

Towards an Understanding of Progressive Education and “*School*”: Lee Dick’s 1939 Documentary Film on the Hessian Hills School

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I

The documentary film *School* was commissioned by the Progressive Education Association for screening at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. While filmed and produced by Lee Dick (one of the few female documentary filmmakers working in New York City at that time), the American Film Center coordinated the production with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation (RF). This project was conceived by the American Film Center as an experimental effort in low cost production and was described in a *Newsweek* article as the “first professional sound-and-dialogue documentary movie ever made on 16 millimeter film.”¹ This was not the only “first” claim made on behalf of the film. Lee Dick maintained that *School* was the first documentary film to abandon the use of a commentator. As she stated in a local newspaper article, “Let the children tell their story in their own way for it is a picture about real children in a real classroom.”² Entitled merely “school,” the project sought to represent progressive education as endorsed by the Progressive Education Association (PEA), and I suspect that the generic title is an allusion to the closing paragraph of John Dewey’s 1938 publication, *Experience and Education*, known to all members of the organization, where he asserts that what is needed “is education pure and simple” with “no qualifying adjectives” and no names or slogans.³

The twenty-four minute film focuses on a group of ten and eleven-year-old students at the Hessian Hills School, located in Croton-on-Hudson, New York. The selection of this school by the PEA to serve as an example (if not an exemplar) of progressive education for screening at one of the grandest venues, the 1939 World's Fair, is somewhat perplexing, in part, because of Hessian Hills School's cultural context, history of the area, and the fundamental orientation of its educational program; however, none of this was known to me upon my arrival at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) to begin a long-term residency in February 2011. My invitation to serve as scholar-in-residence focused upon educational and documentary films of the 1930s-1940s and, specifically, the Rockefeller Foundation-funded film, *One Tenth of Our Nation*, what is considered the first documentary on African American education in the United States. This American Film Center-sponsored documentary was related to my ongoing historical research on the General Education Board's Secondary School Study (also known as the Black High School Study) and remained a primary interest throughout the residency. Yet, as I spent the first few days at the RAC reading American Film Center (AFC) documents and becoming familiar with the Pocantico Hills area and surrounding locales, I felt that I should embark on some research project that related specifically to this area, in part to serve as a gesture of gratitude to the RAC for being afforded the opportunity to work with General Education Board (GEB) and the RF archival documents. Upon learning that the AFC-produced, PEA-sponsored documentary *School* was filmed in Croton-on-Hudson, located on the Hudson River just ten miles north of Pocantico Hills, I thought this could become a fruitful research topic. That proved to be an understatement since, as I continue my work, Lee Dick's film and the Hessian Hills School have become a wonderful adventure, as well as a most significant scholarly project.

NB: While my other RAC Research Reports adopt a formal, academic tone, this report intentionally strives to portray the process of discovery as well as to document important

factual and scholarly information. The writing is intentionally more casual and seeks to introduce an interpretive yet non-authorial perspective towards understanding this film.

II

As I attended my first scholars' luncheon at Hillcrest (the Rockefeller home that was converted into the RAC) with staff and research patrons, I met assistant archivist Lucas Buresch who has great interest in and knowledge of the history of the surrounding area. I began asking questions about the Hessian Hills School, located in the Hessian Hills area of Croton-on-Hudson, named for George Washington's troops battling British mercenaries during the Revolutionary War. Lucas's comments convinced me that this school was a research topic worth pursuing, which was later confirmed from conversations with RAC senior research archivists Erwin Levold and Tom Rosenbaum. I soon learned that the RAC did not hold a copy of the 1939 film in its vaults (nor, alas, the many other 16 mm prints of additional late 1930s educational films funded by the RF for the PEA). My first task was to track down a print or DVD of the film which, after a few Internet searches, I thought would be quite simple. The documentary had been featured in 2007 for an evening event at the Croton Free Library, sponsored by the Friends of History, and former Hessian Hills School students who participated in a discussion following the screening. While engaged in these preliminary searches, I learned of the unique history of Hessian Hills and Mt. Airy, the actual site of the school, and read an insightful and touching reflection by a former student, James Stevenson, children's book author, *New York Times* columnist, and *New Yorker* cartoonist. The school was becoming more and more interesting, especially since I maintained a particular scholarly interest in progressive schools of the 1930s.

