

Experiences of Progressive Educators in Dilemmatic Spaces

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Abstract—Progressive education programs have increasingly conflicted with the growing preference for data-driven evaluations and testing in U.S. schools. This qualitative descriptive study examined how progressive educators navigate the tensions between their beliefs and teaching practices amidst high-stakes accountability in the United States. The target population included progressive education educators currently working in progressive programs across America. The study was grounded by the theoretical framework of dilemmatic spaces of Fransson and Grannäs (2013). Data sources for this qualitative descriptive design included a questionnaire utilizing the Beliefs About Primary Education Scale (BPES) and a semi-structured interview. Data analysis incorporated descriptive statistics and reflexive thematic analysis to address the problem statement. The findings revealed four key themes that highlight the beliefs and practices of contemporary progressive educators and their experiences in high-stakes educational settings. The identified themes were Freedom to Teach My Values, Accountability Not Tied to Standardized Tests, Challenges to My Beliefs, and Adapting to Changing Times. Recommendations for future research include studies on progressive educators in various contexts, dilemmatic spaces, high-stakes testing environments, and principled resistance.

Keywords—progressive education, progressive philosophy, educators, educator beliefs, educator practices, high-stakes testing

I. INTRODUCTION

Progressive education programs have increasingly conflicted with the growing preference for data-driven evaluations and testing in U.S. schools. As school administrators and governing bodies emphasize data collection and standardized assessments, educators must heighten awareness of their knowledge base to successfully navigate their teaching practices [1]. However, when understanding, expectations, and beliefs among educators are misaligned, the school culture deteriorates and becomes ineffective [2]. Professionals are both self-disciplined and motivated to act in ways that enhance the capacity of others to work productively in daily practice. Educational practices that do not fully embrace data-driven accountability and high-stakes

measures, such as progressive education, may be adversely affected by the principles of efficiency and marketization [3]. One of the most dominant features of these policies is the use of data-driven evaluation tools like grading and standardized tests.

A central question of this study was the dilemma, if any, that progressive educators face given the contrast between their pedagogical beliefs and the current standardized measurements driven by increased accountability. Before this study, considerable research had been conducted in public education regarding the reactions of educators and other stakeholders to policies like high-stakes accountability [4–6]. However, limited research has been undertaken on how progressive educators interpret and describe these policies [7].

Research has shown that when educators face conflicts between ideologies, it can negatively affect their instruction and student outcomes [8]. Educators often find themselves in complex situations, required to navigate various factors, such as conflicting expectations from others, competing academic goals for students, and issues related to control and management in education [9]. These dilemmas shape daily practices and beliefs of educators.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A dichotomy in educational policy has emerged from two conflicting educational ideologies: progressivism, which emphasizes student-centered learning, and human capital, which focuses on economic gain and competitiveness. Research on the experiences of public educators has often focused on the conflict between their beliefs and practices. Studies have shown that when educators face ideological conflicts, it can negatively affect their instruction and student outcomes [10]. Educators often find themselves in complex situations, compelled to respond to various factors, such as conflicting expectations from others, competing academic goals for students, or issues surrounding control and management in education. Since the inception of the progressive-traditional divide, the discussion about how students learn and should be taught has remained complex, marked by the turmoil and tensions reflective of the policy and cultural contexts in which it is situated.

The debate over the best approach has remained divisive, with proponents firmly entrenched on either side, framing

each philosophy in opposition. This dualism has led to a stalemate [11, 12]. However, numerous studies have indicated that the knowledge of educators is more nuanced, encompassing various types — subject matter, experience, relational, and other forms [13]. Educators frequently find themselves in the position of having to implement or choose one approach while balancing conflicting mandates, policies, and the expectations of other stakeholders. Empirical evidence highlights the tensions between traditionalism and progressivism rather than viewing them as complementary pedagogies, underscoring the need for inspiration from both disciplines [14]. Nevertheless, limited research has explored how progressive educators navigate the tensions between traditional and progressive teaching beliefs and practices.

A. The Traditional Progressive Rift

At the beginning of the 20th century, John Dewey's progressive educational philosophy challenged the traditional school structure. Dewey believed that schools should reflect the community and promote social welfare and that students learn best through active participation in natural cooperative settings [15–17]. Many resisted this call for reform, supporting older traditions that emphasized the separation of subjects, mental discipline, educators' authority over student interests, and standardized assessments of learning [18]. Thus began the debate between progressives and traditionalists, each advocating a philosophy based on what they believed was “best” for students and society.

