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## **Education without progress: What's the point?**

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### **1 Introduction**

“Is there any point in education, that is, in learning, studying, and in being a teacher and student, if there is no better future to look forward to and hope for?” (Langmann, 2023, p. 1119). This is the question pursued in a special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* on progress and education. The question – here stated by Elisabet Langmann in her response to other contributions – vaguely refers to the “point” of education, indicating that education loses its point when the hopes for progress vain. The notion of progress is considered as central to ‘modern’ thinking, going back to the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Once we give up this modern understanding of progress, the question arises how we can learn and educate ‘after progress’ – in a “postprogressive” way, as Langmann puts it (ibid., p. 1121).

The interrelations between ‘education’ and ‘progress’ can be spelled out in a variety of ways. In what follows, I would like to focus on two issues. First, I refer to the idea that education leads to (social) progress in a *causal* way: It brings about or enables progress, and we might also say that it is necessary for progress. Once the idea of progress is called into question, education seems to lose its point, at least to the extent that it tied to the expectation of a ‘better future’.

The second point does not highlight causal effects, but *structural similarities* between education and progress. The main idea is that some notion of progress seems to be inherent to (or constitutive of) the concept of education itself. It is not that education facilitates progress, but that education is itself ‘progressive’. Calling progress into question, then, also questions the very idea of education. We might go as far as saying that it is unclear how the notion of a post-progressive education can make sense at all. It might well be that the post-progressive view turns out to be ‘post-educational’ as well.

On the one hand, then, we can ask whether education becomes pointless if there is no progress. On the other hand, however, the question is whether the idea of postprogressive education itself is pointless.

## 2 The problem of progress

Let us see what the post-progressive view is actually opposed to: What does it mean to ‘believe in progress’? The modern idea of progress is often understood in a comprehensive way, as a continuous and linear development across different spheres, referring to the whole of humanity – *Progress*, with a capital P (Jaeggi, 2023, p. 20–21). However, we might also speak of progress in a narrower sense, by focussing on some sphere or aspect of a society’s development. For instance, we might concentrate on the social position of women in Western societies since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here, we might say that the process in which women’s position has changed is to be considered as a form of *moral* progress. In what follows, I am more concerned with these forms of sphere-specific progress than with the comprehensive view.

Against this backdrop, I would like to distinguish descriptive, conceptual and normative aspects of the belief in progress (or Progress). First, there is the thesis that there *is* progress, that is, that things are in fact getting better (the *descriptive* thesis).

The descriptive thesis already indicates a *normative* element in the *concept* of progress: Progress has to do with improvement of some sort or other (*conceptual*). Only transformations that lead to a ‘better’ state of affairs can be characterized as progress. In this sense, then, progress is a ‘thick’ concept, a concept that combines a descriptive with a normative element: To say that we have made progress means that we are in a better place than before.

This indicates that the description of progress presupposes a normative view: Describing the developments in the field of women’s rights as progress presupposes that the trend to more equality is to be seen as a moral improvement.

We can assume, then, that talk of progress only makes sense if it can indeed be argued that some (individual or social) states of affairs are better than others, and that there can be actual improvement. The post-progressive view might not only be seen as opposed to the descriptive thesis, but also to the underlying normative assumptions: If the possibility of a normative evaluation of developments is denied, the idea of progress becomes indeed pointless.

The normativity of progress has often been understood as ‘teleological’. As many theorists have pointed out, however, this is not the only way to capture the normative dimension of developments. Some have, for

instance, proposed process-oriented or procedural criteria (Jaeggi, 2023; Anderson 2014, 2015 and 2016; Kitcher 2011). It should also be noted that there might be substantive normative accounts that are not teleological.

