THE EXPERIENCES OF PROGRESSIVE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Progressive schools have shown a remarkable resiliency in recent decades, continuing to operate as an alternative to the public schooling system. This study draws upon interviews with graduates of one small progressive school in Upstate New York to investigate how their schooling affected their subsequent lives. Alumni were asked to describe their educational experiences and the advantages and disadvantages they provided them with as they went on with their lives. The former students' comments were overwhelmingly positive. Four advantages are described here---Community, Small Setting, Freedom, and Trust, along with two disadvantages---Limited Extra-Curricular Opportunities and Limited Socialization The author draws upon the work of Mollie Gambone and her, *"Trusted to Teach: An Ethnographic Account of' Artisanal Teachers' in a Progressive High School,"* to frame the results. Connections between her work and the interviews of these alumni are provided.

There have been alternatives to the institutional educational system for nearly as long as there have been public schools (Cremin, 1961). For more than a century, a group of schools that self-identify as "progressive" have provided an education characterized by child-centered study, community interaction, and instructing for democracy (Chernetskaya,, 2013). Leaders from John Dewey to Ted Sizer have been associated with these schools, but progressive education has been an elusive category, difficult to define (Gambone, 2017). "Progressive education cannot be static; it must be ever searching, ever experimenting, ever moving on towards higher ideals and more complete realization of them." (Kridel & Bullough, 2015. p. 15)

Frequently seen as an instructional and cultural alternative to public education, in the ongoing "Age of Data," progressive schools serve as a clear contrast to contemporary institutional schooling (Little, 2013). At a time when schools, teachers, and students are all measured by omnipresent benchmarks and "student achievement" is defined exclusively by test scores (Steinberg, 2015), it is reasonable to want to know how students educated in the progressive environment fare once they leave these environments. The one public institution through which most of us pass is the public school. However there is a persistent progressive alternative that has survived for over a century (Graham, 1967) . The experiences of progressive school alumni are relevant for examining the rationale for the contemporary public school and its regimen of standardized instruction, "best practices," and tests as the arbiter of learning. If these students, educated through their own interests, in an environment more concerned with community-building than competition between individuals (Manlow, 2009), absent a testing gauntlet, can succeed and prosper at their next level of education and in the workplace, then we may need to question the assumptions that support today's public schools. If the 13-year dictated

process of age-segregated, curricular-atomized, standards-based instruction is not necessary to produce productive students and citizens why continue to use it with young learners?

Research Questions

My research interests were twofold: How did graduates of progressive schools remember their time there and how did what happened there affect their subsequent lives? At a time when test scores are the currency for academic proficiency, I wanted to see how students educated outside of the "assessment culture" have done. Progressive schools have been observed as having distinct educational practices (Greene, 2014 ,Kohn,, 2008) with goals distinct from the standards-based public school system (Little, 2013). In questioning these alumni, I wanted to leave sufficient space for them to elaborate as needed in both of these areas.

For this project I reviewed the relevant literature on progressive school graduates, including the epiphanic "Eight Year Study." Having already observed and written about two such schools I was in a position to speak with their alumni.

I used the following questions in my interviews:

1) How would you describe your years at this school?

2) What effect did your time there have on your subsequent education?

3) What was the biggest advantage of having attended this school?

4) What was the most notable disadvantage of having attended there?

I wanted to know how these former students believed that their time in this alternative environment had affected what they subsequently did. While progressive schools have been identified as strengthening personal skills for democracy and community (Russell, 2012), as I

began my study my interests were in more traditional measurements of student success---

academic success in classes and courses of study (Mullin, 2012)

Literature Review

The standard for research on progressive school graduates is to be found in the literature

surrounding the historic Eight Year Study. From 1930 to 1942 the Progressive Education

Association led an experiment in curricular design and instructional experimentation that

included thirty of the nation's high schools. These institutions were allowed to depart from the

traditional use of "Carnegie Units" to guide students' class schedules (Levine, 2015) and were

given special consideration for college admissions. "The spirit of the Eight Year Study ultimately

took form in three fundamental beliefs: schools can experiment with their programs…without

jeopardizing their students educational futures; there are many paths for college success; genuine

educational reform cannot be packaged and disseminated." (Kridel & Bullough, 2007, p.23)