The struggle over how to educate America's children in the early 20th century took shape against the backdrop of sweeping changes, including massive immigration, industrialization, and rapid societal and cultural shifts. These years saw many reforms in response to social issues, collectively known as the Progressive Era [19]. Progressive education reforms included the establishment of normal schools to train educators and the expansion of the public school system to incorporate high schools. However, many of John Dewey's key progressive ideals—such as student choice, critical pedagogy, and collaborative learning—lacked widespread support and were primarily relegated to small experimental schools associated with colleges of education, where natural discovery, interaction with the environment, and experiential learning were fully enacted [20]. Thus, the struggle over the purpose and management of education developed into a debate between progressives and traditionalists.

Over the past 20 years, the transition in educational beliefs from preparing future citizens in the early 20th century to focusing on personal and economic success has led to government policies evaluating student and educator performance. These policies and practices have shifted expectations for both educators and students [21]. Policies requiring standardized testing and data-driven success metrics have greatly affected funding and support for many public schools responsible for educating low-income and disadvantaged students [22]. Anderson [23] discussed how these new policies undermine educator ethos and identity, leading to a “de-professionalized”

professionalism. Anderson pointed out that, amidst current political and cultural demands and the resulting changes in the identity of educational professionals, new paradigms are emerging to explore educator resistance, appropriation, and advocacy. This study examined the experiences of progressive education educators whose beliefs may sharply contrast with those of their peers.

B. High-Stakes Climates in Public Education

Research has explored how policy changes regarding school reform have influenced teaching. Current literature trends indicate that educator work has become increasingly complex and demanding [24]. Federal and local policies stemming from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in the 1990s and later reform initiatives have created high-stakes accountability measures, such as connecting educator evaluations and compensation to standardized test scores and other indicators of student growth [25]. Despite evidence showing the ineffectiveness of both performance measures and privatization in improving teaching and learning, the debate surrounding the effectiveness of accountability practices—such as high-stakes testing—on educator practices and student success persists [25, 26]. Many of the articulated values of progressive education emphasize student outcomes that are not easily quantified.

C. Elements of Progressive Education in Public Schools

Many public school systems have adopted curricula and programs that incorporate progressive values, such as inquiry-based learning, constructivism, student agency, social-emotional learning, and thematic teaching. However, the implementation of these pedagogies has been inconsistent, which leaves many educators in the challenging position of either adopting curricula that are difficult to assess, such as Writer's Workshop, or integrating the multifaceted curriculum into a traditional classroom schedule with project-based learning focuses [27]. Additionally, entrepreneurial methods have recently been studied to bridge the gap between traditional and progressive views [7, 28]. Understanding the areas of overlap between these two philosophies is crucial for describing the current narrative of the progressive-traditional divide and its impact on educators, as reflective thinking forms a cornerstone of progressive educational theory. Progressive labels and concepts influence numerous aspects of today's schools; however, they are rarely examined in relation to educators who choose to work in schools striving to align with Dewey's ideals while rejecting the prevailing ethos of accountability and traditionalism. One area that has been explored is the alignment between beliefs and practices.

D. Dilemmatic Spaces

This research study is grounded in the theory of dilemmatic spaces proposed by Fransson and Grannäs. See Fig. 1. Educators' work entails numerous interactions and decisions in their daily practice. Teaching in contemporary schools is often complicated by conflicting demands and expectations from stakeholders such as administrators, parents, and education policymakers. The theory of

dilemmatic spaces offers a comprehensive framework for examining how educators navigate and interpret their experiences within complex and contradictory school contexts. According to Fransson and Grannäs, teaching environments are dilemmatic spaces because they function as ongoing arenas for formal and informal power negotiations amid complex relationships and issues of positioning that cannot be fully resolved.

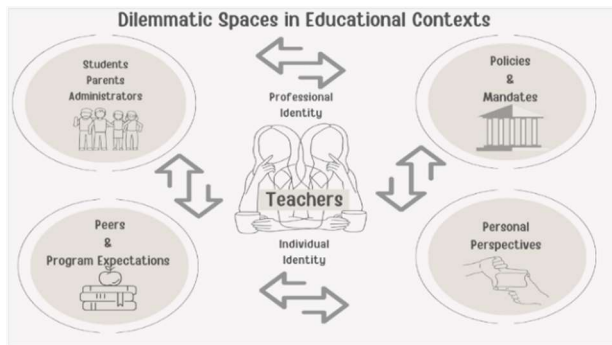


Fig. 1. Dilemmatic spaces in educational contexts.