First, however, I was curious as to whether the school building was still standing, and after learning that the structure was serving as a Jewish synagogue (Temple Israel of North Westchester), I thought a visit would be worthwhile. The architecturally-stunning, International

Style building was immediately recognizable as I drove to the end of Glengary Road in Mt. Airy. However, as is often the case when visiting unrecognized historic sites, the good-natured staff member who granted permission for my photographic documentation was unaware of Lee Dick's documentary or even that the building had been constructed originally as a school. Perhaps the most fortuitous event for my research project occurred after visiting Temple Israel as I became lost among the maze of paths and lanes in the Mt. Airy area. Residents walking nearby quickly noticed the odd travails of an academic's car with South Carolina license plates and knew, immediately, that the driver—namely me—was quite lost. Fortunately, Bonnie Franks graciously provided directions for my return to the main thoroughfare but, before leaving, we proceeded to chat about the history of Hessian Hills. I was told of one longtime resident, the renowned fiber artist Ethel Stein, who had attended the school in the 1930s, and Bonnie volunteered to coordinate an introduction. This outing and conversation began a series of lovely discussions, gatherings, and interview sessions. Little did I anticipate the rich research activities that would transpire.

Since the film had already been screened at the Croton Free Library, I assumed a copy would not be too hard to secure and, initially, was disappointed that its acquisition would not prove more challenging. I was not surprised, however, when few details could be recounted by members of the Friends of History of the September 2007 event. After the screening, the participants seemed to have vanished from the Friends' roster. With no DVD accessible, the archival chase resumed and, fortunately, I would subsequently meet one of the noted local historians, Carl Oechsner, who, in turn, assisted my research in many significant ways. Carl's knowledge, good cheer, and curiosity were infectious and through him, I was able to contact film educator-curator-historian Ivan von Sauer who, I would learn, was the individual who officially

“rediscovered” the *School* print within the holdings of the Rick Prelinger Archives. My meeting with Ivan resulted in a most helpful conversation (and a DVD copy of the greatly prized film) as we discovered many mutual acquaintances within the educational and archival worlds. Carl also introduced me to long-time resident Eugene Perl who was one of the students in the film (and, as Euie, a featured actor in the documentary). Gene would become a key figure in my efforts to revive *School* and, with great enthusiasm, knowledge, and insight, added many important points to my understanding of the film.

The good-natured reception from Bonnie Franks led to a gracious reply from Ethel Stein. The Croton-on-Hudson community had become accessible partly through my patience, and primarily through their kindness, good will, and great interest and love for this remarkable school. I spent a delightful afternoon watching the documentary with Ethel at her home. We laughed often, and I noticed the power of film as I witnessed the strong feelings that arose as she viewed the footage. Ethel, who had graduated from the school before the shooting of the documentary, provided important context of the educational program and discussed the significance of the William Lescaze and George Howe architectural designs. My research pursuits remained somewhat astonishing in so many varied ways. Ethel informed me that AFC director Donald Slesinger had lived in Croton-on-Hudson during the 1930s and, while visiting this site, I began a conversation with the current owner who, to my surprise, I learned was a renowned documentary filmmaker himself. I was beginning to expect the unexpected with each research task related to Lee Dick’s School.

I continued my ventures and so appreciated the kindness of Martha Campbell of the Croton Free Library who assisted my archival work by guiding me to the impressive dissertation written about the school by the founder’s granddaughter, Katherine Moos Campbell.⁴ Also, my

Internet quest ultimately led to my contacting James Stevenson, whose *New York Times* column, *Lost and Found*, originally inspired me to explore this topic.⁵ Later, I invited James and his wife Josie Merck to Hillcrest, where we chatted, laughed, and delighted in watching the film. Also during this period, my conversations with colleague and New York University film historian Dan Streible, founder and director of the Orphan Film Symposium, caused a surprising moment of coincidence as I learned that he, too, was especially interested in the work of Lee Dick. Ironically, my “rediscovery” of Ivan’s “discovery” of *School* had increased the known Dick, Inc. filmography by fifty percent. Through exchanges with Dan, I reintroduced myself to legendary documentarian George Stoney (who had graciously assisted my earlier RAC research on Alice Keliher and the Human Relations Film Series),⁶ and, in what proved to be a highlight moment of spring 2011, I was invited to screen the footage with him at his New York University apartment. Throughout my viewings with Ethel, Gene, James and Josie, Ivan, Stoney and others, I heard many insightful comments about the film. Yet, I continued to be rather perplexed by this specific portrayal of progressive education, one officially endorsed by the Progressive Education Association. Thus began what has become a grand adventure that only recently concluded—well, perhaps merely paused—with the presentation at the 2012 International Orphan Film Symposium as part of a Lee Dick Retrospective.⁷