Students from the experimenting schools were found to outperform their colleagues educated at

traditional high schools (Pinar, 2010), at the college level. This study involved curricular

innovation guided by teachers at the participating schools (Aikin, 1942) that varied from

significantly different to very similar approaches. However,

> …each of the schools…judged to be the most experimental…
> together formed the basis of the Study within the Study evaluation…
> The 323 graduates from these 6 schools significantly exceeded their
> matched pairs in college work and…dramatically out performed students
> from the 23 other participating schools (Kridel & Bullough, 2007, p. 150).

In summary, progressive school approaches have been found to improve student achievement.

More recent research has affirmed the positive effects of progressive schooling methods on student achievement. These include studies of elementary and middle schools (Bensman, 1994, Knoester, 2012) who employ student-centered learning at even the youngest grades. Even more extensive proof of subsequent success at the high school and college levels has been documented (Knoester, 2017, Little, 2015), including the positive effects of progressive methods in training classroom teachers (Horng, Zheng, Lit, & Darling-Hammond, 2015). Included in this work has been the use of alternative assessment measures aimed at measuring the effects that a progressive learning environment may have on students outside of the classroom (Kunkel, 2016).

Allowing a student's interests to influence their course of study has long been seen as a hallmark of progressive education (Russell, 2012). Improved student achievement has been connected to the curiosities that they come to school with (Bensman, 1994) and the efforts of teachers to intentionally structure learning to include those interests. (Gambone, 2017) Freed from the traditional structures of public schools, teachers and their students can grow as co-learners (Bellanaca, Paul, & Paul, 2014). Rather than curricularly atomizing their students, some progressive schools have chosen to employ a "transdisciplinary approach" that. "focuses on concepts and contexts rather than on themes as traditionally imagined. Transdisciplinary skills are defined as," those that situate students for learning, no matter the subject area" (Leland, Wacker, & Collier, 2016, p. 5). Instead of atomizing learning into subject and grade level pieces, this style of education has the opportunity to equip students with abilities that they can use on self-selected learning areas.

The influence that progressive schools have on their students is entwined with the heterarchy present there. This evolving, changing pattern of authority ensures that all involved parties may be seen as partners in a student's school learning, including their parents (Bensman,

1994). Relationships are key to the work done there, primarily the individual connections between teachers and their students (Gambone, 2017, Leland, Wackerly & Collier, 2016) which measurably affect the programs of study that are in place. Additionally, emotional gains have been identified in progressive learning environments (Knoester, 2012, Jones, 2017). From Knoester's book on the Mission Hill School in Boston and their mission statement: "We must deal with each other in ways that make us feel stronger and more loved, not weaker and less loveable." (p. 14)

In considering the research on the effects of a progressive school education, it is necessary to include areas of personal growth such as self-reflection and self-advocacy. Studies have shown that students allowed the latitude of progressive education are more likely to advocate for themselves and their viewpoints (Gambone, 2017). When asked to recall where these skills originated, alumni identify their school settings (Leland, Wackerly & Collier, 2016). The ability to impact their course of study also helped grow these skills (Bellanaca, Paul. & Paul, 2014). Numerous studies have discovered increases in self-reflection from progressive school graduates (Jones, 2017, Kunkel, 2016)

An essential aspect of progressive education has been the nurturing and growth of the school community and connection to the surrounding community (Chernetskaya, , Russell, 2012, 2013). A recent dissertation noted that, "The school and the community are closely tied together, and deeply rooted traditions are passed from one generation to the next." (Jones, 2017, p. 4) A study of three New York City progressive schools revealed a similar school-community connection (Sadovnik, Semel, Coughlan, Kanze, & Tyner-Mullings, 2017). "School as community" is often mentioned by former progressive school students.