With the increasing focus on the spatial dimension, the relationship between experiences of the individuals and their context indicates that “dilemmas become more like positions than situations, and more like positioning than problem-solving” [9, p. 14]. Given the often conflicting demands placed on educators, it is crucial to identify both the obstacles to and the positive aspects of educator effectiveness and well-being [29]. Analyzing teaching practice through the lens of dilemmatic spaces may help to de-dramatize complex interactions and empower educators to navigate their work with less stress and greater well-being. This makes it a suitable framework for examining educators’ work.

III. METHODOLOGY

We utilized a qualitative descriptive design to investigate the impact of progressive and traditional values on progressive educators’ experiences and teaching practices. First, participants were recruited through purposeful sampling by reaching out to progressive education schools across the U.S. and subsequently contacting educators via email. Purposive sampling was deemed the most appropriate method for selecting participants whose characteristics or experiences were essential to addressing the research questions [28]. The recruitment email included a Likert-style survey to confirm eligibility for the study and assess their progressive beliefs, ensuring that the study group represented a diverse range of educational philosophies. The survey also featured several open-ended questions to gather additional qualitative narrative data, which enriched the interview data. This data included critical incidents, stories, and narratives. Finally, the researchers conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews, using the research questions as a framework to delve into the complexities of teaching practice and the influence of the educational beliefs of the eighteen participants. This allowed for an in-depth examination of the phenomenon.

A. Research Questions

RQ₁: What pedagogical beliefs are reported by progressive education educators?

RQ₂: How do progressive education educators understand the relationship between their beliefs and high-stakes accountability climates?

RQ₃: In what ways has high-stakes accountability challenged progressive education educators’ teaching practice?

RQ₄: How do progressive educators describe the ways they navigate the tensions between their pedagogical beliefs and their practices?

B. Sources of Data

This study utilized three types of data to address the research questions. The first data type was collected through a Likert-scale survey on progressive beliefs. The second source involved five open-ended questions to provide additional information, such as specific examples or descriptions. The third source consisted of semi-structured interviews. These data collection methods aimed to gain insight into how progressive education educators navigate the policy environments of high-stakes testing.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the findings of this study, the theoretical framework of dilemmatic spaces of Fransson and Grannäs effectively describes how educators negotiate and interpret their experiences when confronted with conflicting demands and expectations in their teaching careers. Additional study is necessary to understand how contemporary progressive educators articulate their experiences regarding the current societal emphasis on data and standardized testing, directly contradicting their stated progressive beliefs and practices. By analytically focusing on complex interactions, researchers can offer strategies for progressive educators to better manage the daily stresses that arise from these tensions. The results section includes the Beliefs About Primary Education Scale and all narrative text from the data analysis process, with participant names, anonymized through pseudonyms to protect identifying information. The themes that emerged from the narratives addressed the four research questions. The researchers created four themes from iterations of coding, recoding, pattern forming, and finally derived at the four themes. See Table I for themes and definitions.

TABLE I. THEMES AND DEFINITIONS

Theme	Definition
Freedom to Teach My Values	Educators express their progressive beliefs of autonomy and freedom (AF), shared values (CSV), community action (CPP), parent education (PE), and the preeminent importance of relationships (RAA) in education.
Accountability Not Tied to Test Scores	Educators describe how they use evidence (ENT) and data (UDM) to evaluate and inform student learning, as well as the challenge of describing progressive education practice to others (PEM).

Challenges to My Beliefs	Educators' responses to high-stakes challenges to their progressive beliefs by parents (CPar), policies, and other stakeholders (CPol), as well as negotiating responses with other progressive educators (TNP).
Adapting to Changing Times	Educators' expressions of how they interact with current issues, such as preparing students for more traditional education programs (PTP), new educational issues such as the use of technology and the pandemic (RNC), as well as uncertainty about progressive education's place in the future (UAF).

