

The gendered boundaries of child-centred education: Elsie Ripley Clapp and the history of US progressive education

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This paper analyses how historical narratives of the 1930s conflict between child-centred and social reconstructionist factions of US progressive education reinforce gendered constructions of education. The split between these two groups has been drawn along lines of gender with child-centred education associated with female educators focused on individual development and social reconstructionists comprised of university male faculty working for social justice. The work of Elsie Ripley Clapp, an active proponent of rural progressive education in the 1920s and 1930s, is used to illustrate the limitations of accepted categorisations of progressive education. The focus on Clapp points to new ways of framing the ideological tensions within the progressive education movement and highlights how the politics of gender influence which educators are remembered as leaders and activists. The paper argues that the recent renewal of interest in social reconstructionism should include a critique of its oppositional and hierarchical relation to female progressive educators.

Keywords: history of education; gender and teaching; progressive education; feminist historiography

Introduction

The ideological differences between child-centred progressives and social reconstructionists were a defining breach within the progressive education movement of the 1930s. While each group encompassed a range of beliefs, child-centred progressives generally promoted educational experimentalism to support the natural development of the ‘whole child’ and social reconstructionist progressives saw schools as sites for transforming society along more equitable and co-operative lines. Certainly other contingents vied for control of schools’ educational mission, but the contentious relationship between these groups was pivotal to the self-definition of progressive education.

The elusiveness of a single definition is a recurring theme in writings on progressive education. Historians’ accounts of educational change in the early twentieth century provide different accounts of the relationship between school reform and other social and political movements as well the accuracy of describing such a range of educational beliefs as a ‘movement’. These varying accounts of progressive education illustrate how typologies of education are not simply ‘found’ categories exempt from historical interpretation. Scholars influenced by the linguist turn have been particularly

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interested in how narratives shape our conceptions of historical significance (Cohen and Depaepe 1996; Weiler 1998; Popkewitz, Pereyra, and Franklin 2001). In so doing, the focus shifts from accurate representation of the past to the linguistic construction of knowledge. As Scott states, 'History is in the paradoxical position of creating the objects it claims only to discover' (1996a, 10). This is not to mean that historians do not use standards of evidence or that historical research is irrelevant. Scott's point is that there is no 'real past' that is separate from, and can be captured by, historical interpretation.

This paper builds on the existing historiography of US progressive education by using gender to analyse categories of progressive education. In doing so, it provides an example of how historical narratives can reinscribe gendered constructions of education (Maher 2001; Moyer 2001; Munro 1998a, b; Smith 1998; Weiler 2006). The division between child-centred and social reconstructionist educators within the Progressive Education Association (PEA) was not simply a split caused by differing educational goals. The boundaries of social reconstructionism rely on a repudiation of child-centred education. This definition by disavowal of child-centred pedagogies reflects and reproduces gendered norms of schooling and social change. As noted by Nusser (1996), the child-centred/social reconstructionist divide mirrored a fissure between male theorists in university positions and predominantly female practitioners. Furthermore, later historical accounts have largely neglected gender's influence on the dynamics of 1930s progressive education and contemporary historians' interpretations of the time (Weiler 2006).

More specifically, I will use the work of Elsie Ripley Clapp, an active proponent of progressive education in the 1920s and 1930s, as an example of the limitations of the accepted categorisations of progressive education. Clapp's work does not fit easily into existing historical frameworks for understanding progressive education. Although commonly classified as child-centred, her work draws on themes from both child-centred and social reconstructionist progressive education. The focus on Clapp points to new ways of framing the ideological tensions within the progressive education movement and highlights the role of gender in shaping the historical construction of progressive education (Munro 1998a).

Multiple progressives

The numerous philosophical differences that distinguished the educational approaches of the early twentieth century are often lost under the deceptively homogenous-sounding label of 'progressive education'. As noted by Wraga, characterising the numerous factions of progressive education as a single movement is 'treacherous business, easily susceptible to false generalizations and misinterpretations' (1994, 4). Different trends such as intelligence testing, Freudian-based schooling, and the growing administrative power of educational experts have all been categorised as progressive education. Historians have further differentiated among progressive educators through categories such as 'scientists, sentimentalists, and radicals' (Cremin 1961), 'child developmentalism, social reconstructionism and social efficiency' (Kliebard 1987) and 'pedagogical and administrative progressives' (Tyack 1974). Although historians disagree upon the extent to which progressivism impacted the majority of public schools, the first two decades of the twentieth century reflected a significant shift in what was regarded as modern education. The continued influence of these changes establishes progressive education as replete in historical lessons. Semel and

Sadovnik (1995), for example, explore progressive experiments such as the Dalton and City and Country Schools to inform current attempts at educational reform. For them, the histories of these schools ‘teach us significant lessons about school leadership, community, shared decision making, and the forces that affect school change (Semel and Sadovnik 1995, 81). In contrast, Ravitch (2000) sees progressive education as attacking the academic mission of the schools. Reviving 1950s criticisms that placed responsibility for all educational problems on progressive education, Ravitch describes progressive education as promoting ideas that ‘raised doubts about the value of a solid academic education for anyone’ (2000, 60). Despite different assessments of the legacy of progressive education, critics and advocates agree on its enduring significance to current discussion of educational reform.

