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 progressivist ideas will have to be discarded.

The Schools They Deserve

Howard Gardner and the Remaking of Elite Education

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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.

Consider the ostensible fate of one particularly long-running such orthodoxy, educational progressivism. It is true, of course, that classrooms across the country continue to exhibit progressively inspired practices, from "natural" ways of teaching math to "whole language" rather than phonetic reading methods; true, too, that one of the doctrine's most cherished dicta—its preference for "critical thinking" over what is disdainfully called the "mere" accumulation of facts—is enshrined in the heart of almost every teacher and embedded in textbooks and teaching plans from kindergarten on. All this has long been so, and must bring some consolation to the rank and file.

But it is also true that educational progressivism, in practice and in theory, is fast losing ground. For almost two decades, in fact, that particular set of ideas—grounded in Rousseau, transplanted in America by John Dewey and his followers, and disseminated through the educational establishment by generations of loyal acolytes ever since—has suffered what must only appear to the faithful as one ignominious setback after another.

There was, to begin with, that famous—some would say infamous—1983 report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *America at Risk*, documenting the distinct mediocrity of the nation's students and by corollary the impressive failings of its schools. These failings, certain observers were quick to point out, had risen more or less exactly alongside the ascendance of progressive ideas in the public schools. At the same time, and even more annoying to progressives, such critics were turning out to have echoes at the highest levels of politics. After 12 years of Republican governance—including most notably William J. Bennett's tenure as secretary of education—"standards," "testing," "achievement," and other terms regarded by progressives as ideological fighting words were once more in national circulation.

Yet even that much in the way of public criticism, one suspects, could have been comfortably countenanced by the flock; they had, after all, grown accustomed in the course of their long history to challenges from traditionalists of different stripes. But then, as the 1980s wore on into the '90s, came an outpouring of influential books and articles from critics who could not possibly be written off as tools of reaction. Some of these claimed sympathy with progressivism's aims while dissenting from what had been committed in its name. For these critics, what mattered was not the "otherwise unassailable precepts" of progressivism, as the historian Diane Ravitch once put it, but the fact that these precepts had got-

ten twisted around in practice to become "justification for educational practices that range from the unwise to the bizarre." It was a message that reached an ever-wider audience of the concerned, as the statistics on everything from reading to the SATs piled up worse by the year.

But the harshest blow to progressive ideas, and what ought to have been the most demoralizing, came in the even more unexpected form of the writings of literary scholar E.D. Hirsch, Jr. A Gramsci-quoting, self-described political liberal, Hirsch did more than deplore the excesses of progressivist practice; he attacked the creed itself head-on, and on moral grounds to boot. In 1987, his profoundly influential book *Cultural Literacy* argued that progressive ideas in the schools were depriving all students, particularly those least advantaged, of the knowledge required for citizenship and a decent life. Some years later, in *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (1996), Hirsch went even further, arguing in meticulous detail that "the mistaken ideas" of progressivism had led to "disastrous consequences," and that "since mistaken ideas have been the root cause of America's educational problems, the ideas must be changed before the problems can be solved." Whatever the educational establishment may have made of all this was of little moment next to Hirsch's actual resonance with readers across the country. The ideas in his books—along with his Core Knowledge Foundation and its grade-by-grade, content-laden K–6 curriculum—effectively laid the groundwork for what was, and is, an anti-progressive educational counterculture.

Nor is that all. What must have been even more galling to progressives, priding themselves as they do on the tradition's claim to speak for the common man, is that during the same years in which their creed itself was being thrashed in the middle and higher reaches of public opinion, millions of people who had never even heard of Rousseau or Dewey turned out to be busily repudiating their legacy down below. This is the real meaning of what is often referred to as "the ferment in American schools." For almost two decades now, alarmed by all the same things that alarmed the authors and readers of *America at Risk*, parents and school boards across the country have seized on one educational experiment after another in the hopes of improving the schools—experiments that by their very design send shudders through the enlightened heirs of Dewey.