A. Beliefs About Primary Education (BPES)

The Beliefs About Primary Education Scale is an eighteen-item validated quantitative instrument with a five-point Likert scale. It is divided into traditional (nine items) and progressive statements (nine items) intended to capture the beliefs of respondents on a continuum regarding good education. The results of the current study support the validity of the instrument and the BPES authors' original conclusions that educator beliefs are multidimensional and layered yet may concurrently exist as two distinct dimensions. According to the results of the questionnaire, the participants in the current study hold strong progressive beliefs. The overall average agree/strongly agree percentage for progressive statements was 83%. For example, in response to questionnaire statement number seventeen, 95% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "the school has to promote the total and harmonious development of young people". Prioritizing students' social-emotional well-being is clearly and substantially validated by the study's participants. In contrast, the average disagree/strongly disagree percentage for traditional beliefs was 60%. The response to questionnaire statement number four, 82% of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with "the content of a lesson has to be completely in line with the curriculum." This finding supports most progressive educators' rejection of mainstream traditional teaching beliefs.

B. Theme One: Freedom to Teach My Values

The theme of Freedom to Teach My Values emerged as central to the participants' pedagogical beliefs, addressing RQ₁ and RQ₂. It highlights the connection between their personal and professional beliefs and the practices they identified as essential for expressing those beliefs in education. See Table II.

TABLE II. FREEDOM TO TEACH MY VALUES

Themes	Keywords
Autonomy & Flexibility (50)	Autonomy, Freedom Democratic, Flexibility
Commitment to Progressive Philosophy (80)	Whole-child, Hands-on, Thematic Integrated, Individualized
Community Shared Values (50)	World, Equity, Democratic, Social justice, Inclusion
Parent Education & Involvement (50)	Families, Communication, Engagement, Involvement, Participation
Relationship Above All (50)	Care, Relationship, Social emotional, Trust

In Freedom to Teach My Values, the educators described their feelings of autonomy to make pedagogical decisions, flexibility to create their curriculum, and the freedom to respond to the needs and interests of the students. Educators shared their understanding of the progressive philosophy by emphasizing democratic choice and voice, student-led interdisciplinary curriculum, real-world interactions, social-emotional learning, and respect for diversity in all things. Further, the participants discussed the importance of student and school community involvement, sharing the values of social justice, equity, and the democratic process in all aspects of decision-making, from students choosing their project to work on to educators selecting a new director and, indeed, all aspects of the school program. The educators emphasized the importance of parents' involvement and education as critical in supporting student learning. Finally, the educators expressed the importance of building trusting relationships and fostering social-emotional well-being throughout the student body and school community with all stakeholders.

The educators' central shared sentiment was freedom to enact classroom practices aligned with their progressive beliefs. The educators expressed their feelings of freedom to teach in ways they felt were best practices to create confident, democratic citizens and to change curricula to fit the needs and interests of the students within the umbrella of core progressive values-thematic, student-led, and socially relevant learning experiences were common among the participants. This sentiment was often connected to the progressive values described in the responses to the questionnaire, open-ended written responses, and interview transcripts. For example, the open-ended question, "Describe in your own words what 'progressive education' means." This question was designed to answer RQ₁. The ten responses included one or more of the terms "whole child" and "student-centered" as well as "democratic" (three responses), social "justice" (three responses), and "developmental" (six responses). "Whole-child" and "student-centered" are terms echoed by questionnaire statement number fifteen – "good teaching always relates to the personal experiences of the pupils and their own 'world'" which received an 83% agreement rating from the participants.

In the interviews, the participants elaborated on specific experiences with their beliefs and added more narrative details to their descriptions. Twelve of the fourteen respondents discussed the importance of autonomy in making and changing curriculums based on students' needs or interests. Meg expressed a common belief, "I think the biggest one is... the freedom to follow curiosity from your students. The freedom to take your curriculum, but let it lean towards something they are interested in and are pas." Also, most respondents noted the lack of freedom and flexibility in traditional programs – Anna says, "Whereas in a more traditional classroom, you might see everybody working on the same page at the same time, or the same lesson for everyone on the same board." A view upheld in the questionnaire's statement eight – "It is recommended that an educator does not deviate from the

content of an agreed learning program” – received a score of 70% disagreement. In all, a description of the educators’ affinity for the freedom to adapt what they teach and the ability to follow student interests became a common belief to nearly every participant.

C. Theme Two: Accountability not Tied to Test Scores

The theme of Accountability Not Tied to Standardized Tests emerged as a crucial element in addressing RQ₂. The participants shared their responses and experiences concerning the prevailing societal emphasis on conventional teaching practices and data-driven evaluation in education. Their descriptions were organized into four common areas, which became the codes: Progressive Education is Messy, Evidence Not Tests, Student Voice, Choice and Ownership, and Using Data Mindfully. These codes illustrated how progressive educators convey the complexity and inherent unpredictability of learning in a progressive education classroom, respond to demands from parents and other stakeholders for evaluative data through student participation and work products, and use data mindfully and flexibly to guide instructional practices. See Table III.