Perhaps the most essential of metrics in assessing any school's success is how graduates see what happened there influencing their subsequent lives. Most of the studies cited here include alumni pointing to habits they gained in their progressive school education that have benefitted them in other schools and their careers (Little, 2015, Leland, Wackerly & Collier, 2016). Matthew Knoester's (2012) study of Mission Hill School includes this recollection:

> When asked about the impact the cultivation of these habits had on her
> approach to learning, a recent Mission Hill graduate commented: I feel like
> I use them pretty much every day. In every piece of work we use [in high
> school], I have to use it somewhere. It's kind of natural, since I've been doing
> it for nine years. . . When I talk to people, I use evidence a lot. Because I
> try to back up my opinion with something I really know (p.96).

Theoretical Framework: "An Environment of Trust"

Mollie Gambone's 2017 dissertation, "Trusted to Teach: An Ethnographic Account of 'Artisanal Teachers' in a Progressive High School," provides the theoretical framework for my study. In her work, Dr. Gambone identifies three characteristics of settings defined by high degrees of trust in all participants in a school's learning process. Her findings are consistent with other research that I have read on progressive schools and the information I discovered in my study.

A Relational School.

Progressive schools can be understood as being primarily relational in nature, building on the human relationships between students and teachers, not traditional teacher-student roles. Dr. Gambone points to the, "fundamental beliefs of trust and positive intent," (p.196) as being key to these relationships and also leading to, "learning environments where students are encouraged to engage with the tools they will need to grow as individuals within a democratic society." (p.197) This is congruent with decades of scholarship on progressive education which have cited educating for democracy as a key facet of these schools (Russell, 2012, Chernetskaya, 2013, Angell, 1991). A key aspect of these relations is an intentional informality which allows for greater latitude in culture and instruction (Manilow, 2009).

Students as Content.

Dr. Gambone's work on the concept of "The Artisanal Teacher" (pp. 195-197) depicts a learning environment where faith is placed in teachers whose focus is the intersection between detailed knowledge of their content areas and that, "they view their students as an ever-changing subject matter." (p. 196) Progressive school's focus on child-centered learning (Kohn, 2008, Burton,, Collaros, & Eirich, 2013) and their standing outside of the current "testing culture" allows them this opportunity to focus intently on a child's interests and needs. Many progressive alumni have pointed to the individualized environments that they learned in (Nehring, 2006, Read, 2014) and the influence this had on their growth as people and students. Patience, informality, and flexibility are hallmarks of this approach. (Jenlink & Jenlink, 2008).

The Experiences of Progressive School Students

<u>"Active, Inquiry-Based, Critical Thinking"</u>

Contemporary scholarship that has focused on the specific instructional practice of progressive schools (Chernetskaya, 2013, Gambone, 2017, Read, 2014, Russell, 2012) references the space that is provided for individual students to actively pursue their learning. Rather than preparing for success in a standardized form, students are encouraged to question prevailing knowledge and form their own perspectives (Little & Ellison, 2015). While traditional tests are rare and projects much more common (O'Grady, 2011), more importantly students are encouraged to define the parameters of success for their learning goals and see their teachers as co-learners in a community of knowledge (Greene, 2014).

Theory about the effects of progressive education revolves around the noteworthy Eight Year Study. (Aikin, 1942, Waltras, 2006). "Students from the most experimental, nonstandard schools earned markedly higher academic achievement rates than their traditional school counterparts and other Progressive-prepared students." (Kridel, 2018, p.21). Other studies have confirmed these results in more contemporary settings (Lit & Darling-Hammond, 2015, Meier, 2002). There has been some research that has suggested that graduates of progressive schools are more likely to become politically involved. (Knoester, 2012, Kridel & Bullough, 2007, Kunkel, 2016) Taken together these studies coalesce into "theory" about graduates of progressive school: they are academically accomplished, more likely to pursue artistic expression, and successful in college. The use of age-mixing, creative curriculum, and alternative forms of assessment have not been found to have negative effects. The research that has resulted in this "theory" is consistent with the data I discovered in my interviews with progressive school graduates.

Methodology

My research for this project was done through phone interviews of 12 alumni from a small independent progressive school in Upstate New York. The population that I drew from for this qualitative study was recruited through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2012). The initial interviews came through my connection to the founder and teachers at this school who arranged the conversations. Subsequently, other interviews came through introductions from previous interview subjects or through the school's Facebook Alumni site. It was necessary to conduct all of the interviews over the phone as the subjects are scattered all over the world (one conversation was with an alum now in Paris).

