.¹¹⁷ In his time as a teacher, his classroom was "a lively, interesting, cooperative, and generally unthreatening place," mirroring the goals of progressive educators.¹¹⁸ Within a typical classroom, one where there was not this lively, interesting or

cooperative spirit, Holt identified a strange phenomenon. Children were afraid to give a straightforward answer out of fear of mockery or even physical violence so they would withhold their intelligence and pretend not to know.¹¹⁹ In this brief passage, Holt identified that the ways that formal schooling failed to educate were interrelated.

Schools were ill equipped to extract and give knowledge, evidenced through his work with Edward, and that, when prompted, students were not incentivized to share their learning due to fears of retribution from their teachers and peers alike. Whether through ridicule, social shunning, or physical violence, making mistakes was not seen as a moment of creative learning in the classroom according to Holt. Holt later went on to claim that the typical public school classroom destroys students “*by waging an endless psychological war against children to make them even more insecure, anxious and fearful.*”¹²⁰ Holt prioritized the psychological health of the student just as much as their physical health, and at times even more so. Washburne was an early champion of psychological services for school children, ensuring nurses, counselors, and other services were available to every Winnetka student. One major place where Holt disagreed with Washburne was on the issue of testing.

To Holt, testing did not fulfill its purpose of informing teachers on how students were doing as testing did not increase retention of information.¹²¹ Holt claimed that most teachers would exclusively teach the test material as an exam approaches then move on as quickly as they had started with little regard to retention or meaningful experience.¹²² Ineffective transfer of information between teacher and student was a common enemy for both Holt and the progressives. Although Washburne pioneered an individualized testing system, this system was not as high stakes as students would complete and self-correct exams early in the school year and learning at their own pace.¹²³ He would not punish cheating, reflecting his trust in the student to

learn and to reflect on their mistakes. Students were, however, still traditionally assessed at the end of the unit, ensuring some retention.¹²⁴

Holt still gathered traditional student data like grades during his time as a teacher, but he would later break from this system entirely. Despite unschooling's departure from the classroom, theory behind these movements were still concurrent. Parkhurst had similar conclusions about testing which echoed her flexible and pragmatic methods. In *The Dalton Plan*, Parkhurst never addressed the philosophical validity of testing. Rather, she incorporated testing into her lessons as the most direct way of assessing student progress. Dewey never directly commented on testing throughout his works either but his conclusions in *Experience in Education* as well as *Democracy in Education* imply that he also disagreed with high stakes testing.¹²⁵ Holt viewed testing as uncreative, as teachers were coaxing a straightforward answer from students without providing a way for students to demonstrate their knowledge in a different way. While progressives tried to modify testing, it is clear that both Holt and the progressives viewed rudimentary testing as ineffective and sought to reform student assessment.

For progressive educators, the psychological health of the student was essential to creating the democratic citizen. Holt implicitly expanded on these ideas and wrote a manifesto concerning the civil liberties of children, specifically asserting that children deserve compulsory psychological assistance.¹²⁶ One could view Holt's manifesto as an extension of the mission of progressive educators: to humanize, simplify, and soften the classroom into a place where students can learn most effectively while preparing them for a better future. Although Holt's career was less focused on reforming the classroom, his commentary and experience in the classroom led him to identify many of the same issues that plagued schools during the

progressive era. Holt observations on the ability, methods, and training of teachers, mirrored the perspectives of pedagogical progressive educators.

Holt featured a letter from a supporter in *Teach Your Own* commenting on the teachers place in a good education and how a typical public-school teacher did not take on a beneficial role in education. Holt, like progressive educators, viewed bad teachers as an extension of a structurally flawed school system.¹²⁷ Washburne was particularly concerned with reforming his Winnetka teachers. Every Winnetka teacher was required to undergo months of arduous retraining, much to the disdain of some career teachers.¹²⁸ Not every teacher was requalified after training, suggesting the stringent nature of his reforms. The retraining was specifically geared towards how teachers approached student behavior, exemplifying that Washburne highly valued student and teacher interactions. Real learning would be useless if children felt unsafe and uncared for by their teacher, and Holt strongly echoed this sentiment. Holt also had passionate views regarding public education teachers, exemplifying their importance in the intellectual, physical, and spiritual health of the student.