TABLE III. ACCOUNTABILITY NOT TIED TO TESTS

Themes	Keywords
Evidence Not Tests (57)	Integrated, Complicated, Complex, Thematic
Progressive Education is Messy (35)	Integrated, Complicated, Complex, Thematic
Student Voice, Choice & Ownership (52)	Voice, Choice, Ownership, Reflection
Using Data Mindfully (32)	Data, Evaluation, Testing, Grades, Information

One of the most prominent ideas expressed by the participants was the awareness that progressive education practices and student outcomes should not be described in simple, quantifiable terms like grades and test scores. Leah voiced a common sentiment, “I remember so much discussion around measuring student achievement. But I just remember saying to somebody—how do you measure a human being?” The notion that students are human beings who are fundamentally complex individuals with unique cultural and personal histories and psychological mindsets—who do not benefit from being compared to others through testing and grades—was reiterated in some form by all fourteen participants.

D. Theme Three: Challenges to My Beliefs

The third theme that emerged from the analysis was Challenges to My Beliefs. It describes responses of educators to significant challenges to their progressive beliefs posed by parents, district policies, local regulations, and other stakeholders, as well as their negotiations with fellow progressive educators while maintaining their beliefs and practices through principled resistance. Throughout their progressive experiences, participants recounted various challenges to their beliefs and practices stemming from parents, administrators, policy mandates, and other progressive educators. This theme addresses

RQ₂ through participant accounts of experiences dealing with the national preference for data-driven evaluation. It also responds to RQ₃ and RQ₄ by detailing the challenges educators face in high-stakes environments. See Table IV.

TABLE IV. CHALLENGES TO MY BELIEFS

Themes	Keywords
Challenges from Admin & Policies (53)	Administration, Assessment, District, Policy Mandated
Challenges from Parents (59)	Questions, Anxiety, Worry, Grades, Expectations
Teachers Negotiating Within Progressive Programs (35)	Authentic, Pure, True, Real
Principled Resistance (51)	Push Back, Ethical, Manage, Change

The most common challenges described were those from parents. Every educator interviewed shared multiple accounts of instances when parents questioned their practices. Some of this parental questioning involved doubts about the effectiveness of progressive methods. Stella mentioned, “I have encountered questions like, why are the kids playing? Why aren’t you doing more reading?” Other participants described parents questioning progressive evaluation practices. Pearl said, “They don’t give grades; they provide narratives, and then, of course, there were at least one or two parents who were like, what do you mean you’re not giving my kid a letter grade?” Some challenges were described as a lack of parent awareness regarding progressive practices. Violet mentioned, “Then there is a group that wants the extras, like the enrichment, the art, you know, all of that. So that was a bit hard to deal with because I am the kind of progressive educator who focuses on equity.”

Some educators relayed times when they felt opposition towards their progressive beliefs outside of the school environment. Anna said, “I live in [state name], and there are progressive educators there, of course, but there’s a real hostility to the idea that this form of education is accountable.” Kiara said, “Most people who are not in my inner circle of friends, right, my chosen family, think that I do some kind of weird hippie leftist, commie [communist] something I don’t even teach, right?” These were some of the challenges from non-progressive stakeholders and policies described by the participants as influential in their teaching and personal lives.

The tensions and negotiations around understanding and implementing progressive practice with fidelity among co-educators were also described by progressive educators. Some educators related the differences between educators new to progressive education and more experienced educators. Violet, a principal, commented, “Most of my educators are trained in a traditional setting but have chosen to work at this progressive school, and so sometimes it’s a little bit of learning on their part.” Stella commented on the tensions around best practices, “When you get down to the nitty-gritty of how we do things and how another progressive educator does things, it can become very, I don’t know, fraught almost.”