III

Founded in 1925 as the Mt. Airy School, the Hessian Hills School program epitomizes today’s image of the “learning-by-doing,” elementary-level, child-centered, private progressive school from the early twentieth century.⁸ From its origins, the school’s curriculum was conceived as an extension of the home with parents from the community often serving in instructional roles. Educating children from age two through fifteen (with the final level including ninth grade and, at times, a loosely-configured 10/11th grade curricula for certain

students who wished to remain at the facility), the school was quite small with total enrollment never exceeding one hundred pupils. The teaching staff, once numbering up to seventeen, believed in recognizing the interests of students and sought to foster creative intelligence in the classroom, to accept the nature of experience as a defining curricular structure, to embrace open inquiry, and to develop natural relationships among children and adults. The school assigned no grades, and the small classes permitted a more informal setting where children could work at their own pace. Academic content was stressed, a point that must be underscored for those many contemporary critics who incorrectly view progressive schools as being void of rigor and academic content. Hessian Hills School students described sophisticated science projects and the teaching of advanced mathematics, trigonometry, and calculus. Yet, with these intellectual activities, the atmosphere of the school remained “relaxed.” Lee Dick’s film quickly introduces this practice of informal personal relationships as the students call their teacher, Rupert Hampton, by his nickname, “Hamp.” This was not limited to exchanges just between pupils and their classroom teachers; as noted by Eugene Perl, all administrators and teachers were on a first name basis with all students.

In describing his educational experiences at Hessian Hills School, renowned social science theorist Thomas Kuhn, who attended the school from sixth to ninth grade during the mid-1930s, mentioned that “it was particularly good in terms of teaching me to think for myself,”⁹ and this point was mentioned by Ethel Stein and James Stevenson during my conversations. Eugene Perl also stressed the importance of democratic community and the school’s efforts to foster a spirit of citizenship, community service, and working for the common good. James Stevenson described the sense of intellectual adventure and knowledge as exploration, and Ethel

Stein noted the great emphasis placed upon the arts and how these elementary school experiences helped to define her aesthetic interests and ultimately her career.

The Hessian Hills School curricular program is perhaps best summarized by the school's founder, Elizabeth Moos, who stated that "while discipline and hard work have their place in our school, we also give pupils ample scope for self-expression and positive pleasure of creative activities. One of our educational theories is that the child should compete with himself rather than with other children."¹⁰ Moos' comments represent a basic progressive education belief in the significance of "democracy as a way of life," respect for the individual child, the importance of open inquiry and intellectual exploration and discourse and, along with a curriculum that covers fundamentals of knowledge, the school also emphasized fine arts, mechanical arts, and rhythmic. Both Stein and Stevenson would note the emphasis upon the arts as an integral component of all activities and the respect for various art forms including those often dismissed as mere practical arts.

In contemporary terms, the school represented a stereotypical pedagogical progressive school with "learning by doing," "teaching the whole child," and "fostering creative expression" slogans characterizing this form of progressive education. Many educators would view such a program as an exemplar for the PEA to introduce and promote the use of progressive education. Yet, I kept returning to the issue of what was "typical," knowing that the PEA would have struggled to select a representative documentary subject to introduce its practices to a wider audience—namely, the general public and the professional community. Further, the school would be defined as child-centered because, of course, that term has now become emblematic of 1930s progressivism; however, I noticed that this theme really was not emphasized in the film in comparison to the countless written accounts of elementary progressive schools from that period.

Other schools in the New York area would have been more likely prospects to serve as the subject of a documentary. Two of the most famous progressive schools in the United States—the Lincoln School and the Dalton School—were within three miles of Lee Dick Inc.’s West 46th Street-Midtown offices and, conceivably, would have been much easier to access for the seven person production staff, rather than traveling forty miles north to Croton-on-Hudson. While Lincoln School’s parental tensions and the forthcoming merger-ultimate closing were clearly on the horizon (straining relations with the Rockefeller family, a topic that also has my attention and will be described in a forthcoming RAC Research Report), Lincoln’s reputation during late 1938 and the winter of 1939 was still in the highest regard. Similarly, the Dalton School would have been the anticipated choice in recognition of the widespread international appeal of the Dalton Plan, an educational program that would have been familiar to most international educators seeing the film while attending the World’s Fair. In fact, a 1932 *Time* magazine article specifically mentioned the four best known schools in the New York metropolitan area: Lincoln, Dalton, Walden, and City and Country schools.¹¹ Any of these educational programs would have been viewed as a “better” and more famous selection to serve as the documentary focus for the film.

