**Introduction**

Progressive education has many definitions, but one understanding is that it focuses more upon the child’s learning, than upon curriculum content or the teacher’s pedagogy. Two main approaches of progressive education are ‘child-centred’ education - which aims to give children the freedom to develop naturally in a democratic environment, and, ‘social-reconstructionism’ - which focuses on a curriculum highlighting social reform as the aim of education. It has origins in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s fictional work *Emile* (1762) which stressed that a child must be allowed to develop in its own manner, contrary to the early modern view of Puritans and others that all children were essentially ‘wicked’ and needed guidance to be ‘good’. This philosophy was utilized by C19th European educationalists e.g. Johann Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel, and was further developed in the C20th by such figures as John Dewey and Maria Montessori.

The first British ‘child-centred’ schools began to open from late C19th into the early C20th, in what was called ‘The New Education Movement’. Many of these were ‘experimental’ privately-funded schools focusing on the needs of pupils through tolerant discipline, encouragement of the arts and crafts, using manual work as an aspect of physical education, and simplicity of living. The most celebrated British progressive schools include Abbotsholme (founded in 1889 by Cecil Reddie), Bedales (founded in 1893 by J.H. Badley) and Summerhill (initially founded in 1921 by A.S. Neill). Psychologically-based schools were also opened, including Susan Isaac’s Malting House. Many of the promoters and head teachers of progressive schools were associated with The New Educational Fellowship, founded in 1921.

The progressive influences of Froebel and Montessori impacted upon state education during the late C19th and early C20th centuries and in the post-War years the Ministry of Education encouraged new teaching methods, ‘open plan’ school architecture and more imaginative use of space in all types of primary schools. Some key figures promoting child-centred methods emerged, including Molly Brearley of the Froebel Educational Institute, a member of the Plowden Inquiry into primary education in England and Wales. The 1967 ‘Plowden Report’ commended certain ‘child-centred’ classroom approaches, though the impact of post-Plowden progressivism upon primary classroom practice has probably been over-stated. A political backlash quickly set in, with the publication of a series of ‘Black Papers’ (from 1969) and unfavourable press coverage of radical teaching practices at London’s William Tyndale Primary School during the mid-1970s.

*Image: Photograph of children involved in drama/movement activities from the Louis Christian Schiller Collection. C1950s (Ref: DC/CS/J/1)*
The introduction of a National Curriculum by the 1988 Education Reform Act saw the government to have more power over the education service, limiting the possibilities for progressive education to flourish in state schools. ‘Child-centred’ education was officially discouraged by the 1992 DES report *Curriculum Organization and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools*, which dismissed discovery learning and recommended more subject-based lessons and whole-class teaching. Curiously, however, recent official support for ‘personalised learning’ signals renewed state interest in some teaching and learning approaches previously termed ‘progressive’.

**Related Collections**
Click on name of each collection for more information.

**Papers of George and Judith Baines (DC/BA)**
The Baines were primary school teachers who pioneered new progressive teaching methods in an open-plan environment. The collection, 1956-1993, mainly relates to their work at Eynsham County Primary School.

**Papers of (William) Michael Duane (DC/MD)**
Michael Duane was a teacher, headmaster and lecturer, known for his ‘progressive’ educational views, belief in multi-racial approach, encouragement of informal staff/student relationships and opposition to corporal punishment. His papers, 1940-1995, regard his headships of the Howe Dell, Alderman Woodrow, and Risinghill schools, and his writings on various topics including discipline, 'de-schooling', and non-authoritarian education.

**Records of the Forest School Camps (DC/FSC)**
Forest School Camps is a Registered Charity whose purpose is the promotion of holidays and outdoor activities for children and young people. The FSC records, 1917-2003, contain minutes; publications; camp reports; camp diaries; photographs; interview tapes and transcripts; and guidelines for staff and camp chiefs.

**Papers of Isabel Fry (DC/FY)**
Isabel Fry, educationist, social worker and reformer, founded experimental schools where training in farm and household duties were emphasised. Her papers, 1878-1958, contain personal diaries and notebooks, and other papers reflecting all aspects of her life and career.