All interviews took place between May and October 2017 and were from 10-20 minutes long. They were both recorded on my tablet and subsequently transcribed, using funds from a grant I had received for this project. In laying the groundwork for my coding I relied solely on my interviews with the alumni. It was only after all interviews were concluded for this project that I did the coding work. At that point I constructed a "master comments grid" for the alumni that I interviewed to aid in my narrative analysis (Herman et al, 2012) of what each was saying about their conceptions of their school.

Each answer was coded for summary descriptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in an initial descriptive stage of coding (Saldana, 2009) In my analytical coding stage (Jones 2011), I began to categorize my data in order to identify themes and specific language that was repeatedly used by the interviewees.

Data Analysis

In my Theoretical Framework section, I referred to the work of Mollie Gambone (2017) and her three characteristics of learning settings defined by high degrees of trust. It is with those categories in mind that I considered the data I gathered in my interviews. I was not trying to fit what I saw into those exclusive categories nor I was attempting to confirm her findings. In reading over my interview transcriptions I was attempting, with her work in mind, to consider what were the observable and confirmable elements that I was hearing identified in individual interviews. I created a grid with the answers to the 4 questions that I asked each alumni. Each answer was coded for summary descriptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and I performed a similar task with the transcripts of my interviews in my descriptive stage of coding. (Saldana, 2009)

In my next analytical coding stage (Jones 2011), I began to categorize my data. From that I was able to identify themes and specific language that occurred repeatedly. Gambone's three characteristics were included in what I discovered, but as the "findings" below reveal, I also found other common categories. It was at this point that I began to see a distinction between those descriptors and sub-categories that were concerned with instructional and learning behaviors and those that were more broad, touching on the instructional, but only as one of a number of phenomena that went on at the schools regularly. As my coding continued I was able to group learning themes separate from these cultural identifiers.

Findings

Advantages

Considering the answers that I received from the four interview questions that I asked, my findings can be divided into two groups: advantages of attending a small, progressive school and disadvantages.

In this section I will discuss the four advantages: Community, Small Setting, Freedom, and Individuality.

Community

Every interviewee mentioned the sense of community that was present at the school as a very positive factor in their time there. One said, "And I mean, I really loved it. I definitely think it's been really important for me. And growing up, kind of having like a small community, people who definitely cared about each other,". Another noted, "My years at [the school] were very key, they really like definitely instilled a sense of community and being around friends and then making sure that you know, like different... I think the interaction between different ages is something that is really unique there. So, I think that the community aspect was really the key."

Many noted the relationships that were a part of that community and how many of them have continued well past their time at the school. The effect of a small community on the instruction they received was also noted. A number of students cited the daily practice of gathering each morning around the rug in the "living room" to share whatever needed to be said. One told me:

> "I think the advantages of [the school] is here you are ... learning with people of
> different age groups, which I think is absolutely beneficial for your overall

> development because you have to be patient with people who are younger and you have to be humble with people who are older, that are going to do things quicker than you and so you're challenged is also kind of reminded that people have varying abilities ... and interests. And there's a very safe environment, ... and that ... and it was very aware."

Finally, some of the respondents compared this school community to a family, explaining the positive impact that it had on them during their time there. Asked to describe her years there, one said, "How do I describe my years? I would say almost family-like." The honesty of a more relational school was also appreciated:

> "I think the amount of genuine human interaction that we had. Everyone was honest with each other. There was very little fakeness or anything like that from teachers or from students to teachers or students to each other. Everything felt really genuine because there was that accepting culture and that community culture. And I think that that's kind of difficult to find in the larger setting with kind of more regimented days and things like that. I think that kind of like having real, being candid all the time was such a big advantage of [the school]".

And another:

> "I would describe it as a really, really happy atmosphere. I would use the word family to describe it, honestly, even more so than just a community sense because of the mixed-age classroom. You feel like everyone that's at [the school] is your family."

Another alumni added:

> "The younger kids are sort of like your little siblings, the older ones are your older sibling role models."