During this period, the Hessian Hills School, while not as popular, was still recognized in the progressive education community and was a member of the New York City-based Association of Experimental Schools, a collective of private progressive elementary schools including Walden, City and Country, Bank Street, the Little Red School House, and Manumit (in Pawling). The school’s founders, Elizabeth Moos and Margaret Hatfield, were closely linked to these and other well-known programs located in New York City and beyond. Moos had taught previously at the Walden School as well as at the Parker School in Chicago where she had also

been one of its first students, and Hatfield had taught at City and Country School and, prior to arriving in New York, taught at PEA founder Stanwood Cobb's Chevy Chase School in Washington, D.C. Yet, while known during the period, the Hessian Hills School would not, I suspect, have been viewed as "an exemplar" of progressivism and was not even mentioned in Lawrence Cremin's legendary history of American progressive education, *Transformation of the School*, a publication that continues to influence contemporary conceptions of the movement.¹²

The selection of the Hessian Hills School to be featured in the PEA documentary film, while perplexing, certainly was not made in a cavalier manner, and the PEA leadership would have recognized the significance and importance of identifying a "bona-fide" progressive school to represent their organization. Further, they would have considered, at length, the difficulties in defining a conception of progressive education that could be easily displayed in a twenty-four minute film, a feat perhaps even more difficult in the 1930s than today. *Newsweek* reported that the PEA "selected a typical progressive school" as the focus for Lee Dick's film; however, one would be hard pressed, when attempting to define progressive education, to determine what could be construed as typical. A documentary film, for widespread distribution, would have served to commodify a definition for the term, an effort that has been fraught with difficulty. Cremin warned against formulating any capsule definition: "None exists, and none ever will; for throughout its history progressive education meant different things to different people, and these differences were only compounded by the remarkable diversity of American Education."¹³ In fact, at the 1938 annual PEA meeting, a committee reported on its efforts to define the term and, while a statement was produced, nearly the entire group objected, explaining that progressive education is not a definition but "a spirit."¹⁴

Perhaps a “spirit of progressive education” is best displayed in the opening credits of the film:

This is a film about a school—the Hessian Hills School at Croton-on-Hudson, New York. The students, teachers and parents cooperated in making it.

The principal actors are the children of the ten-year-old group, but they are not actors at all, for this is just one day in their everyday life, which you will see. They operate the school store, they make shelves for their books, they work together at improving the school grounds, and they make laws and govern themselves.

Each group in the school has its job to do to fulfill its share of the responsibility for the proper functioning of life in the school community. Out of real situations learning develops naturally—school work becomes a part of everyday life.

Study and Work and Play and Living combine to one end: to teach these boys and girls to become responsible members of a democratic community.

While certainly not an authoritative definition of the term, this written-non-spoken prologue provided a grounded perspective for viewing the documentary and offered one of the more thoughtful conceptions of progressive education.

IV

Margaret Lee Burgess Dick, a Bryn Mawr College graduate and former actor in the New York City-based The Street Scene Company, had established her own film company in the late 1930s with *School* being one of the three documentaries attributed to her. Other films include the now lost documentary *Day after Day*, which focused on health care at the Henry Street Settlement in New York City, and the powerful polemic about silicosis and mining practices, *Men and Dust*, co-produced with her husband, Sheldon Dick, a Farm Security Administration photographer and filmmaker. Lee Dick, Inc. was described by the American Film Center as having split from Frontier Films and was “reestablishing” its technical competence. A factor in its selection by the AFC for the *School* production must have been its financial stability (due, I suspect, to the personal wealth of Sheldon Dick) as well as, in a very divisive world of documentary filmmakers, the production company was viewed with no specific political bias or ideology.¹⁵ Dick would close her company in the early 1940s to work as an editor and director

for commercial productions in New York. Yet, her short-lived documentary film career seems well-respected as reflected by membership in the New York City-based Association of Documentary Film Producers. Further, a 1939 *New York Times* article, “A Big Year for Fact Films,” described 1939 as holding the “promise to be the best documentary year in our history” and specifically recognized Joris Iven’s *The 400,000,000*, Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke’s *The City*, and Lee Dick’s *School*, specifically noting her work on a new subject—presumably the topic of education and schooling—for the documentary approach.¹⁶ While Lee Dick, Inc.’s technical competence was criticized by the American Film Center, her camera men on the *School* production, Edward Anhalt and Rudolf Bretz, both of whom received RF fellowships, were also filming *The City* during 1939, working with Willard Van Dyke, Ralph Steiner, and Roger Barlow, and Anhalt edited the Lee and Sheldon Dick project, *Men and Dust*. Anhalt would later receive two Academy Awards for screen writing in 1950 and 1964.