Holt placed teachers into two camps: those who are implicitly harmful to students and those explicitly harmful to students. Holt categorized implicitly harmful teachers as those who were successful due to the broken standards of modern schooling. There was a generation of teachers who were considered successful by a flawed school system who passed and failed students for years without critically analyzing their methods. Holt concluded in his many conversations with teachers throughout his career that they feared and distrusted students which created a system where success relied on control rather than learning.¹²⁹ This inherent negativism was a self-fulfilling prophecy as uncritical teachers created unmotivated students. These bad habits would not create bad people, but they would reinforce toxic behavior that perpetuated

cycles of spiritual and physical violence.¹³⁰ Holt was very concerned with the effects of this cycle, reflecting the overall goal of progressive educators in creating a competent new generation of people capable of facing contemporary issues. There was also a similarly large group of teachers who practiced were explicitly harmful to students and their development. By embracing corporal punishment, belittling students, or any way of promoting kinds of violence, there were many teachers who embraced the unequal balance of power in the classroom for their own benefit. School reform would be incomplete without changing the flawed dynamic between teachers and students as teachers did not effectively communicate information and were often harsh arbiters of discipline.

Overall, Holt concluded that public school classrooms should be cooperative places where children were free to express themselves. In his early years, he believed that the classroom could be reformed into a safe learning space, but as he continued to radicalize, he increasingly contended that schools were fundamentally broken, and that homeschooling was the only answer which was his major break with the progressive pedagogy. Holt critically revised his thesis on the state of the school by the late 1960s, declaring in *Teach Your Own* that, “since I wrote this, I have stopped believing that ‘schools’ ... are the best place for this [learning].”¹³¹ Holt’s time in public schools led him to many of same conclusions that progressive educators made, expressing his complaints in similar language representing the implicit influence that progressive education had on radical school reform decades after the progressive era. As Lawrence Cremin claimed, progressive education faded in popularity by the 1950s and in some sense he was right. Yet, despite the fact that there are only a few hundred progressive schools operating around the country, the spirit of reform and educational freedom did not die. Even in Holt’s later writings

where he fully removed himself from the classroom, he still held strong connections to progressive education's core ideology.

Chapter Six: An Education Without School

Holt was clearly influenced by progressive education but came to a radically different conclusion on what reformed education would look like. He claimed that public education in America was fundamentally broken through years of maltreatment and neglect which led to his impassioned belief in homeschooling. To Holt, schools were centers of indoctrination where children were forced into boxes that a school bureaucracy created for them.¹³² These boxes marked intelligent students as learning disabled and hyperactive children as attention deficit disordered. Holt's thinking was greatly altered by his experiences with disabled students which informed his beliefs that individualized instruction and the inherent belief in the intelligence of the child were enough to educate anyone. One page 16 in *Teach Your Own* he takes these ideas even farther, arguing that the explosion of learning disabled, and over medicated students was an excuse for schools to marginalize students who needed help the most.¹³³ Washburne also interrogated these issues with his attention to mental hygiene and psychological services. Structurally, schools were an inefficient bureaucracy, with underpaid teachers and unmotivated administrators. From bad teachers, to uncaring administrators, to the effect of generational poverty, Holt saw no other option than to think outside the box and advocate for homeschooling. It is clear that Holt and the consortium of progressive educators agreed on the issues facing public schools, but Holt went in a radically different direction with his push to homeschool. His unique conception of homeschooling came to be popularly defined as unschooling, a method involving entirely self-motivated learning. Looking at Holt's reasoning for the viability, superiority, and necessity of homeschooling finds many parallels with progressive education's

philosophy which illustrated the longevity of progressive education and its basis as an unexpected inspiration for a wide range of educational philosophies.

In *Teach Your Own* (1972), Holt claimed that homeschoolers were not just confined to rich Victorian homes or poor farmers needing the additional help outside the class: instead, homeschooling was a deeply personal choice that Gaither echoed in *Homeschool: An American History* (2017).¹³⁴ Holt argued that most chose homeschooling because the public or private school system had failed them. Holt does not just take into account his own experiences; he features letters and conversations he had with homeschooling parents throughout his works. One potential homeschooler wrote to him in the 1970s and he featured that concern in *Teach Your Own*. This person asked how homeschooled children could adapt to mainstream society despite being outside the public school system and Holt provided an answer that progressive educators may have also embraced. Holt argued that schools either help students adapt to mass society or they give them the tools to resist.¹³⁵ These paths, however, were not mutually exclusive.

