

# Redefining High School Education: The Journey of The Lynnhaven School in Embracing Progressive Education in the Modern Era

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## Abstract

*This article revisits the integration of Progressive Education Theory in the 21st century, highlighting The Lynnhaven School, Richmond, Virginia, a private high school based on Progressive Education Theory. Established in 2012 in response to the restrictive nature of traditional education, Lynnhaven has curricula based on six competencies: knowledge, understanding, discernment, innovation, community, and well-being. Drawing from John Dewey's progressive educational philosophies, The Lynnhaven School merges a decolonized curriculum to nurture competent, civic-minded, emotionally resilient, life-ready students in the modern era of education. This academic model embraces mental health, preparing students for life after high school.*

*Keywords:* Progressive Education, Decolonized Curriculum, Experiential Learning

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### Introduction

Progressive education may be the most enduring educational reform movement in the United States of America, with a life span of about one hundred years (Semel & Sadovnik, 1999). John Dewey, often referred to as the father of the progressive education movement, was at the forefront. His seminal work, *Democracy and Education*, underscores the belief that education should extend beyond mere knowledge acquisition to foster individual development and prepare students for effective participation in a democratic society (Dewey, 1916). Dewey championed the idea of learning through doing, advocating for an educational system that mirrors the complexities of life and prepares students for the realities they will face outside the classroom walls. In today's contemporary educational landscape, a significant shift in the ideals of progressive education has centered on the drive for an academic curriculum and high stakes in the name of enhancing US competitiveness in a global marketplace (Ryan, 1995). The debate about having school standards, curricula, and which methods are the best for teaching and learning are traced back to the origins of the American school system.

Lynnhaven School, established in 2010, is an independent day school for grades 9-12 in Richmond, Virginia, rooted in Progressive Education. The school represents a bold response to the constraints of traditional public and private schooling systems. At its core, The Lynnhaven School seeks to provide a nurturing environment that promotes holistic development—intellectually, emotionally, and socially—for each student in the modern era. The school's approach to education intentionally aligns with the ideals proposed by John Dewey and others, who envisioned education as a fundamental instrument for social progress and individual growth (Dewey, 1916). This article highlights Lynnhaven's mission to harness a transformative approach to education that challenges the status quo of schooling. By integrating

Progressive education theory into its operational DNA, Lynnhaven attempts to address its students' immediate needs and contributes to the broader discourse on educational reform, much like its Progressive education predecessors.

### **Theoretical Framework of Progressive Education**

In the first half of the 20th century, progressive educator and philosopher John Dewey was associated with the Industrial Education movement (Ravitch, 2000). At the heart of John Dewey's philosophy of education is the conviction that education should be an active and engaging process where learning is linked to real-life experiences and societal participation (Dewey, 1938). This principle challenged the industrial education system of the time, which Dewey critiqued for its passive absorption of disconnected facts. Dewey's emphasis on the importance of reflective thought and the application of knowledge to solve real-world problems is evident in his assertion that education is not preparation for life; education is life itself (Dewey, 1899). This assertion underscores education's transformative potential as a continuous growth and development process.

Dewey examined education systems throughout his career, distinguishing traditional and progressive educational philosophies. In his book, *The School and Society*, Dewey (1899) laid out the theoretical framework for progressive education and emphasized the importance of experiential learning. Dewey (1938) argues that neither traditional nor newly emerging progressive forms of education were adequate in their pure forms, advocating for a balanced approach that takes the best of both. Dewey critiques traditional education's rigid adherence to rote memorization and passive absorption of predetermined knowledge. He believed this approach to education was often disconnected from students' interests and experiences, which needed to be considered through the learning process. He saw this approach as overly authoritarian and stifling to students' intellectual and social development (Dewey, 1938). According to Dewey, traditional methods fail to recognize the learner's active role in constructing knowledge and do not encourage critical thinking or problem-solving skills.

### **Integration of the Progressive Education Framework in the Modern Era**

The practical application of Progressive education at The Lynnhaven School represents a dynamic synthesis of Dewey's visionary principles with modern pedagogical approaches and innovations. Though the emergence of progressive education in the modern era represents a significant advancement, the commitment to a decolonized and inclusive curriculum introduces a paradox, highlighting a departure from early 20th-century practices where the curriculum was deeply colonized. The approach to inclusive curriculum is the most significant deviation from Progressive education.