Shot in twenty-four days during the winter of 1939, Anhalt was forced to film from outside of the classroom due to cramped conditions. *Newsweek* mentioned that the “winter cold froze the oil in his camera, and he had to bundle the mechanism in blankets and hot-water bottles.”¹⁷ The synchronized sound proves somewhat startling, certainly to George Stoney who, upon hearing the spoken words introduced after three and one-half minutes of a conventional soundtrack, immediately asked when the film was made and subsequently noted that Dick’s work was ten years ahead of its time. As Gene Perl recounted, the children’s dialogue was indeed scripted and rehearsed. Unfortunately, Dick’s claim of letting “the children tell their story in their own way,” while clearly in the spirit of progressive education, was not particularly well received within the film world. *School* was criticized in the 1940 AFC publication, *Films of the World’s Fair*, as having poor dialogue and “frequently falling into stereotype and imposing a self-

conscious vocabulary on children who seem otherwise to appear so admirably in their own element.”¹⁸ ‘Tis a rather ironic assessment of a film whose crew member would later receive two Oscars!

Officially titled *School: A Film about Progressive Education*, the twenty-four minute documentary, after its opening credits and text, consists of six sections: the school store, shop activities, an outdoor trench project, student council, play practice, and elections. After two minutes of credits, a six minute segment introduces students working at the school supply store and, stemming from the sale of pencils, proceeding to calculate profits. In accordance with the commonly-used educational theory and practice of the “project method,” popularized by William H. Kilpatrick, such student-run stores were quite common at many schools—progressive and traditional—during the 1930s, as a way to display the usefulness of knowledge and to connect classroom activities with the real world. The teacher, Hamp, proceeds to pose questions related to the store profits and taxes. The exchange leads to further questions and, in characteristic progressive education fashion, students suggest they walk into town, inquire with shop owners about the topic of taxes, and then prepare a report for their class.

The next brief, two minute section shows students engaged in woodshop activities, displaying aspects of cooperation, and the breadth of the curriculum (as well as a tangible depiction of learning through the display of stilt-walking). This portion of the film leads to the third section where children are shown working together with a teacher and parent in an outdoor project. The four minute segment displays the use of school grounds as an educational venue and portrays the spirit of cooperation and “good cheer.” Viewers at the time would have noticed the good-natured, “avuncular” spanking of one child as an intentional gesture to distinguish the school from many other traditional programs that consciously used corporal punishment.

The fourth segment introduces the lunch-council meeting where student representatives from each grade engaged in school governance. The theme of taxes returns as students discuss whether they should impose charges on a “private” student newspaper. This five minute vignette includes two interludes where three teachers—Rupert Hampton, Leon Sciaky, and Alice Rothschild—discuss the student council’s conversation as a method for independent research and governance as a form of the democratic process. These teachers represent the diverse and remarkably talented staff at many progressive schools of this period. Rupert Hampton, portrayed in the film as a good-natured, child-centered elementary school teacher, had just arrived in Mt. Airy from the Highlander Folk School where he had worked closely with Miles Horton. In fact, Hampton was one of the five original signers, in 1934, of the Charter of Incorporation for Highlander and, in terms of social engagement and activism, he may have been one of the most important figures ever to teach at the Hessian Hills School. Shown as the caring, benevolent teacher in the documentary, he was also recognized as a gifted organist, having studied sacred music at Union Theological Seminary, and as a noted ethnomusicologist and music educator. Hampton arrived as a teacher in the fall of 1938 and would stay for three years, leaving in 1941. Leon Sciaky, who would write a powerful memoir, *Farewell to Salonica: City at the Crossroads*, taught older children at the school. He is said to have originally been selected as the main speaker during the teacher meeting, but his Salonican accent caused a change in spokespersons. Sciaky would also leave the Hessian Hills School in 1941. Alice Edgerton Rothschild taught younger children at the school and accepted this teaching role after having served as a volunteer-community person. A Quaker and well-known pacifist, she was published in the *New York Evening Post* and other venues.¹⁹