Most historians locate the ideological differences that divided progressive educators in the 1930s within two key groups: child-centred progressives and social reconstructionist progressives. Prior to the 1930s, child-centred progressives dominated the approach of the PEA since its founding in 1919. They were primarily educators at private schools who, although reluctant to endorse specific guidelines, promoted student self-expression and initiative, attention to theories of child-development, student-centred rather than subject-centred instruction, and schools as sites for educational innovation (De Lima 1948; Pratt 1948). Child-centred educators targeted traditional methods of instruction such as rote memorisation as a hindrance to natural development. Stanwood Cobb describes the movement in 1928 as ‘a revolt of parents as well as of educators ... against the tyranny of a curriculum the content-value of which is as nothing in comparison with the actual development of the child in ways wholesome, inspiring, and natural’ (1928, 25).

The hardships of the depression and growing criticism of the US economic and political system altered what constituted progressive education. Promoting the perspective of social reconstructionism, professors such as George Counts and Harold Rugg at Teachers College, challenged what they perceived as the individualistic, politically non-committal platform of the PEA. They pushed for teachers to take a more active role in changing social and economic structures. Believing that capitalism would give way to a more collective economy, they thought schools had a crucial role in instilling the values of co-operation and social interdependence that would be necessary in the new social and economic order.

Tensions over the philosophy of the PEA came to a head at the 1932 annual conference when Counts delivered his speech, ‘Dare Progressive Education Be Progressive?’, challenging the organisation to accept the mission of social reconstruction. Counts urged the organisation to abandon its fears of the ‘bogeys of imposition and indoctrination’ in order to promote a vision of social betterment (1932, 259). In addition to sparking new questions on the meaning of progressive education and the role of schools in social change, his speech signalled the declining influence of the original child-centred founders of the PEA.

Child-centred/social reconstructionist split in education historiography

Historical accounts of progressive education often present the relationship between child-centred and social reconstructionist progressives as dichotomous extremes that are ‘warring factions’ and ‘oppositional camps’ (Bowers 1969; Cremin 1961; Graham 1967). Such characterisations give a false impression of unity and veil the range of approaches contained under each heading (Chung and Walsh 2000). For example,

while Boyd Bode and George Counts had very different ideas about the role of schools in social reform, these differences are often obscured when collapsed under the heading of social reconstructionism (Bowers 1970, 29). This erasure of differences is even more striking when discussing child-centred approaches. Though child-centred schools shared many common features, they also differed depending on the specific philosophy of their founders (Semel 1999). Semel and Sadovnik's (1995) comparison of progressive education in the past and present highlights the limitations of relying on categories of efficiency, child-centredness, and social reconstructionism. Their focus on practices at specific schools explores 'progressive non-uniformity in relation to location, place, and local social and cultural forces' (Kincheloe 1999, xiiv).

Exploring the constitutive role of the categories of educational historiography provides new possibilities for understanding the 'non-uniformity' of progressive education. The range of progressive practices benefits from exploring the relationship between these two categories in progressive education historiography. Seeing child-centred/social reconstructionist approaches as oppositional camps masks the range of progressive practices that drew from both the child-centred and social reconstructionist positions. Because they fail to fit within the categories of the historical discourse, hybrid approaches are often omitted from our record of progressive contributions.

Progressive categories and the construction of gender

The history of the field of education is a persuasive example of 'the institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life' that construct gender (de Lauretis 1987, 2). Education is infused with gendered and depictions of women as 'natural' teachers of young children and men as abstract producers of knowledge (Maher 2001; Walkerdine 1992). Research since the 1970s has documented the pervasive effects of gender inequality in curriculum and pedagogy. More recently, feminist scholars in education have drawn on poststructuralist work in history and philosophy to understand identity as inscribed by and against gender discourses.

The categories of progressive education serve to reinforce dominant constructions of gender. Joan Scott's (1988) attention to the formative role of exclusions and hierarchy in historiography is particularly useful in scrutinising the categories of progressive education. In describing how meaning is constructed through opposition and contrast she states:

Fixed oppositions conceal the heterogeneity of either category, the extent to which terms presented as oppositional are interdependent – that is, derive their meaning from internally established contrast rather than from some inherent or pure antithesis. Furthermore, the interdependence is usually hierarchical, with one term dominant, prior, and visible, the opposite subordinate, secondary, and often absent or invisible. (Scott 1988, 7)

Using gender as a category of analysis brings several features of the division between child-centred and social reconstructionist educators to the forefront. This division predominantly falls along lines of gender and rigidly defines the ranks of social reconstructionists. This split serves to maintain the borders of social reconstructionism through its opposition and repudiation of child-centredness. Though men occasionally are included in the ranks of child-centred educators (e.g. Stanwood Cobb), I am unaware of any accounts that identify a woman as a social reconstructionist. Another

striking feature of the assumed split between child-centred and social reconstructionist approaches is the association of the former with a narrow, individualist focus, and the latter with a larger commitment to social justice (Crocco, Munro, and Weiler 1999; McDonough 1999; Munro, 1998a; Nusser 1996; Rousmaniere 2005).