Two more explanations of the school community:

> "I think that starting at [the school] gave me so much more understanding of different types of people and different learning styles and you know it was somewhere where you had someone who was special needs they were like in their own classroom, you were learning with people who maybe had behavioral issues, or maybe had you know Asperger's, or maybe you know who are really slow. Those people weren't segregated off, and there wasn't some fear that they were going to slow you down ... you were really just all together and took care of each other and I'm still friends with some of the people that I went to [the school] with, and I think it's pretty close to for twenty years. I think we all come back to each

other as adults because there ... was kind of connection that was established. I do think that you have to be a more responsible person."

"I think that one of the things that [the school] really taught me was about community, .because you know, every morning it's pre-K through eighth graders sitting in a circle and singing songs. This is a whole thing. I remember my dog died, my childhood dog. I was like 15, or 14 ... well, maybe I was younger than that. Probably like 13. I just cried in front of everybody in the circle. He was my dog I'd had my whole life, and everybody was just so supportive and there for you. There's no judgment about that kind of thing at all. Just community and family. I don't think a public school really teaches you that so much…   I remember one time I got a mother hen award for just sort of looking after the young kids, stuff like that. It really teaches you to kind of just like love everybody, just take care of each other."

Small Setting

This school occupies a one-floor house and usually has 20-25 students a school year. Many of the alumni identified the small setting of the school as a positive both for the relationships that formed there and the learning that they did. One described it this way: "I think in [the school], it wasn't just the older kids teaching the younger kids, but it was really an exchange, and I think it kind of allowed me to have respect for people that weren't just my age and to be really willing to learn from them and listen to them and be friends with them. Just purely making friends with kids that were multiple years, younger or older than me. That was really special. "

Another told me, "There's advantages to having a really small group of students, which is that you learn how to see the benefits of everyone's character and become friends with people that you wouldn't normally be friends with. I think that students who go to [the school] learn to be really accepting." Other comments included: "It was such an intimate, small sort of learning space. I was able to kind of self-discover what my best learning skills were and

weaknesses," and, "If you're really struggling in a subject, the teachers can see that

because there's so few students, that they can really help you understand what it is that you, or

the subject that you're working on…stuff like that was a very easy and very fun to do."

Humorously, one remembered, "You were kind of forced to care about everyone

because you were around them every day in small groups."

Specifically, interviewees remembered how the instruction of the teachers was

influenced by the size of the school and the accommodations that they received for their personal

interests and needs. "What I love about [the school] is that they pick a subject, like the Middle

Ages or something, and everything that we did was about that subject. We were completely

immersed into it," one said. From another: "My teachers really knew me well. They knew my

strengths and they knew my weaknesses, and I think that comes from being in such a small

community."

Another said, "So you had this attention from the teachers, combined with all of

these great fun projects that got you super interested in the stuff you were learning, and really

made you want to understand what you were doing, and that combined with the teachers helping

you, just gave me some interest in all these subjects, and that's really the most important thing I

got out of [the school]."

Many cited the warmth and nurturing nature of the learning environment and how

the size of the school was a key factor in developing that facet of their time there. I was told,

> "Students who attend [the school] learn more than just academic skills. It's not
> only about the education there, it's about learning how to be a good person
> Because of that, from a young age, students are doing dishes, and they're cleaning
> up after themselves, and they're having social awareness for other people's
> feelings. These almost like household skills that I think a lot of people need to
> know how to do just to be self-sufficient, that you would never find ... or even like
> cooking skills. Those sort of opportunities don't really exist at other schools I've
> found."

Finally, many linked the closeness that they felt with other students and their teachers to this element. One said, "All these different teachers who always influenced us in different ways and they were constantly trying to try out different pedagogical things." Another student elaborated on this:

"Really a great community, and I was always excited to go school, which was not a common feeling, you know? I wanted to go to school because it was fun. I felt like it was always exciting and lots of different learning styles, whether we were doing projects ... I always felt like there was a lot of things that we were doing like projects or assignments, different books we were reading in different classes. I never felt bored, and I really could see myself progress through the years, each year"

Freedom

One of the most commonly heard responses had to do with the freedom

students enjoyed as learners. A girl told me:

"They were great and filled with joy. Probably the best school I've ever attended. And kind of spun my way of thinking of things... like, having gone to a school where it was really only about learning and not about grades or ... you know, just, you learn things because you want to learn them, not because you had to. And so I think that has helped me to appreciate school more, and appreciate just academically in general, because it wasn't about things other than just ... like, I discovered a new topic, so I'm going to figure out what it's about."