**Papers of Nathan Isaacs (DC/NI)**
Nathan Isaacs was a metallurgist interested in theories of child development, who lectured and wrote widely on this topic. The collection, 1913-1966, contains his lectures, unpublished writings and notes, publications and correspondence concerning his psychological/philosophical work.

**Papers of Susan Isaacs (DC/SI)**
Susan Isaacs, teacher and psychoanalyst, was Head of Malting House School, an experimental school which fostered the individual development of children. In 1933 she became the first Head of the Department of Child Development at the IOE. Her papers, 1928-1979, contain personalia; correspondence; writings; and press cuttings concerning her role as the agony aunt ‘Ursula Wise’.
Papers of David Medd and Mary Medd (DC/ME)
David and Mary Medd worked for Hertfordshire County Council Architect’s Department after WW2 and joined the Architects and Building Branch in 1949. They designed educational buildings, furniture and equipment for the schools with child centred learning in mind. Their papers cover their work, 1940s-1990s, including project files; architectural plans and drawings; writings; photographs and slides; reports, pamphlets and publications; and press cuttings.

Papers of Eileen Molony (DC/EM)
Eileen Molony, television producer, was involved in the production of a wide range of programmes. The collection contains material relating to her BBC television series ‘The Expanding Classroom’ (1969) which was intended to provide an insight into schools implementing some of the recommendations of the ‘Plowden’ Report.

Papers of Lady Bridget Horatia Plowden (DC/PL)
Lady Plowden was Chair of the Central Advisory Council for Education, 1963-1966. Her papers mainly relate to her work on the Committee of Enquiry into Primary Education who produced the influential report, Children and Their Primary Schools (also known as the ‘Plowden’ report), published in 1967.

Papers of Louis Christian Schiller (DC/CS)
Louis Christian Schiller, the first Staff Inspector for Primary Education from 1945, was a promoter of progressive ideals and child-centred teaching in primary education. He also ran a course for primary head at the IOE. His collection, 1909-1986, includes papers regarding his educational ideas including notebooks, working notes, writings and scripts of his lectures; correspondence; material relating to courses for teachers; personalia; printed material, and, photographs.

Papers of Robin Tanner (DC/BTA)
Robin Tanner was a teacher who became one of the HM Inspectors of Schools in primary education in 1935. He believed that the study of natural things and the exploration of arts and crafts, music and poetry were essential for the development of teachers and children. His papers, 1920s-1988, primarily relate to his work in education.

Papers of the White family (DC/WF)
The papers of three female generations of the White family including papers regarding Lucy Winifred (Winnie) Nicholls who founded The Garden School around 1916, which was based on principles of love, freedom, brotherhood, cooperation and service. The collection includes Winnie’s diary and note books 1885-1962; photograph albums; The Garden School Bulletins; correspondence; and papers regarding Winnie’s lecture tours and school engagements.

Records of the World Education Fellowship (DC/WEF)
Founded in 1921 as the New Education Fellowship, this organisation grew into an international organisation, and was re-named the World Education Fellowship in 1966. The fellowship’s central focus has been on child-centred education, social reform through education, democracy, world citizenship, international understanding and the promulgation of world peace. The collection, 1920s-1988, comprises the central administration records of the Fellowship.
Bibliography and other printed sources
Brehony K. J. (2001). ‘From the particular to the general, the continuous to the discontinuous: progressive education revisited.’ History of Education. Vol. 30 No. 5. pp413-432.

Other Relevant Archival Collections in the UK

The National Archives holds the official records relating to the Plowden Report [c1967]; The British Psychoanalytical Society hold the papers of Susan Isaacs (1923-1946) (Ref PE/ISA); The Robinson Library at Newcastle upon Tyne University hold the papers of Lady Bridget Horatia Plowden relating to education, broadcasting, Manpower Services Commission, (1918-2001) (Ref: BP); the Bristol University Information Services Special collections hold Brian Tanner’s letters and MS of autobiography, 1920-1988 (Ref: DM 1450); the Stirling Council Archive Service hold the minutes of the World Education Fellowship: Stirlingshire branch (1964-79).