In Paul Diederich and the Progressive American High School, education historian Robert Hampel offers a lively selection of essays by an important and overlooked figure in progressive schooling whose career spanned the Eight Year Study in the 1930s to a long tenure at the Educational Testing Service stretching well into the 1970s – with other jobs in between. Just as progressive educators teach the whole child, Hampel renders Paul Diederich as a whole person through his shrewd selection of essays and insightful commentary. The Diederich that emerges from these pages – curious, inflammatory, ironic, blunt, quirky, intelligent, contrarian, and original—stands as an iconic representative of American progressive education writ large. He is less like the great names we associate with progressive thought and more like the grown-up student a progressive school might produce. Hampel calls him part of the “junior varsity – the men and women who worked for famous educators.” Steeped in John Dewey’s pragmatism and pedagogy, Diederich avoids Dewey’s impenetrable prose. His writing is clear to
the point of blunt with frequent lists and ironic quips. Mentored by Ralph Tyler, Diederich avoids Tyler’s bloodless, hyper-rational manner of thinking and writing. Diederich is often irreverent, satirical, even crude. And while he labored frequently in the realm of large-scale quantitative studies, his most original contributions came as practical innovations at the school and classroom level. He is perhaps best understood as a tinker in the American tradition of tinkers stretching from Franklin and Jefferson (his heroes) to Bronson Alcott to Edison and Bell. And like so many American tinkers, he was also subject to the prejudices of his day and his social class. Yet he challenged some of the economic and social norms that maintained the status quo—like George Counts, but without the fire and brimstone sermonizing.

Perhaps most striking is Diederich’s prose style and his manner of thought. His wit, passion, and irreverence surface in a passage where he rails against indoor physical education, recalling with distaste his high school encounter with the parallel bars. “Then I had to wobble back and forth while my 60 classmates looked on and jeered, do a fancy flip-flop in mid-air; shear off my genitalia on the way down, and land on the back of my neck. It was all highly amusing to the class, but it scared the liver out of me. When I got home that evening, I considered the alternatives of suicide, running away, or learning how to do the parallel bars well enough so that at least I would not be laughed at again.” Later, about the gym teacher, he writes, “May he rot in hell.” Diederich argued instead for unstructured outdoor activity: “…we ought to let them play outdoors just as much as we can get away with. It is probably the cheapest, most easily managed, the most natural, and the most sure-fire education there is.”

In the same essay he offers a blunt critique of mainstream high schools, where the “hectic activity is confusing,” there is “no time whatsoever to think,” and students spend their time “sitting on hard chairs five or six hours a day listening to other people talk.” He also laments the bifurcation of general and vocational education by recalling his own experience. “When I went to high school and
saw all the beautiful shops there, I wanted so badly to get into them that I could have wept.” But he was told that he was “one of the bright boys” and must elect the college prep course. “So the program card I filled out so hopefully was quietly thrown into the waste basket. I watched it go down like a ship sinking, and then was handed a pen and made to fill out a new card under the watchful eye of the teacher who had my best interests at heart.” Against the norm of silence for students, he recommends, “let kids talk to one another. If they have no such opportunity, they will do it in the middle of my Latin class and annoy me to no end.” Looking for a place to cut back the onerous course demands of the typical college prep program, he writes, “The only vulnerable spot in this line-up that I think would yield to about a thousand tons of dynamite is that first foreign language which is pursued for two years in the 9th and 10th grade and then forgotten more completely than any other terrestrial experience.” Again and again, Diederich casts the progressive critique of schooling in language any parent or student will understand, and with a rhetorical flair that kept this reader laughing out loud. On the reaction he sometimes got during a meeting, he writes, “Whenever I make that suggestion, the psychologists in the group act as though I had farted.” Diederich’s seemingly simple and even crude observations belie a deep understanding of progressive principles. He was capable of subtlety, writing, for example, “One of the wisest teachers of my acquaintance says, “A teacher does not have to understand children. He only has to be willing to.”

Also striking are Diederich’s innovative ideas, which were often relatively simple, practical suggestions that cut new pathways through systems overgrown with complexity. For example, he devised a method for the interpretation of Latin word endings that reduced from 1572 to 54 the number of inflected forms that a student had to learn. He reorganized the typical high school schedule so no teacher had to teach more than two classes per day. He arranged, in 16 school districts, for the hiring of college educated housewives to read student papers at a rate of 25 cents and greatly
increased the opportunity for students to write and get feedback on what they had written.

Diederich was not above the prejudices of his time and his social class. His essays are dotted with commentary on women. In a passage where he writes about how high school curriculum should address “what it takes to make a successful marriage,” Diederich comments, “My hunch is that for every girl who “goes wrong” there are twenty who are too scared and frigid to sustain affection. Who has reliable figures on frigidity? A very good psychiatrist I knew last year claimed that 40% of New England women never had an orgasm.” There is no related commentary about male impotence or male problems with intimacy. Throughout the essays in this collection, there is a foundation of supreme confidence underneath the irreverent tone sustained no doubt by the white, male, heterosexual privilege that Diederich enjoyed. It occasionally veered into a frat boy persona. During Diederich’s years at the University of Chicago as chief examiner, he frequently held exam writing sessions at his home. A drawing of one session (wisely included by Hampel) shows a room of drunken men who are singing, brawling, and carrying on. A framed female nude decorates a wall in the background. A caption, which is part of the drawing, reads, “a wildly exaggerated view of the final stage of a meeting to plan an examination ca. 1945 at the home of the examiner.” One wonders how exaggerated. I would have liked for Hampel to explore Diederich’s prejudices more since, from the vantage point of 2014, they are sharply evident and cry out for commentary.

Diederich’s cultural blind spots are balanced somewhat by his striking criticism of many contemporary norms. In a passage on “the nation’s failure to attain essential values” penned in 1945, he writes,

The status of women is still inferior, while that of old age is pitiable. There are well-defined classes in our society, based not on personal worth but on race, religion, and economic status, with little friendly contact between classes. Our economic system assumes that the man who has capital has
the right to control, in his own interest, the lives and fortunes of all the rest of us. Our public affairs, especially in cities, are usually mismanaged by a set of crooks and incompetents who are in politics for what they can get out of it. And now we are at war—the supreme disaster in human relationships, the gravest problem of our species, man’s greatest tragedy and failure. Contradictions such as these, which, if we are honest, we all embody, may be what led Hampel to comment in his introduction “The boxes in which historians place individuals like Diederich may be too small to accommodate the scope of their world views.”

Paul Diederich may be, warts and all, the best example we have of an education progressive at mid-20th century. We have Bob Hampel to thank for bringing Diederich’s work to light through his artful selection of essays and informed commentary. Like notable progressives before and after (Francis Parker, Theodore Sizer), Diederich moved comfortably between the university and the school house. With his clever innovations he strove for a secularized millennium. More than anyone of his day, he was tinkering his way toward an educational utopia.

About the Reviewer

James Nehring
Graduate School of Education
University of Massachusetts
United States
James_Nehring@uml.edu
James Nehring is associate professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. He is the author most recently of The Practice of School Reform: Lessons from Two Centuries. He is at work on a Fulbright supported study of school excellence in the United Kingdom and the United States.