Others addressed the challenge of divergent progressive beliefs among their peers. Pearl asserted, “And he says this

is Pearl's philosophy. And I'm like, it shouldn't just be my philosophy. Why is it my philosophy? Yeah. We're a progressive ed [education] school; it should be everyone's philosophy." Amelia observed tensions in implementing social justice and equity curricula and practices. Several educators discussed the issue of true or pure progressivism concerning practices that they or others did not feel aligned with progressive philosophy. Anna noted, "But with progressive educators, sometimes I have found it's like, well, I know better. That's not really progressive. My brand of progressivism is actually the true brand, which is kind of funny because progressive is supposed to be open-minded." A few educators shared internal struggles with adapting or deepening their progressive beliefs. Merida remarked, "We can have colleagues who become complacent. They do things because they've always done it that way. And I certainly feel that way about certain things, right?... I think that's when progressive education can seem outdated."

The final element that emerged as central to the challenges faced by educators was principled resistance. Principled resistance refers to educators' opposition to conflicting demands and mandates that clash with their professional beliefs [30] and involves educators who "attempt to resolve ethical dilemmas that arise when their beliefs about the purposes, significance, and standards of their work conflict with the policies and practices they are expected to enact." [30, p. 4]. The participants shared their experiences enacting principled resistance against non-progressive demands or expectations in various ways. All participants in this study reported ethical dilemmas where they felt it necessary to resist a non-progressive demand, not implement a mandated policy or curriculum, or leave a teaching position due to discomfort or disagreement with demands they perceived as unethical or inconsistent with their beliefs.

E. Theme Four: Adapting to Changing Times

The fourth and final theme that emerged was Adapting to Changing Times. This theme pertains to the participants' experiences and reflections on current educational influences, the future of progressive education, and their roles within it. Theme Four addresses RQ₃. The participants discussed how the current educational and political landscape impacts their experiences and may shape the future of progressive education. Educators shared how they engage with contemporary issues, such as preparing students for more traditional educational programs, navigating new influences like technology and the pandemic, and confronting uncertainty regarding the role of progressive education in the future. See Table V.

TABLE V. ADAPTING TO CHANGING TIMES

Themes	Keywords
Preparing Students for Traditional Schooling (28)	Administration, Assessment, District, Policy Mandated
Uncertainty About the Future (44)	Questions, Anxiety, Worry, Grades, Expectations
Progressive Responses to New Challenges	Authentic, Pure, True, Real

One common aspect among the participants was their acknowledgment of the broader educational landscape and their thoughts on preparing students for traditional schooling experiences. Clara said, "I remember [educator name] offering some of the fifth graders in her class a kind of test prep on the weekend because parents really wanted that; they felt like students hadn't had that kind of exposure and were concerned..." Violet echoed this sentiment, "So we understand that we are not an island, that our kids will leave our school and have to function in the real world... and whether they go to a traditional high school or a progressive high school, we need to prepare them for both, so what habits do we want to develop?" Amelia noted how her experience supported students transitioning to traditional programs, "If we agree with these standards, which we do, then it's not so much progressive as it is about ensuring that they're being prepared properly."

Another ongoing challenge is the far-reaching impact of technology and social media, which participants identified as significant factors affecting their progressive programs. Hazel underscored this shared concern when she responded to a question about changes in progressive education: "It's the use of technology, I think, and the access to technology. But last year, I noticed how little the kids communicate with each other when they're on a Chromebook." Merida expressed both hope and unease regarding new technologies. "How do we determine if we're giving our kids enough exposure to technology so they're prepared for the tests they now take on it?" The social, technological, and scientific transformations of the 21st century have introduced new challenges for those committed to implementing progressive teaching. More research is needed to investigate the effects and influence of these changes.

V. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

A. Summary of Study

To address the problem space, the researchers organized this qualitative descriptive study to investigate the gaps in knowledge about the experiences of progressive educators within high-stakes environments. The design of this study was guided by the theory of dilemmatic spaces to examine the complexities of educator work more holistically and with greater depth—four research questions were explored and provided a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The study collected data from progressive educators working in the U.S. Seventeen participants completed the Beliefs about Primary Education Scale (BPES) questionnaire and wrote answers to four open-ended questions aligned with the research questions to add context and description to their responses. Fourteen educators also participated in semi-structured interviews. The interview questions aligned with the qualitative descriptive study and provided a thorough understanding of the accounts of the beliefs and practices of the participants.

This study examined how progressive educators articulate their beliefs and practices in high-stakes environments through four research questions. The BPES

questionnaire addressed RQ₁, while RQ₂ to RQ₄ were explored using open-ended questions and fourteen semi-structured interviews. RQ₁: What pedagogical beliefs do progressive education educators report? This was summarized from the descriptive data of the BPES. Quantitative descriptive data can be utilized to present certain aspects of the phenomenon within a qualitative design. Thematic analysis was employed to understand the interview data, addressing RQ₂ through RQ₄, rooted in the theory of dilemmatic spaces from 2013 of Fransson and Grannäs [9].