Holt believed that the goal of public school was to integrate students into mass society. Progressive educators sought to use the school as a way to foster the democratic citizen. The core of Deweyism was to create a democratic society, whereby the school would create the future citizens society required. While Holt disagreed with the notion that schools should be the arbiter of mass society, he still saw value in correctly educating children to better society and saw that education could be the core of social values. Holt proposed that both society and schools were flawed because society dictated the curriculum of public schools and public schools produced flawed individuals. Yet he still saw education as the solution to these problems and that a correct education would not provide the “tools to resist.” In Holt’s mind, homeschooling was the perfect solution as it would allow students to thrive intellectually without the burden of school’s failed

bureaucracy and failed teaching methods. While Holt and Dewey embraced innate intelligence, they disagreed on methods, specifically when it came to the efficacy of public schools as a setting to forge competent, democratically oriented future citizens.

Holt demands for teacher reform went hand in hand with his strong belief in children's rights and these reforms were rooted in progressive educational tradition. Washburne shifted the role of the teacher in Winnetka from a basic educator to one more involved in the mental and spiritual health of the child and as a member of the community. Holt was also an advocate for community learning, believing that teaching was an inherent humanistic trait. Holt argued that the community lent itself to teaching as he defined any functional community as one where each individual has a unique skill set and that the function of the community is to hone these skills.¹³⁶ Dewey, like Holt, viewed community as an essential facet in the complete education of the child. Even Parkhurst, who was consistently at odds with the school board, was a strong community member making many home visits to students. On these philosophical tenets of mental hygiene and community, Holt's ideas were rooted in progressive thought despite a very different vision of how to fulfill these objectives.

In another section, Holt claimed that schools did not make students happy as "people are best able, and perhaps only able, to cross the many barriers of race, class, custom, and belief, that divide them when they are able to share experiences *that make them feel good.*"¹³⁷ Here Holt added qualifiers to experience in that not all experiences are productive which was something that Dewey argued decades earlier. Whether it be unschooling through manual training, devouring classic texts or computer sciences, Holt's homeschooling had significant parallels with progressive education. Holt took progressive ideas of academic freedom and free learning experiences to a new level, seeking to build education entirely around impulse. Experience was

the core of Holt's argument for why homeschooling was the answer. An inefficient bureaucracy, exposure to physical and psychological violence, and a perpetual system of academic failure created negative experiences that inhibited learning. Good educational experiences were ones that were self-motivated and free from the constraints of any school system. One could view the place of the community between Holt and progressives as extensions of one another. Progressive educators sought to raise the importance of the home and community as those were important sources of learning for many children. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey claimed that natural unstructured experiences were the origin of education, but structured experience was necessary in school.¹³⁸ Holt agreed that natural experiences were the origin of education but differed on the utility of a structured education. As homeschooling gained more widespread recognition, a new generation of homeschoolers used the lessons of progressive education to once again go in a radically different direction.

By the late 1970s, Holt's homeschooling journal *Growing Without Schooling* had exploded in popularity around the country.¹³⁹ The December 1978 issue of *Time* ran an article on the homeschooling movement.¹⁴⁰ Holt's 1981 appearance on the *Phil Donahue Show* inspired many, and also brought other voices to the homeschooling conversation. During his appearance on the show, Holt invited Joyce Kinmont and her family onto the stage. The mother, Joyce Kinmont, had long been a follower of Holt despite his leftist views. Holt had long garnered support from Mormon's, Seventh Day Adventists, and other religious evangelicals reflecting the cooperation that leftist and religious homeschoolers had in this early era. Despite Joyce's strong beliefs in Biblical infallibility, creationism, and original sin as a Mormon, she still appeared on *The Phil Donahue Show* with the openly secular leftist Holt. The early 1980s embraced a new

cultural conservatism where schools were once again a target. Religious evangelicals decried that schools were overly secular institutions where religion had no place.

By the 1980s, homeschooling groups became more selective as they gained legitimacy in the eyes of the government and the public. At first, homeschooling advocacy groups were both secular and religious as the fledgling movement needed all the support it could get. But evangelicals began to dominate the movement due to the constraints of homeschooling. As historian Martin Gaither surmised, homeschooling almost always required at least one full time at home parent and with religious groups far more likely to have a stay-at-home parent compared to an average American family, religious homeschooling grew.¹⁴¹ But religious homeschoolers were not a monolithic group; they had their own factions and belief systems.

Gaither concluded that there were two distinct groups of religious homeschoolers, sectarians and romantics. Sectarians were motivated by the belief that God had ordained faithful families to homeschool their children and to reject secular education.¹⁴² Romantics were a modern reactionary movement, similar to progressive educators, that celebrated the “individuality over the mass, a prescription of artistic and emotional expression... and the privileging of the sincere and authentic self over status-quo conformity.”¹⁴³ While romantics were not as evangelical as sectarians, both groups held the core belief that within the child is an individual, worthy of their reverence and specific care. The romantics most closely aligned with Holt and the work of progressive educators as they did not hold strong evangelical beliefs. Romantic homeschoolers, John Holt, and progressive educators can trace their ideological lineage back to classical romantics like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johan Pestalozzi. While these two groups would later come to define the movement, there was a third group that also embodied progressive education ideology.