A somewhat abrupt, non-musical segue introduces a three minute section, the fifth segment, where the class is rehearsing its portion of the 1939 school-wide festival, “Pageant of American Democracy.” While the 1939 program would be the last pageant at the Hessian Hills School, this school-wide program had been staged annually and served as a popular community event. The 1939 pageant was especially elaborate and was performed on three occasions due to community interest and standing room-only crowds.²⁰ The use of theatre and playwriting, while common at many progressive schools, was especially well-developed at the Hessian Hills School. In 1940, George Willison would publish *Let’s Make a Play*, a compilation of scripts and staging descriptions of twelve plays that were written by students and performed at the school between 1930 and 1940. Willison notes that the Hessian Hills School plays “were not teacher-inspired as a means of impressing parents or forwarding the teacher’s reputation as a dramatic ‘coach.’ . . . On the contrary, they constituted an integral part of a modern educational program.”²¹ His three hundred page Harper and Brothers’ publication represented an example of the school’s “philosophy of life and education” permitting the children to attend to “the world about them, the problems of the day, and the meaningful events of the past. They are ever trying imaginatively to forecast their roles in life by identifying themselves with characters.”²²

This fifth segment—Hampton’s class rehearsing a dramatization regarding the Stamp Act from American Revolutionary times—returns to the film’s leitmotif of taxation and the concept of fairness and, after the rehearsal, students continue their historical studies on the Declaration of Independence. The documentary concludes with a two minute segment of class elections displaying the non-competitive nature of the classroom and an insightful comment by a student concerning the importance of educational opportunity and the process of learning.

School includes seven minutes of music—a compilation score of primarily traditional nursery rhyme arrangements including Thomas Arne’s *A-Hunting We Will Go* and other well-known melodies e.g., *London Bridge is Falling Down*, *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, *Three Blind Mice*, and *Pop Goes the Weasel*. Music is used to punctuate the opening of scenes and to establish a feeling for the elementary school setting with these renditions of children’s rhymes. The score also provides segues between sections with two orchestral (non-nursery rhyme) motifs emerging when independent school work is being portrayed.

During the period when *School* was being filmed, edited, and distributed, the American Film Center was coordinating the production of ten other films; yet, even with this full schedule, the Center was working with each production unit “maintaining close and constant contact until scripts were completed and approved. Administrative supervision was maintained during shooting; rushes and rough-cut versions criticized. Editorial contact continued until a final version was accepted, and the film ready for release.”²³ Clearly, the AFC was coordinating efforts to ensure that the PEA would be pleased with its film and presentation to the general public of progressive education.

School was described as being well-received among those Education and Child Welfare films shown at the 1939 World’s Fair, part of an overall film program also coordinated by AFC’s Donald Slesinger, which screened over five hundred motion pictures constituting, in 1939, “the largest collection of factual films ever shown in one place at one time.”²⁴ *Films of the World’s Fair* describes *School* as making “a courageous and persistent effort to show how progressive education methods *influence* the thinking habits of young children . . . It achieves these ends far more successfully than its several companion pieces. The behavior of the children is natural and the situations which form the narrative line are conspicuously real.”²⁵ During the Fair, *School*

was screened at the Little Theatre in the Science and Education Building and shown among the “Education and Child Welfare Films” including *Follow the Plow* (presented by the New York Children’s Aid Society), *Hand and Mind* (produced for the Fieldston School), *Early Social Behavior* (Erpi Classroom Films), and *A 36 Weeks Behavior Day* (Erpi Classroom Films).²⁶

V

While progressive education remains a popular conception of schooling from the early-to-mid twentieth century and is said to be used by educators in contemporary efforts for school reform and renewal, the term continues to arouse confusion and criticism in today’s literature. Typical of many popular concepts, progressive education is difficult to define because “followers” were often self-proclaimed, thereby dissipating those unique characteristics that served to unify “a movement.” For example, Ben Wood, the founder of the Cooperative Testing Service and a defining figure in the standardized testing movement, continually swore allegiance to John Dewey and viewed himself as a progressive educator; few contemporary historians would see any connection. Similarly, certain participating schools in the PEA’s legendary 1930s experimental project, the Eight Year Study (notably, Milton Academy), would never have been identified as representing progressive practices—then or now.²⁷ Part of the difficulty remains in the articulation of a clear definition that was consciously adopted by all, as previously noted by Cremin. Yet, another factor, more distinctive and pronounced during the mid-to-late 1930s, pertained to the purposes of schooling in society and reflected what has been viewed as internal strife within the PEA organization between child-centered progressives, who were said to constitute the majority of the membership, and another group—society-centered progressives—who were more politically oriented.