The remaining three questions are: RQ₂: How do progressive education educators understand the relationship between their beliefs and high-stakes accountability? RQ₃: How has high-stakes accountability challenged the teaching practices of progressive education educators? RQ₄: How do progressive educators describe their navigation of the tensions between their pedagogical beliefs and practices? This study examines how progressive educators manage their beliefs and practices within the complex dynamics of high stakes testing environments, ultimately producing four themes. The researchers' subjectivity served as an analytic tool in reflexive thematic analysis, engaging reflexively with theory, data, and interpretation throughout the thematic coding process [31]. The researchers implemented a reflexive coding process that involved inductive reasoning to generate codes from the data.

B. Notable Findings

The theme "Freedom to Teach My Values" emerged from various codes across all three data sources, revealing patterns that offered a detailed description of the phenomenon. The researchers discovered that progressive educators primarily united around five core tenets when articulating their beliefs and practices. These beliefs aligned with the codes that shaped the final theme: Autonomy and Flexibility, Commitment to Progressive Philosophy, Community Shared Values, Parent Involvement and Education, and Relationships Above All. All participants made positive remarks in each of these categories. The participants unanimously conveyed satisfaction with how their beliefs aligned with their teaching roles and the school philosophy. Given the participants' diverse circumstances—currently working in seventeen schools across twelve cities and six states and holding positions ranging from kindergarten educators to educators in elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as school administrators—this finding is remarkable.

Although a comprehensive definition of progressive education philosophy has never been universally proposed or accepted, the schools in this study all belong to the Progressive Education Network (PEN). A non-profit organization based in the U.S. that is dedicated to promoting progressive principles in education. Therefore, it was not surprising that the participants unanimously supported PEN's statement of educational principles, which include student voice, agency, participation, and social-emotional needs, fostering respectful collaboration, social justice awareness, and active critical thinking in their classrooms and communities.

The descriptions of the participants of their teaching practices supported the belief that non-competitive and non-standardized evaluative tools better assess learning. The evaluative practices described included using student-produced evidence of learning, like projects, portfolios, and presentations, to show that learning occurred. Also incorporated in this theme is a core belief of the educators: Students should have their interests, individuality, and intrinsic motivation encouraged and respected in the selection and participation of learning tasks, and they should take developmentally appropriate ownership of learning outcomes. Surprisingly, the researchers also found the use of some statistical evaluation tools (standardized tests, use of school data, traditional grades in high school, etc.) to provide specific information on student skills, community impact, and facilitating transition into more traditional schools or higher education. Finally, there was a generally accepted acknowledgment by the participants that progressive education, with its relative lack of competitive grading, testing, or ranking, is an inherently complex endeavor that is often difficult to explain in succinct terms.

In contrast to the nearly unanimous beliefs of progressive pedagogy, the methods to evaluate learning garnered much more varied responses. This was further complicated in that the seventeen progressive programs studied ranged from the mostly grade and testing-free environments of elementary programs (K-5) to more traditional middle and high school models, sometimes using traditional grades and testing. However, these were only some of the evaluative tools used. As progressive middle and high schools are much rarer in the U.S. than elementary programs, this area would benefit from more research.

Indeed, several participants expressed some frustration about whether to adopt standardized goals like Common Core or state standards versus taking a more holistic approach to student learning. Most felt they collaboratively received guidance and curricular goals from their administrators or fellow educators. However, others, particularly less experienced participants, expressed their frustration regarding the lack of clear evaluation measures or standards to support curriculum planning and assess educator effectiveness. Within progressive programs, educators also described a complex negotiation with colleagues concerning best practices and program decision-making. Finally, many participants recounted instances where they resisted demands, declined to implement specific requests, or sought to mitigate expectations they viewed as inconsistent with their goals and principles. Challenges from parents were the most common instances of challenges to progressive educators. The participants recounted many instances where their progressive beliefs and practices were questioned or rejected, which, in turn, caused the educators to self-evaluate their progressive beliefs to determine if they needed to change their practice in response. The results of this self-questioning took the form of either direct communication back to the parent or indirectly, with an administrator, sometimes resulting in a change in practice

but, more often, in an affirmation of the progressive viewpoint and a renewed effort to explain progressive education to the parent through more dialogue, evidence of learning, and parent education.

