



Progressive
Education
NETWORK

Principles in Action: Progressive Education & Racial Justice

August 2016

Dear PEN Educators:

One hundred years ago, John Dewey described the pages of *Democracy and Education* as “an endeavor to detect and state the ideas implied in a democratic society and to apply these ideas to the problems of the enterprise of education.” One hundred years later, we continue to explore and to map the intersections of education and democracy in our classrooms, our schools, and our communities -- promoting a vision of progressive education for the 21st century that advances diversity, equity, and justice in our schools and our society, and engages students as active participants in both those spheres.

As members of the Board of Directors of the Progressive Education Network, we wish to amplify the voices and to serve the needs of our member schools. As part of a broader project more intentionally to refine PEN’s mission and its service to progressive educators and schools, we have been supporting programming -- through our national conference; in NIPEN, our cohort-based national institute; and by supporting emerging regional consortia -- to be responsive to the needs of our times, and listening more carefully than ever to your feedback in order to make our work even more responsive still in the months and years ahead.

For example, we have wondered for some time, along with many of you, if various iterations of “The Principles of Progressive Education” -- most recently articulated by PEN, and by the Progressive Education Association and the Network of Progressive Educators before us -- have adequately asserted our moral and professional obligations to interrogate matters of systemic inequity and injustice in American society.

In October 2015 we gathered in Brooklyn, New York under the banner of the conference theme, “Access, Equity, and Activism: Teaching the Possible” to explore such matters collaboratively and in greater depth. Inspired by a call to action issued at the close of the conference, in the new year we embarked on an effort to refine “The Principles of Progressive Education,” an initiative you will hear more about in the months to come. And our 2017 conference in Boston will be designed to explore the first of these newly revised principles of progressive education:

**Education must amplify students' voice, agency, conscience, and intellect
to create a more equitable, just, and sustainable world.**

We are sharing this principle with you sooner than we had originally intended because we find ourselves at a historical moment that demands we all remember, as Paulo Freire wrote, that the progressive educator must always be “continually reinventing...what it means to be democratic in his or her own specific cultural and historical context.” We recognize, with you, the importance of continually pushing ourselves to build on the legacy of progressive educators who came before us, and to expand our definition of what it means to be a progressive educator in the 21st century.

For example, we recognize as American citizens the unspeakable violence that has been serially and disproportionately perpetrated against black lives by those who have been charged by our society to protect them, and we reject the suggestion that these are merely the aberrant acts of isolated individuals. Instead, we see these acts as symptomatic of broader racial inequities throughout the legal and criminal justice system, and resonant with broader patterns of bias and injustice throughout our society and its economy.

Crucially, we also recognize the degree to which these inequities are further embedded in and perpetuated by our school system through education policies and practices such as punitive school discipline, grossly inadequate funding, the segregation of school communities, testing and accountability policies, and a narrowing of the training, support, role, and agency of teachers. All of these disproportionately impact students, families, and communities of color and threaten our democracy as a whole. Yet there seems some ambiguity, in certain corners, whether the interrogation of these issues is the “proper” business of schooling.

At this juncture, therefore, the PEN Board of Directors implores progressive schools and progressive educators to acknowledge the urgency of addressing racial justice inside and outside our classrooms. This could involve learning experiences that foster students' exploration of systemic inequities in our schools and society, partnering with individuals and organizations in our communities that advance the work of racial justice, and amplifying the voices of student leaders who are actively working to make this a better world. In addition, we believe the work of conscientized progressive pedagogy carries with it an imperative to examine the complicity of our own institutions in racial bias and inequitable representation in our curriculum and pedagogy, and in our institutional systems, structures, and rituals.

To put it plainly, a progressive pedagogy must ensure that Black lives matter not only generally in our society, but more visibly in our schools. Our schools must ensure that inequity, bigotry, and White supremacy in all its forms are interrogated and mitigated in our classrooms, amplifying students' voice, agency, conscience, and intellect to create a more equitable, just, and sustainable world. Our students deserve, and increasingly demand, no less.

Sincerely,
The PEN Board of Directors