Many districts and states, for example, have opted for mandatory standardized testing. They have, further, adjusted the curriculum to

cover the contents of those exams—in the deploring phrase of progressive educators, "teaching to the test." Other districts are experimenting with financial incentives that these same educators also deplore—merit pay for teachers, school vouchers for disadvantaged families. Some schools have completely reconfigured their courses according to exactly the sort of fact-based learning progressives most heartily oppose; some 400 schools across the country, for example, the vast majority of them public, now claim to be based in whole or in part on Hirsch's Core Knowledge program. Finally, and just as dramatic, is the fact that still other parents have voted for standards and content with their feet by fleeing to the burgeoning rolls of private and parochial schools or—in a phenomenon that progressively inclined educators barely even mention, so much does it affront their first principles—into the also-burgeoning home school movement, now numbering some one and a half million students.

It is all the more curious, then—it is in fact a puzzle begging for solution—that in the elite circles of higher education where the progressivist tradition still burns bright, the public drubbing their doctrine has endured for nearly two decades now has induced little more than the occasional flinch. In these circles, quite unlike those school districts across the country now noisy with democratic experimentation, an altogether different atmosphere reigns. Here, the very innovations for which many in the public clamor—vouchers, school choice, charter schools, standardized tests, and all the rest—continue to be designated, when they are mentioned at all, as reactionary or nostalgic exercises in discontent. Here, the ideas of the progressive tradition's sharpest recent critics, above all those of Hirsch, continue to be dismissed with genteel contempt. Here, as anyone can see, the long-running doctrine of progressivism continues to reign serenely, exactly as if the rising tide of criticism and the mass defections into enemy territory were not shaking the philosophy's throne to its foundations. All of which suggests that this may be a particularly opportune time to examine what form progressivism now survives in, and the source of that form's appeal.

"First among Equals"

Like any other successful academic orthodoxy, including others that have come to be rejected by the ordinary people in whose name they were devised, the tradition of educational progressivism has never lacked for

friends in high places. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that in the professional world of education itself, the doctrine has a near-perfect monopoly on academic prestige. One highly eminent figure in this world is Theodore Sizer, chairman of the Education Department at Brown, whose Coalition of Essential Schools project includes over 200 high schools organized according to progressive principles—student "exhibitions" rather than tests, an emphasis on "habits of mind" rather than accumulation of knowledge, a passion for relevance (one class recently studied *Othello* for its parallels to the O.J. Simpson trial), and so on. Many other figures less well known bring a similar cast of mind to related experiments and projects. And, of course, given the ideological homogeneity of the field, these like-thinking educators often work together, with the largest and most heavily funded of their projects typically collaborative efforts.

Yet if, in this collegial world, a single figure could be said to be "first among equals," as James Traub put it recently in the *New York Times,* or "the premier American scholar addressing educational reform," in the words of the like-thinking Sizer, it would have to be psychologist and celebrity intellectual Howard Gardner—professor of Cognition and Education and adjunct professor of Psychology at Harvard University; adjunct professor of Neurology at the Boston University School of Medicine; co-director since the early 1970s of Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, whose many programs and institutes continue to attract educators from all over; author of some 18 books and hundreds of articles; and recipient of 12 honorary degrees and "many honors," as his latest book jacket copy puts it, including but hardly limited to a 1981 MacArthur fellowship. Gardner's ubiquity both inside the world of education and out almost challenges description. He is a leader in more projects and studies than can be listed here, a steady contributor to tomes from the higher journalism to the specialized literature on down, and a fixture on the lecture circuit (he delivers some 75 talks a year) whose professional interests span everything from classical music to studies of the brain-damaged, political advocacy to developmental psychology, oversubscribed teacher workshops at Harvard to a more recent sideline in corporate consulting.

Daunting though it may be to contemplate, this resume does not even begin to convey Gardner's overriding influence in one particular realm of American education, and that is the world of elite private schools. Today, more than any other single figure, he seems poised to

leave his stamp on a generation of students at many of the country's most prestigious schools.

Gardner's influence has a surprising history, as he himself has written and other reports agree. In 1983, the story goes, Gardner published what is still his best-known and most influential book, *Frames of Mind*. There, he challenged the professional convention of dividing intelligence into verbal and mathematical forms, and insisted instead on the existence of seven (he would later say eight, and is now equivocating about a ninth) separate "intelligences" of "equal priority," those being the mathematical-logical, linguistic, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Dense and jargon-ridden, as well as mildly esoteric—its main target, as Gardner has written, was Jean Piaget's conception of intelligence as scientific thinking—*Frames of Mind* was executed, and indeed intended, for a limited scholarly audience. "I believed," as the author himself put it later, "that my work would be of interest chiefly to those trained in my discipline, and particularly those who studied intelligence from a Piagetian perspective."