Child-centred progressive education is often defined such that it precludes social commitments extending beyond the individual child. Munro argues that the commitments to social change and the political efforts of educators such as Lucy Sprague Mitchell and Caroline Pratt 'have been obscured by gendered assumptions embedded in the term child-centeredness' (1998a, 282). As will be discussed further in reference to Clapp, the opposition between child-centred and social reconstructionist educators presents women as barriers to social progress and as lacking concern for broader social issues. Bowers, for example, describes the two factions as holding 'opposing points of view on the school's responsibility for social reform' (1969, 4). Similarly, Cremin describes social reformism as 'virtually eclipsed by the rhetoric of child-centered pedagogy' after World War I (1961, 181). Despite the strong political commitments of many child-centred educators, characterisations of their work often reflect gendered assumptions that deny their social convictions and their recognition of the socio-political implications of pedagogy. Bode's 1938 assessment of child-centred educators continues as a strong theme in contemporary assessments of child-centred progressive education:

The progressive movement draws its chief inspiration from a certain sentimentality about children. This sentimentality, so it appears, leads to a lot of unedifying fussiness, which is camouflaged as 'respect for personality,' but is not intended to be really subversive. There is no intention of changing the established values of society beyond the point of spreading more sweetness and light. With respect to these values the teachers in our progressive schools are frequently as conventional as the buttons on the sleeve of a man's coat. (10–11)

Women teachers are dismissed as mere emotional ornamentation to the real work of theorising the role of schools in social reform.

Janie Nusser's (1996) analysis of the role of gender in the PEA identifies the child-centred/social reconstructionist divide as a split between the male theorists leading the progressive education movement and the predominantly female practitioners. According to Nusser's review of *Progressive Education* during the 1920s and 1930s, this shift in leadership was accompanied by an increase in the number of articles that focused on theory rather than practice and by decreased attention to the education of young children. Nusser regards these changes as the masculinisation of the organisation and the devaluation of child-centred, practice-oriented concerns. Her work highlights the importance of gender in relation to transitions and divisions within the PEA. For Nusser, the very qualities that were criticised in progressive education – the focus on creativity, the lack of a cohesive philosophy, and a child-centred approach – were those associated with women and women's work.

Characterising child-centred progressives as lacking a broader social vision is not isolated to the wave of secondary literature on progressive education published in the 1960s. In a recent account of progressive education, Zilversmit (1993) describes the social reconstructionists as helping 'to restore a balance within the progressive education movement. They led an effort to recover Dewey's vision of the progressive school as an institution concerned with social reform, a vision that had been all but lost in the individualistic, child-centered progressivism of the 1920s' (1993, 18). This depiction

of the two groups of progressives reinscribes the split that associates social reconstructionists with social reform and child-centred educators with a nurturing individualism. Interestingly, some accounts fault both camps of progressive education for falling victim to extremism, but the quote above depicts the social reconstructionists as bringing much needed balance, restoring a vision of social reform almost lost due to the faulty ministrations of child-centred educators. Despite these differences, Zilversmit underscores the similarities of these progressives in comparisons to other, more politically conservative, educational reform movements of the time. He compares disagreements among child-centred and social progressives to ‘quarrels within a family in which the members share a core of common assumptions’ (1993, 18).

The family metaphor deserves to be pursued. If we see progressive education as a family, John Dewey would be the grand patriarch. Historians commonly judge different factions of progressive education according to their adherence to Dewey’s conceptions of progressive education. The degrees of allowed latitude were often narrower for women. Women educators who worked with well-known men were expected to be ‘dutiful daughters’ (Munro 1998a, 272), who faithfully carry on their mentors’ traditions. Of the many who departed from Dewey’s frequently ambiguous discussions of educational philosophy, it is often the child-centred female educators who were judged harshly. The dismissal of the child-centred educators seems to be not only a judgement of the daughter who wanders from the work of the seminal father but a disavowal of the feminine features linked with child-centred education (Munro 1998a; Nusser 1996).

