
Opposing Approaches So Johnny Can Read

Finding the Answers in Drills and Rigor

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This selection first appeared in the *New York Times* on 11 September 1999. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. is a professor at the University of Virginia and author of *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them* (Doubleday, 1996).

The most interesting debate about American education concerns why the United States has not fulfilled the egalitarian aims of schooling as well as other democracies have. The main cause of inequality in American schools, I have argued, has been the dominance of the progressive-education tradition, which has seriously misconceived itself as the guardian of social progress and democratic ideals.

In this regard, I hope Howard Gardner is right that my work poses a threat to the assumptions of the progressivist tradition.

If we are lucky, the end of the 1990s will mark the end of spurious connections between educational ideas and political affiliations.

During the last two decades, when Democrats have controlled a school board, the district has tended to favor the whole-language method of teaching reading, to encourage the use of calculators for “math understanding” (instead of memorizing the multiplication table), and to disparage multiple-choice tests, all positions connected with progressive education but not logically with the platform of the Democratic Party.

By contrast, when a majority of school-board members have been Republican, the district has tended to favor the explicit teaching of phonics, the memorization of the multiplication table, and the use of standardized tests, positions properly associated with educational conservatism but not necessarily with political conservatism.

On the contrary, political conservatism, understood as the preservation of the social status quo, is best achieved by progressive educational methods.

There have been recent signs that the politics of education is belatedly becoming more sophisticated. As long ago as the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci, a brilliant communist opponent of Mussolini, denounced the

new “progressive” ideas that were being introduced into Italy from the United States. He argued that social justice required educational conservatism because only if the poor worked hard in school to accumulate the “intellectual baggage” of the rich could they earn money and wield the levers of power. Gramsci, the Communist, serving on a modern American school board, might surprise fellow board members by voting with Republicans.

So might James S. Coleman. Progressive methods failed disadvantaged students, he concluded after a decade of inquiries into the implications of his famous 1966 report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. What people remember about his 1966 report is that schools appear to count for little in determining educational achievement, whereas family background matters a great deal. This statistical fact upset many people, including Coleman, because it dashes the democratic hope of giving all students an equal chance by simply putting rich and poor together in the same common school. If the common school does not in fact reduce the advantages of wealth and privilege, then the premises of democratic education must be reexamined.

After the Coleman report, one had a choice of two positions: One could become an advocate of compensatory education to narrow the achievement gap between groups, or one could adopt the determinist view that the schools can do little to rectify the ills of the wider society. The deterministic position, which excuses the schools for failing to reduce the test-score gap between groups, is widely held in the American educational world. But after further research, Coleman adopted the compensatory position.

Published in the '80s, that research showed that most Roman Catholic schools were better at achieving equity than most public schools. Catholic schools followed a rich and demanding curriculum, required a lot of drill and practice, and expected every child to reach minimal goals in each subject during the year. As a result disadvantaged children prospered academically, as did their advantaged peers, and the schools narrowed the gap between races and social classes.

This deeper inquiry of Coleman's started a controversy almost as fierce as the one surrounding his 1966 report. It was seen as an attack on public schools, but, as Coleman unanswerably pointed out, his findings were not limited to Catholic schools; the very same democratic results were being achieved by the few public schools that defied progressivist doctrine. Consistent with that finding is the fact that recent improvements in equity

have been achieved only by school reforms that use conservative methods like drill and practice (e.g., the Success for All program at Johns Hopkins) and a demanding curriculum (e.g., the “Core Knowledge” series of books).

After so many practical failures, few educational experts overtly label themselves progressivists, but one can detect de facto progressivists by certain distinctive traits. First, there is their belief that knowledge and skill will be gained incidentally from intensive study of a few subjects. This incidental method claims, against all evidence, to achieve greater depth, as if there were a simple trade-off between depth and breadth. A claim is made under various labels and slogans such as “the project method” and “less is more” that exposure to a few complex experiences will cause understanding to occur naturally, an idea that first gained currency during the Romantic movement.

The persistent attractions of this “natural” method may possibly be explained by the vestigial Romanticism of American culture, but as Lisa Delpit observes in her book *Other People’s Children*, the progressivist mode of teaching has consistently failed to benefit African-American children (and many advantaged children as well).

Another mark of progressivism (and another vestige of the Romantic movement) is its criticism of an “overemphasis” on language. Emerson said: “We are shut up in schools and college recitation rooms for 10 or 15 years and come out at last with a bellyful of words and do not know a thing.” But as Ms. Delpit points out, these antiverbal ideas have done the most harm to the most disadvantaged students. Their greatest deficits are in vocabulary and the conventions of literate language; they make up math deficits much more readily than language deficits.

Keith Stanovich and his colleagues have shown that a score on a standardized reading test in first grade is the best predictor of 11th-grade academic achievement, a shocking indictment of present-day schools and a powerful illustration of the accuracy of standardized tests and of the centrality of verbal training for determining life chances.

Disparagement of objective tests is a third way to detect progressivists. Their hostility to tests is not surprising, given that progressive methods fail to improve test scores. Yet standardized reading tests are among the most valid and reliable assessments that exist and among the most important instruments for measuring excellence and fairness in education. To take a reading test, a student has to perform the very skill being assessed. These tests, even in their much-maligned multiple-choice forms, are highly correlated with each other and with real-world reading skills.

Competence in reading (that is, in comprehension) is central to academic achievement and to participation in economic and political life. High school graduates who read well enough to get into top colleges know about 100,000 words, which means an average learning rate of more than fifteen new words a day, an astonishing number attainable only by wide reading and by psychological mechanisms that are only beginning to be understood.

A broad vocabulary is an index to broad knowledge, and broad knowledge, extended over time, is the key to depth of knowledge and to a general ability to learn new things.

Since the late '60s it has been known that high literacy entails prior background knowledge over many different domains. Within a given literate culture, the most literacy-enhancing background knowledge can be identified and taught to all students. Theory predicts that teaching such a high-octane curriculum will raise everyone's reading and learning levels and narrow the achievement gap between social groups. This prediction has now been confirmed by independent researchers.

Teaching a curriculum that produces high literacy for all is a potent way of fostering the egalitarian goal of democratic education. But before we can advance toward that goal on a broad front, many progressive ideas will have to be discarded.

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The Schools They Deserve

Howard Gardner and the Remaking of Elite Education

Mary Eberstadt

This selection first appeared in *Policy Review* in the October/November 1999 edition. Mary Eberstadt is the consulting editor to *Policy Review*.

Our postmodern times, it is often observed, are rough times for orthodox belief. But religious beliefs aren't the only ones being put to the test these days. Certain established secular creeds, too, seem to be taking their lumps.