The professional world, for its part, was unconvinced. As Gardner accurately summarized the book's reception later, "a few psychologists liked the theory; a somewhat larger number did not like it; most ignored it." In the *New York Times Book Review*, psychologist George Miller pronounced the theory "hunch and opinion"; in the *New York Review of Books,* meanwhile—where Gardner's own essays on subjects inside and out of his chosen fields are frequently featured—psychologist Jerome Bruner praised the book for its timeliness, but went on to conclude that Gardner's "intelligences" were "at best useful fictions."

And these were just the friendly critics. In *The Bell Curve* (1994), to no one's surprise, Charles Murray and Richard J. Herrnstein dismissed Gardner as a "radical" whose work "is uniquely devoid of psychometric or other quantitative evidence." Yet others with no visible dog in the fight over intelligence turned out to echo the charge. Robert J. Sternberg of Yale observed that "there is not even one empirical test of the theory"; Australian specialist Michael Anderson complained similarly that "the scaffolding is the theory." Though some put their kindest face forward, praising the author of *Frames of Mind* as "brilliant" and his thesis as "original" or "powerful," few of his professional peers would venture, then or since, that anything Gardner was up to amounted to science. Piaget, at least so far as the professional world was concerned, did not stand corrected.

Nonetheless, there was one audience-in-waiting positively electrified by Gardner's message, and it was moreover enthusiastically indifferent to the book's scholarly critics. That audience, as it turned out, came from the ranks of private school administrators and teachers. As Traub put it last year in the opening of another article on Gardner, this one for the *New Republic*, "Howard Gardner first realized that he had struck a chord in the national psyche when he gave a speech to private-school administrators on his new theory of 'multiple intelligences' and saw the headmasters elbowing each other to get into the hall." Gardner himself recalls the moment with dramatic detail in his 1993 *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice:*

> Some months after the publication of *Frames,* I was invited to address the annual meeting of the National Association of Independent [i.e., private] Schools. . . . I expected the typical audience of fifty to seventy-five persons, a customary talk of fifty minutes followed by a small number of easily anticipated questions. Instead . . . I encountered a new experience: a much larger hall, entirely filled with people, and humming with excitement. It was almost as if I had walked by mistake into a talk given by someone who was famous. But the audience had in fact come to hear me: it listened attentively, and grew steadily in size until it spilled into the hallways on both sides of the room. . . . [A]fter the session had concluded, I was ringed by interested headmasters, teachers, trustees, and journalists who wanted to hear more and were reluctant to allow me to slip back into anonymity.

The event that proved a turning point in Gardner's personal life would also mark a turning point for his admirers in the tonier schools. Today, as if in vindication of the judgement of those enthusiasts who catapulted his ideas to celebrity heights, Howard Gardner bestrides their world as no other single influence or figure of inspiration. In addition to his omnipresence on the lecture circuit, Gardner's books and videotapes and software are in constant demand (his CD-ROM tour of the intelligences sells for $435 for a set of five); his workshops for teachers and other educators at Harvard are early sell-outs; and hundreds of schools now claim, in varying degrees, to have remade themselves in keeping with multiple-intelligence theory. And though some of those schools are public—there is no shortage of funders or educators interested in trying Gardner's ideas—there can be no doubt that it is the private school world, today as in 1983, that is clamoring for multiple-intelligence products, paying for Gardneriana, and conforming their classrooms to his

dicta. Indeed: In what may be the single most telling detail of Gardner's influence in the world of elite education, Traub reports that "when the directorship of one of New York's most prestigious private schools recently came open, almost every candidate for the job mentioned Gardner in his or her one-page educational-philosophy statement." In sum, as one educator put it to Traub, "Howard is the guru, and *Frames of Mind* is the bible."