The landscape of modern education is complex. The quest to reconcile theory with practice remains at the forefront of pedagogical innovation. It has been the great paradox in the American education system since its inception over 300 years ago with the opening of the Boston Latin School. At the heart of this exploration lies the philosophies of Dewey and others whose theories on Progressive Education have catalyzed a reevaluation of conventional teaching methodologies. Dewey's *Laboratory School: Lessons for Today* is a pivotal case study in applying Dewey's educational philosophies in the modern era (Tanner, 1997).

### **Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning, conceptualized by David Kolb, emphasizes the critical role of experience in the learning process. Kolb's (1984) model, rooted in the works of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget, posits that learning is a cyclic process involving four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This theory underscores that effective learning occurs when individuals can engage in a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Dewey (1938) argued that education should be grounded in real-life experiences and that reflective thinking is essential for meaningful learning. Dewey's philosophy, which advocates for learning through active participation and reflection, significantly informs Kolb's experiential learning theory, bridging theoretical concepts with practical application. Experiential learning is a dynamic and integrative

educational approach that places students at the center of real-world, complex problems, necessitating their engagement in research, problem-solving, and project execution over extended periods. This method, a core component of progressive education frameworks, heavily draws on Dewey's principles of experiential learning. Dewey articulated that learning is most impactful when it is an active and socially interactive process, suggesting that knowledge emerges from the interaction between learners and their environment (1938). The Lynnhaven School actualizes the experiential learning approach by immersing students in deep investigations that require synthesizing knowledge across various disciplines, thus promoting a holistic learning experience.

### **Example of Experiential Learning at The Lynnhaven School**

The integration of experiential learning within the Environmental Science curriculum at The Lynnhaven School exemplifies a progressive educational model that is both immersive and hands-on. Central to this innovative pedagogical approach is experiential learning investigating a historically and environmentally significant event: Virginia Governor Mills Godwin Jr.'s closure of the James River to fishing in December 1975. This inquiry captivates students' interests and serves as a multidimensional platform for exploring interconnected themes such as policy analysis, environmental justice, historical context, and the development of communication skills.

To augment their theoretical understanding and directly engage with the subject matter, students are immersed in experiential learning, such as visits to the James River, where they can observe and analyze the ecological impact and recovery firsthand. These experiential learning opportunities are further complemented by collaborations with organizations like the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, which enable students to contextualize their projects within broader environmental conservation and advocacy efforts. These partnerships extend the learning environment beyond the traditional classroom boundaries and introduce students to the complexities and challenges of real-world environmental stewardship.

The students also engage with policymakers and politicians at the General Assembly, offering them insights into the legislative and policy-making realms that shape environmental regulations. These interactions provide a practical understanding of the intricacies of ecological governance, policy formulation, and the pivotal role of civic engagement in influencing public health and environmental protection measures.

The holistic approach to experiential learning at The Lynnhaven School embodies the principles of progressive education by fostering a comprehensive and integrative educational experience. Students are not merely passive recipients of knowledge; they become actively involved in a learning journey that spans multiple disciplines and real-world applications. Students develop critical life skills through this learning process, including problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, and effective communication. They cultivate a sense of civic responsibility and environmental ethics, equipping them to address and navigate the challenges at the intersection of environmental science, policy, and community engagement.

### **Steps to Implementation of Experiential Learning**

1. **Lesson Introduction:** The lesson begins by introducing the students to the closure of the James River to fishing in December 1975. This topic is a gateway to exploring various themes such as policy analysis, environmental justice, historical context, and communication.
2. **Research:** Students will engage in online research about the James River and devise questions, comments, and opinions organically, propelling conversations and dialogues as they progress through the lesson.
3. **Field Experiences:** Students participate in field trips to the James River to enhance their understanding. These visits provide firsthand observation opportunities, enabling students to study the ecological impact and recovery efforts directly.
4. **Collaborative Partnerships:** The curriculum incorporates collaborations with external organizations like the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. These partnerships offer students broader perspectives on environmental conservation, linking classroom learning to real-world advocacy and stewardship efforts.

5. **Engagement with Policymakers:** Students can interact with policymakers and legislators at the General Assembly and local government officials. These engagements offer insights into the processes that shape environmental regulations and underscore the importance of civic participation in public health and environmental protection initiatives.
6. **Skill Development:** Throughout the unit of study, students work on developing a range of essential skills, including problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, and effective communication. These competencies are vital for their growth as informed and responsible citizens.
7. **Civic Responsibility and Environmental Ethics:** The lesson aims to instill students' sense of civic duty and environmental ethics. They are prepared to face and address the complex challenges at the intersection of environmental science, policy, and community engagement. They are ready to make positive contributions to society and the environment.