These ideological differences were first publicly introduced at the 1932 PEA conference where, in what is considered one of the most famous speeches in American education, George

Counts delivered the talk “Dare Progressive Education Be Progressive.”²⁸ Counts asserted that public education should be used as an instrument for social reform and that, even in a democracy, schools should indoctrinate and impose values on students to combat the ills of fascism and capitalism. Counts criticized brutally those progressives—the entire audience—who focused on the interests of the child and who were not attending to political and economic issues that were threatening the foundations of democracy. The PEA conference went into an uproar with subsequent sessions cancelled so that members could discuss and argue further Counts’ assertions and accusations. His challenge to the organization and, implicitly to all educators, exerted substantial influence on the direction and general dialogue of progressive education during the 1930s. Counts’ two colleagues, John Childs and Boyd Bode, debated the topic of indoctrination in a series of critiques and rejoinders published in *The Social Frontier*. The exchange became known as the “imposition controversy” and was expanded into Bode’s treatment of the “conception of needs,” another defining yet now overlooked topic of progressivism where attention to children’s interests was balanced with a greater consideration of societal needs.²⁹

Indoctrination was not an amorphous, far-removed topic from the educational life of the Hessian Hills School which was, as I would have expected from all truly progressive schools, in the midst of this debate. The PEA’s house publication, *Progressive Education*, printed a series of reactions to Counts’ conference presentation with a response from Elizabeth Moos who agreed in principle with Counts’ challenge yet balanced the child-centered—society-centered perceived discrepancy: “our problem is to help the child function as an integrated member of society, not as an isolated individual. For the little child, the family, and classroom are Society and situations there can and should be consciously utilized.”³⁰ Interestingly, Moos would continue her essay to

address issues of race placed within a student-oriented educational philosophy. Later in the decade, the Hessian Hills School debated the topic of indoctrination periodically (with school parent and AFC executive director Donald Slesinger opposing the view of schools intentionally imposing values). George Counts would even visit the Hessian Hills School for discussions with the school community.³¹

While this dilemma served to help define diverse educational beliefs for many members of the PEA during the 1930s, progressive educators are now typically reduced to a one-dimensional dichotomy between child-centered progressives who attended to the interests of children versus those society-centered/social reconstructionist progressives who sought to change the social order. Unfortunately, this reductionist narrative has not been helped by educational historians who often follow another equally simplistic separation of competing groups—pedagogical progressives versus administrative progressives. With these caricatures determining contemporary definitions of progressive education, I was especially interested in what “type of progressive education” would be selected for the film. While I never expected to locate documentation suggesting that the PEA would intentionally select a “child-centered school,” I wondered how they would present themselves. Would tensions between these alleged competing groups influence the decision to select a “representative” progressive school for the documentary? I remained curious about the mystery and oddities of selecting the Hessian Hills School as the featured subject for this film.

Yet, to understand such oddities and the complexity of the Hessian Hills School’s selection is to learn of the characteristics of the community-cultural setting. Moos was quite clear about the relationship among members of the school community: “there is no conflict between home and school; teachers, parents, and the whole community are working toward the same end,

the development of effective adult personalities.”³² Home-school relationships were central among all progressive schools during the 1930s, and efforts were made to integrate students’ interests with events in the local community. In general, however, the influence of the home and community upon the school has been typically viewed in social-economic terms. In fact, a common criticism of many progressive schools was their upper-middle class, privileged status and accompanying values embedded into the curriculum. What I found quite significant with this school was not the effects of the high social-economic status of the students and their families, which clearly existed, but rather the political context and orientation of the community.

The Hessian Hills School was established to provide education for the children of families in the Mt. Airy area of Croton-on-Hudson. While the Croton-on-Hudson community included a spectrum of political beliefs (and a population reflecting some cross-section of social-economic levels), this specific portion of Mt. Airy was also known as Red Hill, an area of liberals, socialists, anarchists, and communists and home to Robert Minor, Upton Sinclair, Floyd Dell, Max Eastman, Stuart Chase, and others. The school’s director, Elizabeth Moos, just months before the shooting of the documentary, shifted her already leftist, social reconstructionist position by officially joining the Communist Party. While what could be construed as a child-centered progressive tradition clearly existed at the Hessian Hills School, many of the children—elementary-middle school students—who were “so comfortable in their own element,” were living within families with strong society-centered, politically-left interests. Ultimately, this documentary could be viewed as depicting a child-centered school focused on students’ interests that reflect values from the home that were clearly politically-left and social reconstructionist in nature. However, I found the simple-minded child-centered/social reconstructionist portrayal to pale in comparison to a school that had balanced a conception of personal-social needs where the

interests of the students were naturally and appropriately directed to societal issues. The tax motif throughout the film is an example of such individual-social needs and interests.³³