Progressivism, Properly Understood

If so, the holy writ has now been enlarged once more, and the reader curious as to what the private schools are clamoring for need look no further. For this year Gardner has published yet another book, *The Disciplined Mind: What All Students Should Understand* (Simon & Schuster, $25.00). Unlike *Frames of Mind*, which as we have seen reached the general reader only inadvertently, *The Disciplined Mind* takes no such risk; it is overtly aimed at "individuals"—indeed, "individuals all over the world"—who "care about education." Here, the author promises with typical sweep, he "seek[s] to synthesize over thirty years of research in the cognitive and biological sciences, and over fifteen years of involvement in precollegiate education," to find the features of "good educations . . . everywhere in the world."

Somewhat incongruously, progressivism's most visible public defender opts here for an Olympian tone. He is "weary," he explains, "of debates that array one educational philosophy against another." Though it is true, he elaborates later, that "much of what I write about can be identified with the educational tradition of John Dewey—with what has been called progressive or neo-progressive education,"—it is also true, as he acknowledges, that this tradition has become a code word in the minds of some for low or no standards and poor work. In that sense, Gardner writes, "I reject the baggage that has . . . come to be associated with this label." Contrary to what critics have suggested, "one can be progressive while also espousing traditional educational goals and calling for the highest standards of work, achievement, and behavior." This book, in the author's telling, is a statement of that other progressive philosophy, progressivism properly understood—not the old and tarnished version of yesteryear, but a kind of souped-up version, a muscular version, a kind to which even conservatives and traditionalists, or so the author seems to hope, might warm.

Where does this new progressivism lead? The answer is something of a mystery, at least at first. For Gardner is also "weary," as it turns out, of what he calls the "instrumental or momentary" issues in education today—issues like "vouchers," "charter schools," "teachers unions," "local control," "national standards," "international comparisons," and all the quotidian rest. Such issues, Gardner argues, "skirt the most fundamental question" of the purposes of education itself. These purposes he identifies as a "quartet" across "educational time and space": "to transmit roles; to convey cultural values; to inculcate literacies; and to communicate certain disciplinary content and ways of thinking."

Alongside this quartet of purposes, the author simultaneously outlines a "trio of virtues" that "should animate education"—truth, beauty, and morality—and produces examples of how each of these realms might be approached. To gain an understanding of truth, he suggests, students might study the theory of evolution; of beauty, Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*; and of morality, the Holocaust. These choices, the author readily acknowledges, are "time-bound," "place-bound," and even "personal"; they are not intended to signal a "fixed canon," which the author himself ardently opposes. One could easily substitute other instantiations in their place, he goes on to explain—for example, approaching truth through "folk theories about healing or traditional Chinese medicine," beauty through "Japanese ink and brush painting" or "African drum music," and good and evil through "the precepts of Jainism, the stories of Pol Pot and Mao's Cultural Revolution," or "the generosity of bodhisattvas." The point, it appears, is not to "privilege" any particular set of examples; not one is "sacrosanct," and in any event, Gardner writes, "I do not believe in singular or incontrovertible truth, beauty or morality." "No doubt," the author goes on to acknowledge, "there are various routes" to such understanding (later in the book, he will identify six such "pathways"); the one outlined here is merely his own "preferred path."

Anyone reading this far into his argument may long since have started wondering what a curriculum—to say nothing of a lowly classroom—might look like when cut to the specifications of all these purposes, virtues, and pathways. But the reader must be patient; list-wise, we have only just begun. The Six Forces That Will Remake Schools are easy enough to digest (as is the by-now obligatory point that "changes in our world are so rapid and so decisive that it will not be possible for schools to remain as they were or simply to introduce a few superficial

adjustments"). Similarly, the six "most prominent ideas ushered in by the cognitive revolution" can be managed without headache. So can the seven "mind and brain findings" that "ought to be kept in mind by anyone concerned with education," off the track of Gardner's main point though they may be.

It is when the author returns to his main subject that the conceptual challenge begins in earnest. For it turns out that there are not only Four Approaches to Understanding ("learning from suggestive institutions," "direct confrontations of erroneous conceptions," "a framework that facilitates understanding," and "multiple entry points"), but that the fourth of these, in keeping with multiple-intelligence theory, is itself subdivided into seven further categories (the entry points in question being narrative, numerical, logical, existential/foundational, aesthetic, hands-on, and interpersonal), *and* that room must be left for metaphor, similes, model languages, and other means of making sense of the consequent "multiple representations of the Core Concept."