This step-by-step implementation of experiential learning demonstrates an example of a progressive education model that prepares students for the complexities of the modern world. It aligns with and advances Dewey's educational philosophies for future learning environments.

### **Decolonized and Inclusive Curriculum: Absent During the Progressive Era**

While John Dewey is celebrated for his foundational contributions to progressive education, emphasizing experiential learning, democracy in education, and social interaction, it is vital to acknowledge the limitations in his discourse, particularly concerning race and racism. Dewey's extensive body of work, pivotal in shaping educational theory and practice, often falls short of explicitly addressing the intricacies of race and the systemic nature of racism within the educational system and society at large. Educational scholars have critiqued Dewey for this oversight, pointing out that despite his progressive stance on many issues, there needs to be a thorough engagement with race matters. While revolutionary in advocating for a child-centered approach and developing critical thinking skills, Dewey's philosophy does not directly confront the challenges posed by racial inequality (Ryan, 1995). This gap is significant, considering the impact that race and racism have on educational equity and social justice. Dewey's theoretical framework largely overlooks the racial prejudices and discrimination that pervade American society. This omission is notable given the era in which Dewey wrote when racial segregation and discrimination were legally and socially enforced in the United States (Kloppenber, 1986). To address these criticisms, contemporary educators and scholars advocate for integrating Dewey's progressive educational principles with a more explicit focus on racial justice and anti-racism. The Lynnhaven School embraces these principles and intentionally incorporates modern and contemporary approaches to decolonizing the curriculum. This involves critically examining and revising curricular content, teaching practices, and educational policies to confront racial biases and inequalities head-on, ensuring that progressive education promotes inclusivity and equity for all students (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### **Balancing Act: Modernized School Week**

The weekly structure at The Lynnhaven School offers a reduced schedule of core academic days complemented by a day dedicated to electives, internships, or early release, which mirrors the progressive education principles advocated by John Dewey. Dewey (1938) believed education should be a social process focused on the individual's well-being, fostering a balance between acquiring knowledge and developing personal interests. The modern approach to an academic workweek anchors the school's interpretation of this philosophical belief. By allocating Fridays for experiential learning and personal growth opportunities, The Lynnhaven School reduces academic hours, in line with research supporting the link between fewer structured academic hours and improved student well-being, and actively applies Dewey's educational philosophy (Basch, 2011). Dewey (1902) asserted that education must extend beyond the transmission of facts to include experiences contributing to students' physical, emotional, and social growth. This approach recognizes that the well-being of students is as crucial as their academic development and that real-world experiences are invaluable to the learning process.

The Lynnhaven School's schedule encapsulates Dewey's view that education should be tailored to the development of each student, accommodating their individual needs and interests. The flexibility inherent in this schedule allows students to engage in diverse learning activities that foster autonomy and responsibility, aligning with Dewey's (1916) vision of education as preparation for democratic participation in society. The modern schedule is a strategic educational choice and reflects a more profound philosophical commitment to developing engaged, well-rounded individuals. It stands as a modern embodiment of Dewey's progressive ideals, emphasizing the importance of creating educational experiences that are meaningful, engaging, and conducive to students' overall development as they prepare to navigate the complexities of the world.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The Lynnhaven School's journey of adopting Progressive Education Theory in the modern era affirms Dewey's vision, interwoven with the complexities of present-day educational demands. The school is committed to fostering an education reflective of real-life experiences and societal changes.

Dewey's contributions to Progressive Education laid the groundwork for such an approach, the practicalities of educational reform often reveal a gap between theory and application. The Lynnhaven School's efforts to decolonize its curriculum and adopt an inclusive pedagogy address this gap, moving beyond Dewey's original scope to confront issues of race and equity that were not fully articulated or addressed in his era. This evolution within Progressive Education reflects the school's understanding that the ethos of inclusivity and responsiveness to societal shifts is not static but requires constant reevaluation and adaptation.

The Lynnhaven School remains dedicated to nurturing students to become informed, engaged, and responsible citizens capable of contributing positively to a diverse and dynamic society. In doing so, it honors the spirit of Progressive Education while plotting new paths that align practice more closely with theory.

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