Since the school declines to give tests of any kind, students are free to have

significant influence on the path that their learning will take. One said, "What we really loved

about [the school], was the freedom to excel to whatever level you want to.   Just being able to

have those opportunities, and the freedom to excel to whatever level we were capable of, and

pushed to do so, I think was really appealing." Another went into greater detail on

the same point: "I felt like the education I was getting was super hands-on, You just have so

much creative freedom, not only in actual artistic creativity, but creative in what you are

interested in studying, projects that you do." This leads to an instructional informality that led

what many referred to so a stress-free or pressure-free environment. An example from one

student: "There is no pressure about what you say, if you are saying the wrong thing. I don't have

a fear of messing up as much."

Looking at the effect that attending this school affected her going forward, I was told:

> "I think the biggest advantage of attending there was the academic confidence that
> I gained because I never felt pressure. I never felt like there were   academic rules.
> Because of that, I had such a freedom to really know how I learn best. Because I
> was able to have the opportunity to do that, I think that my confidence in the
> classroom and being a really avid participant in conversations and knowing that
> it's okay to bring my own style into things, and take my research in whatever
> direction I feel like is something that I don't think I would have gotten if I hadn't
> gone there. I don't think I would have been as confident in making sure that my
> education is my education. "

Many also pointed to the patience that the teachers there extended to students as they gained

knowledge of how they learned. One added, "And it was definitely a place where like, the

 teachers that I had really were able to be flexible to students' interests…The teachers were very

 willing to say, okay, like let's spend more time on this."

A number of responses reflected the opportunities that these alumni had had to

investigate areas of their own interest. One told me, "I think that [the school] gave me a

thirst for learning because they encouraged that curiosity, and that's what was so great about

it, is that they encouraged you to do that. Where, at public school, it was sort of frowned upon. It

 was seen as disruptive."

Individuality

Students frequently noted the respect that was shown for them as individuals. One

described her time there:

> "Academically, it was very individualized and self-motivated in a lot of ways. Very creative. They were really creative years, I would say it sort of allowed me to come out of my shell in ways that I might not have."

One alumni said,

> "I think that [the school] definitely made me feel a lot more like comfortable being confident in my beliefs. Because it was a place that like really made you feel like you were accepted and should be accepted."

Another agreed:

> "Really just being educated in an environment where there is no pressure was great. The only standard they ever wanted, was for you to do your best, which I think all education should be like"

Congruent with comments made by the school's leaders, time, space, and choice are allotted for each child to discover how they learn best. I was told, "I think the most positive thing that I took from it is that you can view things in a different way and still get a lot out of it and you can learn in a way that's engaging and fun and still get a lot of different things from it." Another said, "My years there were great. The school really allowed me to learn in my own way, and grow in that, and really worked to understand me as a child and how I can best learn. It was great." Another added: "There's just a really open environment, ... and a patient environment."

Students have been allowed to pursue individual projects that they later shared with the whole school. Reading is encouraged as an important tool that allows them to make their way to their own individual learning goals. One said:

> "I think that [the school] does a really, really excellent job of getting students to enjoy reading. It's almost a separate thing. When was there, I read so much, and I loved it, and my sisters loved reading, and the way that books were presented to us were exciting. .I think that I feel so fortunate that I learned to love reading because of the way that [the school] really gives you the freedom to choose what you want to read, also. Kind of explore different genres, and study ... just sort of know what's available from a young age, were definitely really amazing."

Free from the standardization of public school, this progressive environment truly is "child-centered," with each individual having an opportunity to take their interests in the direction they choose, demonstrating their learning in a variety of ways. "[the school] helped me so much, and I still think about it all the time. I do. The people who work there, they still inspire me today. The people that they are, and the things that they taught me. They just equipped me.."