Gaither referred to this group of homeschoolers as the “*Pragmatics*.”¹⁴⁴ These homeschoolers followed in the footsteps of Helen Parkhurst, families who chose to homeschool out of convenience or necessity in contrast to the religious motivations. Many of these families chose to homeschool through homeschooling textbook guides, popularized by figures like Carleton Washburne. Although Parkhurst pales in popularity to Dewey, it is clear that certain overarching motivations harkening back to the progressive era were still present into the 1980s.

Chapter Seven: A Leaderless Movement Finds its Footing

Following John Holt’s death in 1983, homeschooling proliferated throughout the United States, evolving to serve new demographics while rooting itself in progressive thought. Although the evangelical Raymond Moore and Holt worked together in the 1970s, Holt’s death prompted a new era of homeschooling one where Moore’s evangelism would take center stage. Younger figures like Gregg Harris and his religious fundamentalism represented a new generational divide within the homeschooling movement. While *Growing Without Schooling* was published through 2001, paradigm shifts in 1980s pushed religious homeschooling to the forefront of the homeschooling conversation while still upholding many traits of unschooling and pedagogical progressive ideology.

Perhaps the most significant shift in the fight to homeschool were an increasing number of legal victories declaring the validity of homeschooling in the eyes of the state. In 1983, the Home School Legal Defense Action (HDSLA) was formed by an openly Christian group who marketed the HDSLA as a pre-paid option for homeschool legal defense.¹⁴⁵ Endorsed by Moore, many families of different background flocked to the HDSLA to begin a unified effort to legalize homeschooling. There were still those who resisted homeschooling’s heavy-handed religiosity and they were mainly the romantics who still followed the words of Holt. Even Moore, an early

homeschooling organizer and Biblical realist, was forced out of the movement as his Adventist beliefs and humanistic pedagogy, not unlike what progressives believed, alienated him from HSDLA's strong Protestant majority.¹⁴⁶

In 1993, after long standing fights by dedicated activists, homeschooling became legal in all 50 states.¹⁴⁷ For homeschoolers, this was a celebratory moment, echoing Dewey's sentiments that one day their interpretation of good education would become universal. Although each state varied in their enforcement and stringency of legality, homeschooling was ultimately legal. Federal legislation both increased visibility for homeschooling and asserted its validity as genuine education. But the 1990s were also a complicated time for the movement. Different religious factions had their own Biblical interpretation of homeschooling and the terse alliance between the leftist homeschoolers and the religious homeschoolers began to fall apart. As the HSDLA won more cases, homeschooling become increasingly streamlined through a select few organizations, diminishing the experimental and progressive legacy of American homeschooling despite continued intellectual connections.

Some scholars and educational commentators have overlooked the history of secular left-leaning homeschooling ideology of Holt and increasingly associated homeschooling with conservative Christianity. Despite a pedagogical shift towards the religious right, these evangelical homeschoolers were implicitly and explicitly inspired by Holt and the progressives. What differentiated the belief in the inherent intelligence of the child was its origin. For religious homeschoolers, their intelligence was ordained by God while secular homeschoolers believed in the natural, biological intelligence of children. As homeschoolers won legal challenges, pedagogical publications began to take notice of this new strain of homeschooling. Although

some of these commentators were politically at odds with Holt, they still embodied many of his pedagogical theories.

The principle of parental choice had become tied to a constitutionalist interpretation of the legality of homeschooling, invoking First Amendment rhetoric. In 2000, *the Peabody Journal of Education* ran a special double issue on homeschooling celebrating the turn of the millennia. The editor, Brian Ray, noted many of the same trends that Holt had touched upon, namely that the growth of homeschooling was linked to a new era of “parental choice.”¹⁴⁸ Mirroring the evolving demographics of American homeschoolers from the 1970s to the 1990s, several of the contributors to this double issue were religious conservatives. Michael Farris, a board member of the HSDLA, wrote a column for this edition. In his article, he argued that those committed to upholding the constitution should validate homeschooling as a reflection of the freedom of religion and expectation of privacy.¹⁴⁹ Beyond legal justifications, Farris took exception to what he saw as the purpose of public education: imparting national identity. He argued that “the state... can never simultaneously *be* tolerant *and* require tolerance by the citizen,” criticizing liberal notions that national unity must be achieved through state education.¹⁵⁰ While Dewey would have agreed that public schools were failing, his mission in reform was to transform public schools into a democratically oriented space which imparted social and political responsibility. Farris exemplified a kind of educational libertarianism similar to Holt in criticism of the values public schooling imparted, but from a conservative perspective. Interestingly, Farris included a story about Dewey, referencing his involvement in the fight to legalize homeschooling in early twentieth century Oregon. The Oregon chapter of the Ku Klux Klan was a strong proponent of banning private education to control public education to further their racist views which Dewey strongly opposed.¹⁵¹ Although Dewey sought to use democratic