Notably, the participants reported challenges that, in recent years, have intensified regarding parents questioning not only progressive beliefs but also seeking to remove or dictate the use of specific books and curricula, even pushing to alter fundamental progressive values. Other educators described instances where parents demanded the removal of books addressing homosexuality or racial equity from classrooms. They also mentioned parents who withdrew their students from the school due to disagreements with the focus on social-emotional learning, social justice curricula, or the emphasis on equity and tolerance in social studies activities. One educator recounted a parent who approached the school board to have the district enforce traditional math texts and grading. In that case, the district ultimately resisted effectively upholding its progressive practices. Other participants noted parents who questioned the time children spent on activities deemed insufficiently 'academic', such as field trips, free-choice time in kindergarten, and the absence of traditional approaches to curricula assessment.

The beliefs and practices of educators were most affected by parents' challenges. In most cases, the participants described their responses to parent challenges as communication and information sharing around progressive principles and explanations of how their practices yield successful learning outcomes for students, albeit unconventionally. Ultimately, this cycle of challenge/self-questioning/response was felt to be time-consuming and stressful, especially for newer educators, whom the participants felt were ill-equipped to face such challenges without years of experience and knowledge with which to respond.

A novel finding was the recent decline in trust among participants, parents, and educational stakeholders in recent years. Conversely, the participants emphasized that, overall, they were satisfied that their programs provided the best learning environment for students because they felt trust between educators and parents was present. While the issue of trust and the relationship between parents and educators is complex, the study participants placed a high importance on it. They dedicated extensive time and effort to fostering respectful and open relationships with their students' parents. This often included regular, sometimes daily, interactions with family members and a more inclusive community environment in the school, featuring frequent family events such as parental participation, holiday gatherings, student plays, and musical performances, along with showcases and presentations of student learning.

Although the participants largely agreed on progressive principles, their specific practices varied significantly, sparking debates and ongoing discussions about best practices. More experienced participants emphasized the importance of training younger or less experienced educators to fully understand and implement progressive practice. Other, newer educator participants expressed

tension with older, more experienced educators whom they felt had become resistant to changing or updating their progressive activities, even when those practices might harbor hidden biases or flaws in pedagogy.

One of the most intriguing discoveries in this study was the number of participants who responded to challenges to their beliefs through principled resistance. The term principled resistance [30] refers to educators who resist challenges from mandated reform policies that contradict their expertise and best practices in education. While the book primarily focused on educators in traditional school settings, the concept effectively illustrated how the participants of this study responded to challenges from parents, administration, and policies in purely progressive programs. Indeed, choosing to become a progressive educator can be viewed as an act of principled resistance against traditional, standardized education. Pearl observed, "One of the great hallmarks of a progressive educator is that they don't just sit around and wait for other people to change things." Thus, principled resistance emerges as a central aspect of this study's participants' belief systems, not merely a reaction to conflicting ideas demands.

Participants described instances of principled resistance in response to what they believed were direct attacks on their core beliefs and practices. These challenges raised concerns about student withdrawal from school, job retention, and potential legal consequences. Multiple cases were reported of parents questioning literature selections regarding Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) families, racial equity, and social justice, occasionally leading to students being withdrawn from school. In each instance, educators defended their decisions to include the books and received support from colleagues and administrators. Participants also noted instances where parents tried to impose non-progressive mandates, such as grades, traditional assessments, or comparative accountability measures, by bypassing educators to reach administration, school boards, or social media. However, these challenges were successfully resisted through principled actions by both educators and administrators.

The educators in this study outlined their responses to incorporating technology and social media, aiming to use these advancements to further progressive practices rather than replace them. Some participants described using social media to promote their schools and their ability to reach more community members with news, events, and information. In other instances, participants voiced concerns about the pervasive and often adverse effects on middle and high school students, leading to restrictions on phone use at school and explicit instruction on online safety. One high school educator addressed the use of AI in writing assignments and the difficulties it creates in evaluating the authenticity of student work. Incorporating how and when to implement computer learning, such as tablets, laptops, Chromebooks, and other devices, elicited various responses, including criticisms and praise. Once again, further research on new technologies and social media use in progressive programs is essential to understand their role fully.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Heidi Topley collected the data and conducted analysis; Frankie Lee assisted with the data analysis process, peer reviewed, reviewed the final paper, formatted the paper, and made revisions; both authors had approved the final version.

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