Elsie Ripley Clapp and a broadened progressivism

The work of Elsie Ripley Clapp helps broaden our understanding of the range of approaches to progressive education and the limitations of the child-centred/social reconstructionist framework. Because it represents features of both child-centred and social reconstructionist approaches, Clapp’s work does not fit easily into existing historical frameworks for understanding progressive education. Clapp’s use of aspects of child-centred and social reconstructionist approaches is an important example of work that remains largely unexplored in the history of progressive education. Clapp made significant contributions to the progressive education movement in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in her application of progressive education to rural schools. After serving as a principal in Ballard, Kentucky, Clapp was selected by Eleanor Roosevelt to be the school and community director of the first homestead community of the New Deal. The federally subsidised creation of the town of Arthurdale in West Virginia must have seemed to Clapp to be a once in a lifetime opportunity to build a school and community from the ground up. But the government decision to reject families’ applications based on race and politics is one illustration of the contrived and politically expedient notion of community that undergirded the homestead (Perlstein 1996).

Despite her leadership of the Arthurdale educational experiment, her editorship of *Progressive Education* from 1937 to 1939, and her influential approach to educational reform, historians have largely overlooked Clapp’s work. Only recently have scholars explored Elsie Ripley Clapp’s approach to community-based schooling and her experiences as a woman educational leader and administrator (Moyer 2001, 2004; Perlstein 1996; Perstein and Stack 1999; Stack 2004). Stack’s 2004 biography, *Elsie Ripley Clapp (1879–1965): Her Life and the Community School*, provides much-needed attention to her lifetime involvement in education innovation. This

focus, however, is on her life experiences and contributions to progressive education rather than as a site for understanding gender dynamics.

Traditionally, educational historians' references to Clapp are in the context of her collaboration with John Dewey at Columbia University and the influence of his educational philosophy on her work. Her name appears only twice in Cremin's comprehensive study of progressive education and then only to direct the reader to Dewey's introduction to her book. A recent example is *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform*. Despite the title 'Elsie Clapp's Contributions to Community Schools', the chapter deals with her application of Dewey's theories rather than her own innovations (Benson, Harkavay, and Puckett 2007).

In her 1967 book on progressive education, Graham mentions Clapp only briefly, using her name to represent the far end of the continuum of reactions to Counts's controversial 1932 address to the PEA convention and describing her as being 'categorically opposed' to any kind of 'indoctrination'. Clapp's name also appears in a listing of individuals described as 'child-oriented' in opposition to the 'social-minded' group of PEA members. Similarly, Bowers's one mention of Clapp in his study of progressive educators during the Depression describes Clapp as 'denouncing' Counts's report from the PEA committee on Social and Economic problems as 'too negative' (1969, 36). Bowers omits, however, the remainder of Clapp's comments in which she calls for economic criticisms to be tied to specific solutions. In Bowers's account, Clapp serves as a foil to Counts's commitment to social change, an impediment to the realisation of education's radical potential.

Clapp's (1932) response to Counts's speech at the 1932 PEA annual conference reveals the inadequacy of a dualistic construction of progressive education. Her response does not fall neatly into a readily identifiable 'individualist' or 'child-centred' position, nor can one simply equate child-centred approaches with an abandonment of social conscience (Rowan 1969). Clapp, in fact, concurs with Counts that educators must not only serve the individual needs of students but must also accept a responsibility 'to participate in changing the social conditions in which we live' (1932, 271). Clapp's objection to Counts's use of 'indoctrination' is not a naive argument for educator neutrality; she acknowledges that 'conscious and unconscious indoctrination, of course, indubitably happens'. Rather, she argues, 'Revolutionizing is the *process* of living and learning and doing' (1932, 271). Influenced by the guiding Deweyan principle of growth, Clapp argues that one cannot know in advance the final social goal.

Clapp serves as an interesting deviation from the usual characterisations of the PEA leaders that equates female/practitioner/child-centred, on the one hand, and male/professor/social reconstructionist, on the other. Clapp's educational and professional background joined characterisations associated with child-centred progressivism with experiences traditionally associated with social reconstructionism. Clapp's work as a female educator in child-centred schools, combined with her teaching at Columbia University and association with Dewey and Kilpatrick, placed her between the commonly understood categories of practitioner and academic that grew increasingly contentious in the PEA.

Much of Clapp's professional career was consistent with the traditional profile of the child-centred members of the PEA. She worked in several private progressive schools including Ashley Hall in South Carolina (1913–14), Brooklyn Heights Seminary in New York (1914–21), and Milton Academy in Massachusetts (1921–22).

Clapp also spent a year teaching 7th grade at one of the most well-known child-centred progressive schools, the City and Country School. These positions offered the opportunity to interact with key child-centred leaders such as Caroline Pratt and Lucy Sprague Mitchell and to introduce progressive curriculum into schools that had formally relied upon a traditional educational approach (Stack 1999).