education to enhance society, he was discerning over the values that public schools imparted. Although there is a clear split between Farris and Dewey over democratic education, Dewey's philosophies were still useful to Farris. Looking at this comparison through the lens of Holt also finds similar parallels.

Holt morally objected to many things that contemporary schooling promulgated. His advocacy for the rights of students was a moral one, an attempt to protect them from the physical and spiritual violence that he associated with conventional schools. Another commentator, Perry Glazner, even quoted the UN's declaration of human rights on the rights of the child, something that Holt strongly believed in and wrote his own version of. By the turn of the millennia and into the twenty-first century, homeschooling had become more closely aligned with evangelicalism and right-wing politics than ever before. Notably, even with these serious ideological differences, the core beliefs in the innate intelligence of the child, a mistrust of the public school system, and a utopian vision were consistent between the HSLDA, John Holt, and progressive educators.

Homeschooling majorly rose in popularity into the twenty first century. From 1999 to 2007, the number of homeschooled children almost doubled from 850,000 to 1,508,000.¹⁵² Analysts from the National Home Education Research Institute estimate that this number might actually be higher due to inconsistent reporting laws by state for families that homeschool. With the growth of the internet and its online learning options, families have opted to homeschool for many of the same reasons that Holt had outlined half a century earlier, citing poor school administration and lack of individualized learning. Although *Growing Without Schooling* is no longer in print, the magazines website is still active, and updated with testimonials and columns from Holt supporters. Although after Holt's death the leftist homeschooling movement

decentralized and never regained its cohesion, its message and spirit have lived on. The Christian homeschooling movement is still thriving, strongly influenced by the progressive roots of Holt's ideas.

An in-depth view of the Evangelical homeschooling movement in the twenty-first century finds a strong adherence to both Christianity and the ideas of Holt and the pedagogical progressives. Vanderbilt professor of American religious history James Hudnut-Beumler attended the "Teach Them Diligently" conference in Nashville in 2018 and recounted his experiences in his book *Strangers and Friends at the Welcome Table: Contemporary Christianities in the American South* (2018). Using this book as a guide, it is clear that contemporary homeschoolers are still grappling with the same concepts that Holt and progressive educators dealt with. "Teach Them Diligently" is a Christian homeschooling collective that holds its annual meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, attracting evangelical homeschoolers from around the country. It appears that early alliances between leftist and evangelical homeschoolers have dissipated as Beumler ruminates on the anti-evolution PowerPoint slides that populate the Nashville convention center.¹⁵³ Further, he comments on a speech from Israel Wayne, a homeschooling leader, who stated that Christian homeschooling singlehandedly led the way for American homeschooling despite Holt's popularity. Israel even went as far to say that Holt's "unschooling" movement was against the scripture.¹⁵⁴ But his rhetoric, protection of the child, the role of family and community in education is rooted in a progressive and unschooled past, despite his objections to Holt.

Another figure in the crowd, Emery White, a founding pastor at the Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte, South Carolina, espoused that "homeschooling... is what lets you insulate them [children] from the world before their maturity is ready to engage it on their

own.”¹⁵⁵ Parallels between religious homeschooling, unschooling, and progressivism are implicit and still prevalent. Holt’s long diatribes about the right of the child in the face of an abusive public school system harken back to this same idea of protection. It was the right of both the child and the parent to protect the student from the ills of society before they are ready, and both Holt and these homeschoolers agree that schools do not do this well enough. Although when White referenced “insulation... from the world,” he spoke from a religious perspective, the notion of protection is consistent.¹⁵⁶ Religious schooling is a long and storied tradition, and this is not to say that religious homeschoolers and progressives were branches of the same tree; rather they were ideological ships passing in the night, implicitly sharing ideas while serving different agendas but ultimately for the individual benefit of the child.