Another said, "It totally changed my life. I wasn't being my true self, I think, in a social way. So [the school] really allowed me to grow in that, and figure out who I wanted to be, and what was important to me at that age. So when I went back to public school, I was more true to myself than I had been before I left." I received another similar comment:

> "It's pretty self-motivated, it's very intimate learning, and you become very close to the people around you in that setting But there's no pressure to conform to one style or another. So I think it really allowed me to find that independence. And now in high school and college, I am a really hard-working student, and I think [the school], because it's so personalized, for me, it allowed me to really explore what worked for me, but for my own guidance, not from a teacher telling me, "Try this. Try this."

The comments I received similar to these were numerous. I will limit myself to sharing just one more:

> And it allowed me to be very self-motivated in my learning and excel ... I think the cool thing about [the school] was the multi-age classroom. That was probably the biggest advantage just that logistically, because of that, Yet there are no restraints. Like I said, in eighth grade, we were taking 10th grade math and probably higher level French than would have been given in a traditional public school. So I think it was really that fluidity, the flexibility of whether you wanted to excel a lot in certain things, which was my case. Or whether you were a couple years behind in other subjects. I think both ways, that is such a big advantage of [the school] because you really don't feel pressured to be performing to any material or level. It's just where you're at. They meet you where you're at. And I think really allows for that self-discovery, like I said, and self-confidence. It allows you to just be comfortable with what you're doing."

Disadvantages

In this section I will discuss the two disadvantages that were mentioned in interviews: Limited Extra-Curricular Opportunities and Limited Social Interaction.

Limited Extra-Curricular Opportunities

This is a small independent private school in rural Upstate New York. It has no athletic facilities of its own, limited funding, and no affiliations with athletic or cultural organizations. A number of students leave this school once they are about Middle School age in order to pursue extra-curricular opportunities. One said: "I think if you're someone who wants to play sports and kind of have that larger kind of social network it's challenging". While the school does use some of the facilities available on the college campus where they are located, to play on a sports team, students need to leave the school. "So there were a couple of reasons that I left. One is that I couldn't play sports if I, if I was there for seventh grade. And that was a big deal to me at the time. I really, I really loves sports. Playing baseball. And I couldn't do that with a public school anymore if I wasn't going to the school. So that's part of it." Another had similar interests: "Something I liked about the public school was that they had organized sports, which [the school] didn't. That's something you have to seek out yourself, if you're going to do a sport. I always was actively wanting to do sports. And I was desperately wanting to be on a middle school team or something like that. In seventh grade I was really looking forward to joining the soccer team."

Limited Social Interaction.

With such a small student population, social opportunities are very limited. One said, "It's just the social aspects that were hard for me because it's such a small school. At the time, I think that that felt like a really big disadvantage. I think that maybe their social development in terms of friendships, and that sort of stuff could maybe be a little stunted after they leave there. I think that's probably what I would see as the biggest disadvantage for students that attend [the school] in general. "A second alum agreed: "I could see how someone who might want to interact with a ton of people all the time might not fit in well there."

Dating at this school is very rare and the leadership there has stated their intention to keep many Middle School behaviors out of their school. A boy said, "I think being, especially in seventh and eighth grade, you know, no one's really dating anyone there because it's so small. So I think that was definitely something that people would talk about… So that, that was frustrating. I think it's part of why I wanted a bigger school and like you know, tied in with feeling a little bit kind of, sort of you know, like emotionally claustrophobic there, just how small it was. "

However, students are aware of social events and opportunities that would be available to them at other schools. The most common point at which students leave this school is after 6th Grade, when they would enter Middle School. Many interviewees cited the lack of social opportunities as a specific disadvantage of attending there. One told me:

> "I would say the social aspect of the school. Being that when you only have two or three other kids, or one, that's really your own age, at that age can be pretty hard. Middle school, you're entering teenagehood, and our bodies are changing, and there are all these kind of new, awkward things going on and [the school] was such a small base, I sometimes kind of felt self-conscious in that in not having multiple different friends to lean on."