Like many teachers and administrators in the PEA, Clapp's pedagogical expertise was confined to affluent private schools in the Northeast. In 1928, however, a southern school committee seeking pedagogical innovation discussed their ideas for a new school with Clapp. Evidently, Clapp's ideas for using Ballard as the site for an 'experiment in rural education' were persuasive (1939, 6). The committee appointed Clapp principal and agreed to supplement the public school budget with an additional \$10,000 from parents and the County Board of Education. Clapp expressed her appreciation for the community's financial and emotional commitment to this educational experiment by acknowledging that the 'dream' of progressive education at Ballard was made possible by the parents' and Board's 'vision and efforts' (1939, 6).

In accepting the position, Clapp made a geographic and intellectual move that would redefine her scholarship. Clapp would go on to head the Arthurdale homestead school and highlight the health and educational challenges of rural schools in her books, articles in *Progressive Education*, and lectures to groups such as the Child Welfare Organization of America, the National Education Association, and the New Era Organization (Elsie Ripley Clapp Papers,¹ hereafter ERCP, Box 1, Folder 1).

Clapp expanded the narrow confines of the PEA to include schools as community centres in economically and geographically remote areas. In doing so, she was part of a longer tradition of women's co-operative work to meet the educational, social, and health needs of rural communities. Rural reformers used schools for community gatherings, distribution of information, and to form men's and women's clubs. In isolated areas, the school was a means of not only educating children but also an entire community. Examples of this approach in rural African-American schools include Jeanes Supervisors' work as community educators and Mabel Carney's promotion of industrial education for racial progress in the Rural Education Program at Teachers College (Hoffschwelle 2001; Littlefield 1999; Weiler 2005). Clapp's concept of teaching from students' surroundings and promoting community co-operation are based in earlier progressive experiments such as the Porter School. In her book on the successes of the Porter School, Evelyn Dewey observes how a school 'can unite and stimulate the whole community' (1919, 51) and that 'the country school must become a real part of the active life of the community' (1919, 322). Clapp's work is inseparable from these earlier examples of schools as community centres.

Even prior to its new beginning as a progressive school and community centre in 1929, the Ballard School had a unique history in Jefferson County compared to other local schools (Clapp 1939). In 1909, Mr and Mrs Thurston Ballard donated the land and financial support for the establishment of the Roger Clark Ballard School in memory of their son. The County Board of Education contributed to the new school by selling the land occupied by two smaller local schools and giving the proceeds in support of this larger, consolidated school. The school opened with about 50 pupils that had attended the smaller schools and the children of Mr and Mrs Ballard's friends and neighbours – students' whose class standing in Kentucky would have normally dictated a private school education. Clapp described the student body as 75% children of small independent or tenant farmers and 25% children of 'prosperous old Kentucky families' (1939, 5). For Clapp, the diverse economic background of the students and

the history of community support of the school made Ballard an ideal location for implementing her ideas on schools as democratic community centres.

The Ballard School proved Clapp's ability to create a progressive school from the ground up. However, this could not have prepared her for the national attention that she and the fledgling community of Arthurdale would receive. The first project of the US Division of Subsistence Homesteads and an experiment in large-scale community-based progressive education, Arthurdale was inundated with visitors and reporters. Eleanor Roosevelt's personal and political investment in the programme magnified newspapers' preoccupation with the details of Arthurdale's development. Roosevelt expedited the creation of Arthurdale after a visit to the coal-mining community of Scott's Run, West Virginia in 1933. The poverty and disease she witnessed at Scott's Run left a lasting impression on Roosevelt (Roosevelt 1949). She was a vocal advocate of Arthurdale and Clapp and made frequent trips to show her support and monitor the community's progress.

Arthurdale's successes and failures became symbolic of the New Deal and the effectiveness of the Roosevelt administration in general. As stated by Haid,

To New Deal critics, it was an extreme example of waste, bureaucratic bungling, and teary-eyed idealism that characterised much of the Roosevelt Administration's reform program. To defenders, Arthurdale was an innovation that would provide a prototype for fundamentally reorienting and reorganising American life along more humane lines. (1975, 1-2)

Clapp, like many advocates of Arthurdale, saw the new community as a desperately needed intervention in an area profoundly affected by poverty. The families who came to live in Arthurdale relocated from the mine camp of Scott's Run in Monongalia County, West Virginia. Already subject to fluctuations in job opportunities, Monongalia County and its coal industry were hit hard by the Depression and massive lay-offs by coal companies. In some camps, virtually all the miners were unemployed (Haid 1975).

The challenges of relocating families to a new settlement that provided housing, schooling, and employment, quickly became apparent. It was clear that the school building would not be finished in time for the fall opening in 1934. Construction was far from finished when the first families moved into their hastily ordered pre-fabricated houses in the summer of 1934. The houses were too small to accommodate the number of people in many of the families, were ill-suited to the weather, and did not fit the foundations that had already been made. The houses had to be renovated at considerable expense and became the first of many targets for those who saw Arthurdale as poorly planned and financially irresponsible (Waldrop 1935). Clapp attempted to launch a social experiment while simultaneously defending its worth to the nation. Clapp wrote in the margin of her scrapbook of press clipping about Arthurdale, 'Reporters constantly sent in by newspapers to find some flaw to exploit' (ERCP, Box 4).