Hudnut-Beumler ended his chapter on a contemplative note, questioning the effect that these conservative homeschoolers have on American culture. He indicates that the issues that evangelical homeschoolers highlighted, namely the insular community of public schools, were already being eroded by a growing minority of homeschoolers.¹⁵⁷ Fostering a strong and welcoming community was essential to both the pedagogical progressive’s and Holt. Hudnut-Beumler considers that the decentralization of knowledge would fundamentally change American culture, questioning the viability of this kind of homeschooling.¹⁵⁸ This decentralization was exactly what Dewey commented on in *Democracy and Education* a century earlier. The solution to the issue of schooling was not solved by Washburne, Parkhurst, Dewey or even Holt and these solutions are still hotly debated. Just as conservative homeschoolers continue to dominate the homeschooling conversation, many original progressive schools still remain and tracing their pedagogical evolutions reflects shared and abandoned goals.

Chapter Eight: Twenty-First Century Progressives

Although Christian homeschooling maintained ties to progressive education in its ideology, there is still a strong community of progressive schools that expand upon the legacy of Dewey, Washburne, and Parkhurst. These schools are mostly private with high tuitions, something that Holt would have likely found problematic as it would restrict many vulnerable students from accessing better education. Despite the limited reach, their continued operation emphasizes the longevity of progressive education as a viable and important alternative education choice for families. Looking at a few examples of contemporary progressive schools finds consistencies and evolutions from original progressive thought. The Cambridge Friends School is a Quaker inspired progressive institution. Based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the school's blend of religious philosophy and progressive pedagogy is a popular composition for contemporary progressive schools. Perhaps some of the same religious evangelicals that read Raymond Moore and John Holt found solace in the Cambridge Friends School. In the modern era, with more time for pedagogical experimentation, fragments of both of these educational movements are found in these disparate private schools. Helen Parkhurst's Dalton school is one example of private progressive institutions with a strong historical legacy. The Dalton school embraced change as "our society is experiencing rapid change," the Dalton school "is changing as well," adapting its pedagogical methods as Parkhurst did in her day.¹⁵⁹ While these are only two brief examples of progressive schools, there are hundreds of progressive schools scattered around the country. The Winnetka school system also still reflects a strong progressive legacy. The Carleton Washburne elementary school begins their mission statement by emphasizing the "emotional, social, physical, and cultural development of students" with emotional notably listed first.¹⁶⁰ Its mission statement also stresses the importance of the relationship that students have

with their teachers, echoing Washburne's call to retrain Winnetka teachers and Holt's claim that students and teachers fundamentally misunderstand and fear each other. Importantly, the Carleton Washburne school reflects "the principles of a democratic community," further emphasizing the progressive elements of this public school.¹⁶¹ Reflecting on these changes, it appears that modern progressive schools have transitioned towards a traditional education setting with a strong connection to progressive pedagogy. While this is only a brief look at progressive schools, it is clear that progressive education, like homeschooling, is a niche but strongly supported alternative education option.

What is most important to consider when looking at the current state of progressive schools is the long-term viability of progressive pedagogy and how it continues to influence homeschooling pedagogies. Progressive education has made inroads in public, private, and homeschooled institutions, illustrating how the movement's ideas transcended educational spaces. It has evolved not only to suit the needs of a rapidly evolving student body, but also the needs of homeschooled children. The intellectual consistencies between pedagogical progressive education and homeschooling are still relevant conversations to have today as both institutions are still strong. The constructivist ideology popularized by John Dewey still strongly influences educators all around the world. Intellectual traditions can spread to unforeseen locations and the job of an intellectual historian is to endlessly uncover the ways that ideas have spread.

Chapter 9: Conclusions and Online Futures

A comprehensive review of the work of John Dewey, Carleton Washburne, and Helen Parkhurst uncovers a diverse and powerful array of voices whose philosophies solidified the foundation of progressive education and inspired generations of activists to follow. Their work was foundational for twentieth century alternative education and helped lay the foundation for

future pedagogical traditions like contemporary homeschooling. Dewey's work set the standard for progressive education with his ideas on democratic education, focus individualized education, group activities, and the connection between the school and community. Helen Parkhurst introduced pragmatism to the dense philosophy of Dewey. Her Dalton school championed individualized learning methods and contracts, reflecting progressive education's goal of best preparing the student for working society. While not overly concerned with philosophy or pedagogy, she in many ways followed Dewey while forging her own path in a way that helped develop unschooling and homeschooling pedagogy. She was less concerned with the quality of experience or subject matter and instead focused her efforts on reforming the classroom environment. Carleton Washburne's pedagogy was in certain respects a combination of Dewey and Parkhurst's ideas. Washburne created his individualized system with a strong focus on student directed learning, self-assessment, and community. The Winnetka Plan was one of the most famous examples of a pedagogical progressive education program in a public school. From these three thinkers emerged a cohesive pedagogy that withstood the decline of progressive education in the 1950s. Their theories and philosophies are celebrated in progressive institutions today but more importantly, are a foundational influence on contemporary homeschooling. Pedagogical progressive education both explicitly and implicitly influenced Holt's unschooling philosophy, as well as more recent Evangelical homeschooling movements.