Discussion

In this section I will discuss the connections between my theoretical framework and my findings. As I stated previously, I am examining my data through the framework of Mollie Gambone's three characteristics of high-trust educational settings, such as progressive schools. The answers that I received from the alumni confirmed that their school is such a high-trust environment, that the trust there is extended to all involved parties, and that the memories that these students have of their education includes many examples of how that trust affected those years at this progressive school. This aligns with other research on progressive schools that shows the benefits of teachers trusting students to take a larger role in their education (Kohn, 2008, Little, 2013, Gray, 2013).

Relational Schools

Clearly this school is one that is built on the personal relationships between the students and their teachers. The lack of hierarchies here, the willingness to share decision-making about the learning that takes place indicates that students and teachers both work and learn together. Patience and informality are also key concepts at this school, whose decision not to include summative testing allows the space for authentic learning to take place. By taking the time to know their students and their interests, teachers are able to play a part in constructing an education that is relevant and personal for each student. As one student said, "It allows you to just be comfortable with what you're doing."

Students As Content

Dr. Gambone's observation that in high-trust learning environments, teachers "view their students as an ever-changing subject matter," (p. 196) is realized in the practices of this school. A teacher there once told me, "We don't fit the kid into the curriculum, we take the curriculum and form it around the ideas and interests of the students." While child-centered education has long been identified as a characteristic of progressive schools (Russell, 2012), this learning environment is intentionally flexible and sensitive to what is best for its students. As indicated in the previous section, many of the recollections of the school by these alumni included examples of the ways in which the school accommodated their particular situations. The community of the school is built around what is best for their learners, not satisfying the demands of an external educational body. Because they are the center, they recall their time there as being, "…great and filled with joy. Probably the best school I've ever attended. And kind of spun my way of thinking of things.   ... like, having gone to a school where it was really only about learning."

<u>"Active, Inquiry-Based, Critical Thinking"</u>

By having so much influence on how their learning will unfold, the students at this school occupy a different position than the passive learners in many educational settings. As was shown in the interviews with the alumni, significant amounts of time, space, and choice are allotted to areas of investigation and discovery that individual learners choose. In interview after interview I heard students recount examples of individual learning goals that they were encouraged to pursue. Frequently, the school as a whole benefitted as these learnings were shared with the other students. "I was just so curious about everything that I ... I don't know. But [the school] encouraged that curiosity, and that's what was so great about it, is that they encouraged you to do that. "These alumni are still able to vividly recall how their school encouraged them to not just receive an education, but to create one.

In this section, I have shown that there is a connection between the work of Dr. Mollie Gambone and her research on high-trust educational settings and the experiences of alumni of a progressive school. As Dr. Gambone theorized, these students' school was highly relational, treated the students as their content, and assembled an active learning environment for them to work in. Their positive comments about their experiences at this school indicate the link between progressive education and a high degree of trust between teachers and students in the learning process.

Further Research

There are too many segments of the educational landscape that have been insufficiently researched in recent years. While there are many contemporary studies on standard definitions of academic achievement in public school classrooms, further attention could be paid to alternative learning settings and the students that they produce. These alternative ways of educating and their graduates deserve to be studied with greater frequency and depth.

In examining progressive schools and their alumni it has become clear that today many students graduate after having spent many years in a non-public school environment. Charter schools, private schools, and home schools are all an established part of what makes up education, but far too little is known about how their graduates do at the college level and in the workforce. There is a need for longitudinal studies that attempt to connect the way students are educated with outcomes once they leave their schools. There is much to be learned about the advantages of different types of instruction in more closely examining these groups.

<u>Concluding Thoughts</u>

I've been observing, interviewing, and thinking about this school since April 2016. During that time my life and work have gained much from what I have learned there. This is the third article I have produced about some aspect of what goes on in this progressive learning space. The work that I have done has inspired me in my own teaching, opened my mind to new ways of thinking about what school could be, and broadened my perspective in many ways.

In many ways, what is done there on a daily basis should be a model for schools everywhere. The leaders and teachers at this school are informed by contemporary educational standards and policies, but they never allow them to get in the way of their mission, The school's founder once told me that when students left her school, she hoped that they would remember it as, "A place where they were cared for and cared about." All of the student achievement scores and standardized measures of accomplishment can never compete with that definition of success. This school treats students as individuals, capable of helping to construct their own learning, and they are still changing lives.

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