Clapp acknowledged problems such as the small size of the houses but, in keeping with her focus on progress, used it as an example of the architects' 'ingenuity and resourcefulness' in completing the necessary enlargements (1939, 71). Clapp used the same optimism in describing the start of the school term without a building. Realising that the new school buildings would not be ready, residents renovated the old mansion on the property to serve as a temporary elementary school. Completing the renovation in time for the first day of school after considerable community effort was for Clapp

an appropriate beginning for a school conceived as a community centre: 'For two weeks we had all together – fathers, teachers, mothers, children – worked at everything. The School was a reality at last and it was ours – the community's school' (1939, 79).

Arthurdale gave Clapp a unique opportunity to promote her model of schools as community centres. Because of federal funding, the school was able to provide health care, a spacious nursery, co-operative food purchases, and recreational activities. Rural settings also provided opportunities for school/community collaboration impossible in other locations. In reference to Ballard Clapp wrote,

In a city the work of a school is supplemented by medical centers, relief agencies, social centers, places of entertainment, theatres, museums, concert, halls, etc. In a rural district where these other agencies are lacking, the school necessarily performs a variety of functions. (1933, 126)

Clapp used the local resources and activities familiar in students' daily lives to heighten their awareness of historical and social processes. Local history, community projects, and the geographical surroundings were tools for showing students the relevance of what they were learning and to build on their pre-existing knowledge. In the first chapter of *Community Schools in Action* (1939), Clapp discussed Kentucky's landscape, economy, and agricultural production. This knowledge of the state's history and resources allowed Clapp to connect the school's educational goals with their parents' work and activities. For example, drawing on the fact that many of the families in the community owned sheep, the school involved the younger students in a study of wool. The children experimented with washing, carding, and spinning wool, observed shearing on local farms, and discussed modern processes of wool manufacturing. Similarly, students studied local handicrafts such as weaving and fiddle making. Community members demonstrated their skills for students and discussed the processes involved in production. Students created their own products and discussed connections to the crafts of pioneer settlers (ERCP, Box 4, Folder 1).

Clapp was particularly interested in blending the past and the present in her work at the Ballard and Arthurdale schools. The coexistence of tractors with hand ploughs and cars with horse-drawn buggies afforded rich opportunities for the study of history. In her surroundings, Clapp saw 'existing side by side today illustrations of almost all the stages of Kentucky's history' (1939, 16). Old cabins and country trails inspired discussion of Native American tribes in Kentucky and the experiences of European Americans settling the land. To further explore the daily life in a pioneer home, students furnished an abandoned cabin with a spinning wheel, woven rugs, pegged log-stools, and homemade candles and soaps. Later this cabin became the backdrop for a play the students wrote about Daniel Boone and a pioneer family. Quoting from a teacher's year-end report, Clapp highlighted the role of these activities in the educational process: 'Language has meaning to [the students] because they have written when they had something they wanted to say, and I think history has a meaning to them. To them history means life. They think of the pioneers in terms of their own lives' (ERCP, Box 4, Folder 1, 18). Furnishing a pioneer cabin and recreating the daily life activities of early Kentucky and West Virginia settlers was designed to help children make connections between their immediate surroundings and its historical context. These local connections then served as a foundation for learning about other states and countries.

Exploring local history and experimenting in pioneer living exemplified Clapp's commitment to using local resources in the educational process and the progressive education emphasis on hands-on activities. Clapp's writings also suggested such projects were partially motivated by her belief in the children's academic limitations. In her draft manuscript on Ballard, Clapp wrote: 'Inept in book-learning the group had used painting as an approach to their Indian studies' (ERCP Box 4, Folder 1, 43). Perhaps realising that this presents painting as a strategy for dealing with learning deficits rather than valuable in its own right, the phrase 'inept in book-learning' has a line drawn through it.

From its inception, Arthurdale was a constructed community that excluded applicants based on race, politics, and family history. Racism and a fear of political radicalism led to the exclusion of African-Americans and labour organisers from Arthurdale. Despite the presence of a plantation slave cabin on school property, the issue of slavery was not incorporated into the students' studies of the history of their surroundings. The students discussed coal, yet, the relationships between the miners and the coal companies, the history of strikes in the region, and the level of poverty that led to the creation of the homestead remained untouched (Perlstein 1996).

The homesteading plans of the 1930s were steeped in romanticised images of the independent yeoman farmer of pre-industrial America (Haid 1975; Roth, Effland, and Bowers 2002). They were in part an extension of the back-to-the-land movement of the early twentieth century. A complex movement with a diverse constituency, it was easily adaptable to government efforts to encourage agricultural production and slow the migration of people from the country to cities. School activities such as furnishing a pioneer cabin, documenting folk tales, and studying fiddle-making reinforced a simplistic and homogenous concept of Appalachian life and a 'sanitized version of local culture' (Perlstein 1996, 637).