### **3 Progress and education: Causal connection**

With this in mind, let us go back to the first of the claims about progress and education, namely, that education causally facilitates progress. To make sense of this claim, we need some rough idea of how this might work. To the extent that progress is in some ways tied to the idea of betterment, the question is how education supports this process. Let us take as an example the considerations of Elizabeth Anderson (2014; 2015; 2016) that are focussed on processes of moral learning. Anderson treats moral progress as an epistemic issue: It is seen as a way of gaining moral knowledge and avoiding epistemic errors.

If we assume that (some) social development can be characterized as moral progress, the question is how these processes come about: In this context, Anderson introduces the concept of ‘contention’ – moral learning can occur when existing practices and views are ‘contested’, especially by those who are disadvantaged or oppressed: This can happen through moral argument, but also in many other ways – Anderson even mentions forms of violence, but also many kinds of peaceful, non-violent protest (Anderson, 2015, p. 32). She explains that “contention aims to secure the satisfaction of claims by eliciting the recognition of those in power of the legitimacy of those claims, and thereby the incorporation into social institutions of an established recognition of those claims” (Anderson, 2015, p. 33). Anderson assumes that persons can legitimately make moral claims – thereby ‘contending’ existing social practices – and that this can facilitate progress.

It seems obvious that education can play a role in fostering this kind of moral progress. Roughly put, it might be assumed that young people should be initiated into ‘practices of contention’, they should be enabled and empowered to put forward legitimate moral claims. There must be further debate as to what exactly this means – in other words, what ‘progressive education’ should look like.

So, let us go back to the post-progressive view in its various versions. If we assume that there can be no progress in the sense that there are no

*normative* criteria to evaluate social changes, it seems clear that this kind of progressive education loses its point.

It can be noted, however, that denying that future states of affairs can be characterized as ‘better’ (or ‘worse’) than the current situation also means that there is – in a way – no reason to worry. A pessimistic view about the future seems to presuppose that the evaluation of developments is possible. It would be contradictory to claim that 1) our situation will not improve in the future, and 2) it cannot be determined whether one state of affairs is better than another. However, the loss of normative criteria – of value or ‘meaning’ – might itself be seen as a source of crisis or desperation. In this case, the issue is not that things will ‘not get better’, but that whatever happens is ‘pointless’.

What about the descriptive thesis – that progress is indeed *normatively* possible, but *factually* not to be expected? Here, we should note that this is not actually a view about the future, for the future remains unknown. It is about our attitudes towards the future, some sort of pessimism or fatalism, lack of hope, maybe desperation. We might assume that progressive education – in the sense just outlined – entails some notion of agency, that is, the idea that it is possible to act in ways that improve the situation even if the odds are bad, and changes seem to go in the wrong direction. Progressive education, thus understood, does not presuppose overly optimistic attitudes, but the view that it is possible to reach small improvements, or at least to counteract processes of decline or regression.

#### **4 Progress and education: Structural similarities**

The causal thesis is to be distinguished from the structural or conceptual thesis, namely, that ‘progress’ and ‘education’ are structurally similar: To the extent that the idea of progress is questioned, then, this also affects the debate on education.

R.S. Peters (1973) has emphasised the similarities between the concepts of ‘education’ and ‘reform’, claiming – among other things – that both have “norms built into them” (p. 15). According to Peters, “‘education’, like ‘reform’, picks out a family of processes culminating in a person being better” (ibid.). For Peters, it would be logically contradictory to claim, first, that a child has been educated, and second, nothing desirable has come out of it. Interestingly, Peters – at least at this point – seems to think of ‘reform’ primarily as an individual process. The concept of

progress might be applied both to the individual and the collective. In thinking about Progress, we have a comprehensive, global, collective perspective, but we might as well say that an individual has made progress, thereby indicating that they have changed for the better.