John Holt was one of the most prominent voices in the American homeschooling movement. His folksy demeanor and easy-to-follow philosophy brought homeschooling out of the shadows of American culture. A committed leftist, his trajectory from naval officer to schoolteacher to homeschooling activist gave him a unique perspective on the issues facing American schools. While his opinion of the school changed over time, many of the solutions he

proposed for the classroom were reminiscent of the progressive educators who preceded him. Opening the classroom, promoting the innate intelligence of the child, and committing to their mental hygiene were all theories developed by progressive educators like Dewey, Washburne, and Parkhurst. Holt's inherent trust in children's ability to control their own behavior and mold their own educational environment were reminiscent of Parkhurst's contracts and Washburne's individual system.

Holt and the progressives held similar positions regarding their current states of public education. The nineteenth century Victorian style education that emphasized good behavior and rote memorization which caused students great physical and mental distress, was still present to Holt which he believed caused students great physical and mental distress. His extensive writings on violence and corporal discipline in the classroom expanded on progressives' ideas on how best to coax information and learning out of children. Holt understood that many teachers were overworked and underpaid, just like Dewey observed from his time at Hull House. He argued that bad teachers were a consequence of the poor schooling structure, in that the schools' inherent fear and distrust in children led them to prioritize good behavior over real learning. Although later in his career Holt no longer saw the viability of public schools, he was first a school reformer. In one of Holt's later books, he noted that "a deschooled society would be a society in which everyone shall have the widest and freest possible choice to learning whatever he wants to learn, whether in school or in some altogether different way."¹⁶² Harkening back to Dewey, Holt's deschooled society is strongly reminiscent of Dewey's experimental classrooms, displaying the consistencies of both of these scholars' visions.

Holt understood the importance and influence of the community as a resource for homeschooled children. Similar to Dewey, his ideal school, though still advocating for

homeschooling as the penultimate choice, would be one that would be entirely in sync with nature and industry as well as a strong facet of the community.¹⁶³ Reflecting on Holt's earlier conversations about the damage of physical and psychological classroom discipline, homeschooling was a safe haven from the indifferent and cruel schooling apparatus. One way that Holt maintained popularity within many subsets of the homeschooling community was that he did not commit to a single ideology as a justification or model for homeschooling. He understood and respected that families decided to homeschool their children for a variety of reasons, many of them deeply personal or religious. As some educational commentators like Michael Farris and Perry Glazner discussed, democratic education, the lifeblood of Dewey's pedagogy, infringed on free learning experience. Holt's flexibility in the homeschooled classroom allowed for a diversity of thought, reminiscent of Parkhurst's pragmatic teaching style.

Beyond this thesis discovering new places in scholarship, this project explores our basic assumptions about the legacy of pedagogical progressivism, its place in contemporary homeschooling and the ways that the lessons of these scholars are still relevant today. Other scholars have analyzed progressive education and homeschooling as parallel structures, both vital but separate. Analyzing these movements together finds unstudied connections that contribute to the rich history of radical schooling in American history as Holt's philosophies exemplify the many continuities with the pedagogical progressives before him. Much of his framework, lack of trust in schools, the romantic view of children, and reform mindedness ground themselves in progressive ideology. He borrowed Dewey's conception of community, Parkhurst's pragmatism, and Washburne's push for psychological health then synthesized them to come to a radically different conclusion. These connections represent the diversity and

malleability of reform movements and the possibility of bringing change in a democratic society. Even within the same ideological tradition, there are countless ways to interpret the solution to a common problem. While on the surface some movements may appear fractured, understanding the ways that intellectual schools of thought communicate with each other is an essential step in advancing scholarship.

None of this, however, is to say that pedagogical progressivism and homeschooling were the same ideology. They were informed by different traditions, were of different eras, and importantly viewed the purpose of the classroom differently. It is the connections between these two movements that was essential to the development of contemporary homeschooling. Reflecting at the current moment in the nation's history, one where a majority of primary school students are online schooling, philosophies of learning both inside and outside the classroom are important to consider. In 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic forced a tectonic shift in educational practices, creating new opportunity for alternative schooling options. In a certain respect, almost every American student suddenly became homeschooled. Progressive educators and homeschoolers of the twentieth century would likely marvel at the technological advances of today and one could only surmise what they might think of an online learning experience. Even after life returns to a new normal, education will be changed forever. In recovering and reconstructing education post COVID-19, Holt and the progressives still offer relevant lessons, representing the continued viability and presence of their ideologies.