Teachers wrote of residents' 'rural culture' and 'long, unbroken past' of Celtic and Germanic traditions. One teacher described the homesteaders' previous work as coal-miners as an 'infinitesimal' influence compared to the region's longer history: 'There is of course much still to be done. So far we have been able to freshen these elements of rural culture, to wipe from them the coal dust, to realize them' (ERCP, Box 4, Folder 1, 27, 35).

A pastoral and selective history seemed to promise a foundation for community unity. To Arthurdale's planners, the region's history of labour exploitation, class and ethnic conflict, and individualism threatened the ideal of a democratic and co-operative community devoid of social distinctions.

The politics surrounding the founding of Arthurdale was also a likely contributor to Clapp's and the teachers' focus on community stability. A dominant theme in their accounts of progress was winning over apathetic and suspicious residents. The government financed Arthurdale in hopes that it would be a model for reviving rural communities devastated by massive unemployment. It also was closely identified with Eleanor Roosevelt, and often belittled by the press as her 'pet project'. Arthurdale represented a significant investment of federal money and political capital.

Rethinking reconstructionism

Clapp departed from many social reconstructionist educators by not explicitly addressing underlying economic and social issues. Social reconstructionists such as Counts and Bode promoted critical discussion of US social and economic

arrangements in schools. They furthermore faulted schools for obscuring the negative consequences of American economic individualism and encouraging a tolerance of contradiction in the interests of patriotism and corporate profits (Bode 1933). For Bode, the tendency for millions of unemployed depression-era workers to see their situation as personal misfortune reflected an ‘obtuseness’ facilitated by public school (1933, 7). This compartmentalisation of community circumstances from larger social issues left Clapp vulnerable to criticism.

Samuel Everett’s review of Clapp’s *Community Schools in Action* challenged her lack of analysis of larger social problems:

Issues such as those of race, farm tenancy, unionization, conservation of human and natural resources, unemployment, paternalism, dictatorship, nationalism, the maldistribution of wealth and income – in a word, the sickness of an acquisitive society – are noticeable for their almost entire absence. (ERCP, Box 2, File 28)

For Everett, Clapp’s book illustrated a larger weakness in community-school programmes – the lack of an underlying social philosophy. This same criticism was commonly levelled against the child-centred members of the PEA during the 1930s. In fact, Everett’s language sounds strikingly similar to Counts’s controversial speech of 1932 in which he identified the lack of a theory of social welfare as the chief weakness of progressive education. Everett’s framework of reform is contingent on systemic socio-political change. He faults Clapp for ignoring social problems and fails to acknowledge her achievements. The connections between parents, teachers, and the school, curricula that draw on community skills, and the localisation of progressive theory are either ignored by Everett or dismissed as inconsequential to social welfare.

As a long-time colleague of Clapp and author of the book’s introduction (his last publication before his death), John Dewey was dismayed by Everett’s review. He wrote an April 29, 1940 letter to Everett to clear up his ‘misunderstanding ... of either the point of my introduction or of the text of Miss Clapp’s report’ (ERCP, Box 2, File 28). Dewey provided a clearly articulated defence of Clapp’s position, describing her focus on the problems and resources of specific communities as a ‘concrete exemplification’ of his own social philosophy. He commended Clapp’s work at pursuing the ‘vital tasks’ of education (ERCP, Box 2, File 28).

Dewey is often portrayed as supporting criticisms of the PEA as lacking a social vision (Bowers 1969; Cremin 1961; Graham 1967; Tanner 1991). His defence of Clapp, however, showed a broader definition of what might constitute a social philosophy than that characteristic of social reconstructionism. Challenging Everett’s characterisation of Clapp’s approach, Dewey saw the issue as a conflict in social philosophy rather than Clapp’s failure to have one. Dewey wrote:

That this social philosophy [in *Community Schools in Action*] runs counter to a good deal of present talk and writing in educational circles [*sic*] which begins – and too often ends – with an attempt to start from the larger political and economic problems of the country – and often of the whole world – or, if not that, to use the local community simply as a spring board to get over to these issues, I can see. But I think it is confusing to assume that because there is a conflict between two social philosophies there is an absence of social philosophy in one of them... (ERCP, Box 2, File 28)

The above quote by Dewey has twofold significance. For one, Dewey challenged the common depiction of social reconstructionism as the only educational approach with

an underlying social philosophy. Second, he validated the importance of women educators' work to put different strands of educational philosophy into practice.