If we follow Peters' lead, then, we can see that a normative element is inherent in both the concepts of education and progress. Education (as a process) is seen as a form of progress, it is *inherently progressive*. So, if the very notion of progress, especially the aspect of betterment, is questioned, this affects the very idea of education. Should we call any practice or process 'educational' that is not tied to the idea of betterment? Those educational theorists who endorse a post-progressive agenda should make clear how their accounts address this issue.<sup>1</sup>

Against this backdrop, we can consider – as an example – the recent debate on 'Bildung as transformation' in German philosophy of education. In Hans-Christoph Koller's theory – which is not explicitly post-progressive –, "*Bildung* is understood as a transformation of the way in which people relate to the world, to others and to themselves, and [...] such transformations can always take place when people are confronted with experiences for which the established forms of their relationship to themselves and the world are inadequate" (Koller, 2022, p. 11, my translation).<sup>2</sup>

The question is, then, whether understanding the concept of *Bildung* in this way implies that these kinds of transformations are seen as progress. It seems that the concept of transformation – other than 'progress' – can be used in a value-free manner. This might be one reason why it is attractive to theorists like Koller who combines a broadly Humboldtian idea of *Bildung* with a 'postmodernist' outlook.

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<sup>1</sup> Langmann (2023) writes, in her response to the contribution of Piotr Zamojski (2023): "If so, what distinguishes this kind of educational transformation from the modern idea of educational emancipation?" (p. 1124). She thereby questions whether Zamojski's attempt to develop a post-progressive educational account is successful.

<sup>2</sup> "Diese Theorie lässt sich in knapper Weise so zusammenfassen, dass Bildung darin als eine Transformation der Art und Weise verstanden wird, in der Menschen sich zur Welt, zu anderen und zu sich selber verhalten, und dass solche Transformationen sich immer dann vollziehen können, wenn Menschen mit Erfahrungen konfrontiert werden, für deren Bearbeitung die etablierten Formen ihres Selbst- und Weltverhältnisses nicht ausreichen" (Koller, 2022, p. 11).

I would like to suggest, however, that Koller's view implies the idea that the educational transformation leads to an improvement of sorts: The new self-understanding arising from the transformational process is to be seen as 'better' than the old because it is better suited to address a given problem or crisis. In a basic conceptual sense, then, the account is 'progressive'. It entails a specific kind of normativity that is not substantive and certainly not teleological – it might be characterized as process-oriented or procedural.

This is just one example of an account that might – at first sight – be described as post-progressive but is consistent with Peters' conceptual point ('education' as betterment) and entails specific (non-substantive) normative criteria. The question is whether there can be an account of education – which is really an account of *education* – that does not meet these two conditions.

It must be emphasised that accepting 1) the conceptual point of education as progress, and 2) the idea that individual developments can be normatively evaluated is compatible with traditionalist or 'conservative' and in this sense non-progressive forms of education: We might have the aim of improving individuals so that they fit into a pre-given social order and become able to participate in its practices.

So, considering structural similarities between 'education' and 'progress' might help to better understand some versions of the post-progressive view, it does – however – not lead to the formulation of an educational view that would count as 'progressive' in a stronger normative sense. The term 'progressive' – in the normative educational sense – might refer to reformist practices of education and/or its interconnections with a broader idea of social progress.

## 5 Conclusions

1. The notion of a post-progressive education is pointless in the sense that some view of progress is inherent to the concept of education itself – regardless of whether education is understood in a 'conservative' or 'progressive' way. In other words; in a weak (conceptual) sense, any education is progressive, but not in a stronger normative sense.
2. The normative notion of progressive education (education facilitating social progress) is only pointless if it is assumed that (social) progress is normatively impossible, that is, if it is not

possible to determine whether some state of affairs is better or worse than others.

So let us return to the question we started with: “Is there any point in education [...], if there is no better future to look forward to and hope for?” We might say that this question becomes pointless if the possibility of normative evaluation is denied – the expression “better future” seems to presuppose the possibility of evaluation. Alternatively, it might be assumed that the term simply means that the future is neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’, but in a way ‘meaningless’. This really raises the question what the point of education is.

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