Online schooling is both an informally social and isolating place for students. Unstructured online time feeds informal social interactions and unstructured collaboration, which was a cornerstone of pedagogical progressive education. The unschooling movement also embraced the utility of free social interaction, allowing children to learn at their own pace,

prompted by their own educational desires. Public schools have limited options for unique classes, but the flexibility of online schooling could broaden the course catalog, allowing students to pursue academic passions that were previously unavailable. Expanding this catalog to include classes from other schools, in disciplines that would otherwise be unavailable, could help fulfill the progressive mission of self-exploration in the classroom.

Many students are faced with the advantages and disadvantages of their own independence in an online class. They are confronted with choices to cheat, collaborate with others, or do their work earnestly. Similar to Washburne's policy of tacitly allowing cheating, online schooling subscribes to some of the freedoms that Holt and the progressive pedagogues spoke about. In some ways, the current makeup of online schooling is an experiment in unschooling. Students have the internet at their fingertips, able to further research any idea they hear during class. Students can also simply turn off their cameras and leave. This kind of academic freedom could allow for more creativity, but as experience has shown, academic freedom also comes with drawbacks.

Although the short- and long-term effects of online schooling are still undetermined, online schooling reflects a modified homeschooling experience where both the lessons of Holt and the progressives are relevant. Educational scholars have already begun to look at the ways in which a year of online schooling has affected the almost 1.6 billion students worldwide who were forced out of school.¹⁶⁴ Although smaller in scope, students displaced by the 2005 Pakistan earthquake for three months lost almost one and a half years of schooling.¹⁶⁵ As researcher Michelle Kaffenberger identified, the loss of learning manifested slowly over time, with grade three students having lost a year and a half as measured in year ten.¹⁶⁶ Education loss appears to be an exponential curve, where brief interruptions early in life can have tremendous effects later

on. Perhaps research from Washburne's experimental classroom could be of aid, where he intentionally delayed reading development for students to test its long-term effects. Overall, keeping children who are conditioned to learn in an in-person setting are suffering with online schooling and to move forward, one must think creatively.

In contemplating how to reconstruct a school system in a post-COVID world, the work of the progressives and Holt offer's some advice, reflecting their relevance as both a way to look forward and a continued presence in contemporary schooling. To begin, student mental health has suffered greatly as a result of the pandemic. Following in the footsteps of Holt and Washburne, mental health services should continue to proliferate through public schools. Online alternatives for counseling for both administrative and mental health services have expanded since the pandemic, and these options should continue to be available.¹⁶⁷ To combat the loneliness and loss of community felt as a result of the pandemic, schools would benefit from the lessons of Holt. The school community should be an inclusive and non-threatening place, one where any student can feel welcome. Parkhurst would add that a student in the community must pull their own weight and be an active member. The transition back to in person learning will likely come with any number of unforeseen complications but focusing on the student should be the first priority. The academic damage of the pandemic had not only been felt in schools. As progressive education sought to educate the whole child, the non-academic damage will become apparent when in person education resumes. The loss of learning in the past year is also compounded by a loss of socialization and developmental milestones. Especially for younger students, teachers and administrators should pay special attention to how students socialize. While these are only brief hypotheticals about what a "new-normal" should look like, it is clear

that the lessons of progressives and homeschoolers are still with us. In looking to an uncertain future, revisiting the past can be a useful tool.

There are other critical questions that progressive education or contemporary homeschooling has yet to solve for. How can we equitably educate students of color who may not have reliable internet access? How has this affected their development? If schools create a hybrid learning environment, how will this change learning? What about students who opt-out of in person learning? While these questions are at our doorstep, looking back on the history of radical schooling traditions reflects that these questions are not new. As Phil Donahue asked John Holt in 1981, “How should we reform schools?” We are grappling with this question no more than ever. From progressivism to Holt and to Moore to Glazner, these strains of thought are decades, and soon centuries old. We must adapt to a new normal, never forgetting the students that may be left behind, the ones Holt, Dewey, Washburne, and Parkhurst fought so valiantly for. The tireless work of these 20th century educators still has much to teach us and at a moment where America has the opportunity to radically reconstruct its educational system, these lessons should not be soon forgotten.

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