Dewey presented Clapp's work as an alternative formulation of social philosophy – one grounded in grassroots engagement rather than abstract generalities. Unlike Everett, Dewey was well aware of the pragmatic difficulties of making schools responsible for the democratic and economic transformation of the USA. Though Clapp's work did not articulate an explicit socioeconomic framework, Dewey regarded it as a necessary complement to the discussions found in the social reconstructionist journal, *The Social Frontier*. Indeed, the extent to which many social reconstructionists avoided discussion of how their philosophies would look in day-to-day educational practice is striking. Counts, for example, offered scathing critiques of schools but only vague suggestions as how to implement change. This omission in the social reconstructionist scholarship most likely played a part in Dewey's defence of Clapp's work. Dewey's letter to Everett was a rare acknowledgement that a commitment to social betterment was held by educators other than the male faculty at Teachers College.

Joining a community with a predetermined agenda would have been inconsistent with Clapp's vision of schools as community centres. Clapp stressed school planning as a process of ongoing development. Entering a school with an *a priori* social philosophy and strategy would have been at odds with Clapp's more pragmatic perspective. Her commitment to schools as community centres was motivated by her belief in their possibilities for facilitating social change:

The school is, therefore an experiment in democratic living ... It is influential because it belongs to its people. They share its ideas and ideals and its work. It takes from them as it gives to them. There are no bounds so far as I can see to what it could accomplish in social reconstruction if it had enough wisdom and insight and devotion and energy. (Clapp 1933, 128)

She attempted to put social reconstructionist commitments into action by adapting democratic ideals in response to local needs.

Clapp's work illustrates how the boundaries between child-centred and social reconstructionism blurred in actual educational practice. Using a hybrid of educational approaches was not unique to Clapp. The PEA's 1941 mission statement stressed the organisation's commitment to avoiding extremes of child-centredness and social reconstructionism. The organisation was all too aware of perceptions that it was driven by 'sentiment' and bowed to 'the caprice and whims of children' (Albert 1941). Certainly there were cases of teachers that provided little structure or tools for learning in the name of natural development of the child. But the deep association of progressive education with children taking control from teachers was also shaped by a general backlash against progressive education as well as gendered readings of PEA members as 'romantic sentimentalists' (Counts 1932, 257).

Conclusion

Kessler-Harris (2001) uses the term 'gendered imagination' to describe the influence of gender norms on social policy in the USA. This powerful descriptor of the pervasive effects of gender as a social and discursive divider also applies to education. The blurring of teaching with mothering, marriage bars, firings of lesbian and gay teachers

and low numbers of women in educational leadership are examples of how masculinity and femininity legitimise only selected profiles of education professionalism (Blount 1998, 2005; Casey 1990; Weems 1999).

Narratives of the split between individualist, female practitioners and politically engaged, male faculty are another piece of the 'gendered imagination' of education. Progressive education historiography can potentially reinforce the neglect of women's activism and leadership and reifies sexual difference as a form of power.

The underrepresentation of women, particularly as examples of social activists, has been well documented. Clapp broadens our understanding of the varieties of progressive education and educators' hope that schooling could be a primary tool of social reform. Her significance, however, extends beyond adding an overlooked woman to the historical record. She is a location, or what Scott (1996b) terms a 'site' where the gendered imagination of history and educational theory converge.

Books such as *Social Reconstruction: People, Politics, Perspectives* (Riley 2006) and *Social Reconstruction Through Education* (James 1995) introduce a new generation of educators to social reconstructionism's influence on the development of social studies, its connections with other US political movements, and the backlash it suffered during the conservative political shift prior to World War II. Reconstructionist philosophy contributes to contemporary educational issues such as the tension between individual and social needs and confirming or challenging dominant social interests (Bullough and Kridel 2003). Social reconstructionism continues to inspire educators drawn to the movements' bold challenge for schools to embody democracy and compassion (Giroux 1988; James 1995; Roberts and Bussler 1997; Stanley 1992). By providing historical precedent, social reconstructionism empowers contemporary critical pedagogy and becomes what Zinn describes as the radical and creative power of history:

It lends weight and depth to evidence which, if culled only from contemporary life, might seem frail. And, by portraying the movements of men over time, it shows the possibility of change. Even if the actual change has been so small as to leave us still desperate today, we need, to spur us on, the faith that change is possible. (1970, 48)

Understanding social reconstructionism includes interrogating the exclusions upon which the category depends. A central question is the extent to which the utopian vision of social reconstruction relies on gendered boundaries of whom and what the term encompasses. Contemporary educators inspired by the activism of social reconstructionism should be wary of the category's oppositional and hierarchical relation to female progressive educators. Social reconstructionist educators' criticism of child-centred philosophy as lacking a theory of social welfare confirmed their own identity as progressivism's social conscience. Its coherence as a category rests in part on its opposition to child-centred progressivism – an opposition infused with the politics of gender. The challenge for educational historians is the difficult task of both using and disrupting the categories of child-centred and social reconstruction in understanding their history and enduring relevance.

Note

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