Other aspects of students' interest as societal needs do not fully appear in the film. For example, in the fifth segment of the film, viewers see these charming children engaged in a dramatization about the Stamp Act from American revolutionary times, a rehearsal in preparation for the 1939 school-wide Pageant of American Democracy. Only this portion of the pageant is shown; however, other politically-oriented themes from the pageant, not depicted in the film, included issues related to slavery and Jim Crow, a reciting of Langston Hughes' *I Too Am America*, and events from the Haymarket Strike. One student dressed in black and read accounts of what seemed to the children as the emergence of fascism in America. The finale of the pageant staged students as factory workers discussing "the cost of having our children brought up not as free and dignified human beings, but as pawns molded and enslaved by a machine."³⁴ The performance ended with the recitation of the Declaration of Rights of the American Youth Congress. I am uncertain whether these were children's interests, parents' beliefs, teachers' convictions or whether this represents outright indoctrination; nonetheless, I know that such a production would not have been common fare at the Dalton School, Lincoln School, programs in New York City that, seemingly, would have appeared more appropriate to serve as an exemplar of progressive education methods.³⁵

Counts challenged progressive educators to change the social order. Moos sought not a reconciliation between these constructed and somewhat artificial classifications of child-centered and society-centered progressivism; rather, she and the other teachers maintained their educational and political beliefs and worked with students and families who would form a community that held many cultural and political positions as far left and radical than Counts'.

Moos notes that the teachers, parents, and community were working toward the same end, and the academic year in which the documentary was filmed, 1938-1939, was described by Hessian Hills School historian, Katherine Campbell, as “the last year during which liberals, Communists, and socialists at Hessian Hills combined mild social reconstructionism with experimental education into a coherent educational philosophy.”³⁶ I would add to Campbell’s assessment that the banners of child-centered and society-centered progressivism were not held high during any such meetings of détente. Rather, the school represented an integrated position if not a truly unified stance within the PEA’s arrayed positions on indoctrination, experimentation, attention to the child, and engagement in social reform.

VI

My research adventures continue and, for this reason, any grand conclusion becomes perilous. Having spent years with Progressive Education Association and American Film Center archival materials, the mystery remains why this school would have been selected as the subject for a film to introduce and to promote American progressive education to a national and international audience at one of the greatest attended venues, the 1939 New York World’s Fair. I do find it curious that AFC’s Donald Slesinger’s home was just down the street from the Hessian Hills School. Yet, a more significant factor, I believe, is the role of Alice Keliher, Associate Director of the AFC and the PEA’s staff member who coordinated the Human Relations Film Series and directed the Eight Year Study’s Commission on Human Relations. Keliher served to epitomize the progressive educator committed to early childhood education and the interests of students (she is considered the “grandmother of day care”) coupled with strong political engagement and cultural radicalism. Throughout this period, her PEA commission was articulating, along with other commissions in the Eight Year Study, a specific and viable conception of needs—individual-social needs. While my impressions are and have been quite

speculative, I would never expect Keliher to view schools as exclusively child-centered nor would I anticipate her to support any program as the documentary subject that focused solely upon the interests of child. As an entrusted member of the PEA staff, she would have guided, quite strongly in her characteristic manner, the wishes of the PEA in its effort to craft a film to introduce progressive education to the general public.

Ultimately, I am struck by what the PEA decided not to do: not to feature one of the many famous child-centered schools so closely located to Lee Dick, Inc.'s offices AND not to emphasize "the interests of the child" theme throughout the documentary. While this twenty-four minute film is merely a twenty-four minute film that documents one school that would later close due to the disruptive nature of Elizabeth Moos' Communist party membership and other administrative decisions, I find myself questioning the strength—even validity and reliability—of any child-centered/society-centered lens to classify and understand educators and progressive schools of the 1930s. Lee Dick's film, commissioned by the PEA to its specifications and guided by the American Film Center, does truly present the complexities, practices, and strengths of progressive education. However, this documentary, as described to the RF, that "so adequately catches the spirit of the institution it is interpreting," does not feature the importance of focusing on the interests of the child.³⁷ Rather, the film presents quite beautifully and honestly, a school engaged in the articulation of student interests in relation to societal needs—the very conception of needs addressed by Bode and others. I could not have imaged a more thoughtful and sophisticated portrayal of progressive education. As George Stoney has assessed the technical aspects of the documentary as being ten years ahead of its time, I see *School* and its presentation of educational thought and the significance of progressive education, then and now, as timeless. I have presented the RAC with a DVD copy of the film so that patrons may screen this important

archival document. In addition, the University of South Carolina's Museum of Education will be launching a web exhibition of *School* for wider public viewing.

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Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Erwin Levold, Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

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