What all this means for the classroom is anybody's guess, but what Gardner himself says it means looks something like this: A "narrative entry point" into the subject of evolution, for example, might be the story of Darwin's voyage on the Beagle, or the tale of his fellow evolutionist and grandfather, or the saga of the Galapagos finches. A "numerical entry point" might be a study of the beak size of the same finches. Other entry points might include, say, breeding fruit flies (hands-on), watching a documentary (aesthetic), or recreating the debates that followed publication of Darwin's theory. Similarly, the *Marriage of Figaro* might be studied via the human struggles it contains (existential-foundational), comparison of meter and rhythm in two arias (numerical), or performing parts of the score (hands-on). As for the Holocaust, one might, say, study the history of artists persecuted under Hitler (aesthetic), read the literature of survivors (existential-foundational), or focus on a specific event such as the Wannsee conference (narrative). A classroom designed by Gardner, in other words, might do all these things—or it might, even more important, do none of the above; we are reminded repeatedly, as he puts it toward the end, that "these choices are illustrative only."

Well, so be it. Now, if the content of such an education is indeed ad hoc, arbitrary, in permanent flux, then we can only evaluate that education by means of its methodology. About that methodology Gardner is quite clear—he favors "depth over breadth," (pursuing a small num-

ber of topics rather than conveying large amounts of information); "construction over accumulation" of knowledge (an emphasis on personal questioning rather than memorization); "the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake over the obeisance to utility"; "an individualized over a uniform education" (a preference that allows "the natural inclinations of the human individual to unfold and endure"); and "student-centered" rather than "teacher-centered" education (meaning that students join in the process of "assessing" themselves). Personal relevance, student-led classrooms, hands-on, performance-oriented activities—does any of this sound familiar?

> "Learning by doing" was a central element in the . . . curriculum . . . [as were] educational methods that discarded the mere accumulation of knowledge and made learning a part of each student's life, connected to his or her present situation and needs. These were schools of the future. . . because they exhibited "tendencies toward greater freedom and an identification of the child's school life with his environment and outlook."

The description here comes from Diane Ravitch in *The Schools We Deserve*, and she is quoting John Dewey. The year in question is 1915.

The Shock of the Old

In sum, the vision on which Gardner insists so passionately in *The Disciplined Mind* is not exactly new. It is, in fact, older than most people now alive, as was demonstrated most elegantly by the progressives' nemesis, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., three years ago in *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*. Gardner, of course, is profoundly aware of Hirsch's opposing perspective, which he describes in his latest book as "a view of learning that is at best superficial and at worst anti-intellectual." (That's when Gardner is minding his literary manners. On the lecture trail, he prefers the jab of "Vanna White knowledge.") Yet it is an interesting fact that Gardner, for all that he describes his own latest book as part of a "sustained dialectic"—read disagreement—with Hirsch himself, in fact mentions his adversary only a few times, while *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* appears not at all.

Interesting, but not at all surprising. For that last book of Hirsch's, *predating* Gardner's though it did by three years, uncannily provides the intellectual genealogy of just about every tenet of *The Disciplined Mind*, most of them presented by the author as if they were thought up just yesterday.

"Changes in our world are so rapid and so decisive," Gardner's argument begins, "that it will not be possible for schools to remain as they were." "The claim that specific information is outmoded almost as soon as it has been learned," writes Hirsch in *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, "goes back at least as far as [William Hearst] Kilpatrick's *Foundations of Method* (1925)." Subject matter, Gardner argues, should not be "privileged"; what matters is that education be centered on the child rather than the subject. "Dewey's words, disposing of the polarity between child-centered and subject-matter-centered education," Hirsch observes after quoting them, "were published in 1902." What of the concomitant idea—also part of the "child-centered" curriculum—that testing amounts to "spitting back" material, and that children should instead "construct" answers for themselves? "The campaign against giving students tests," Hirsch explains, "is an integral part of a Romantic progressivism that goes back to the 1920s. . . . [O]rthodox educational doctrine since the 1920s has been consistently opposed to testing and grading."

And so on, and on—and on. The superiority of "hands-on" experimentation versus "drill-and-practice" teaching, the importance of "individual differences," "learning styles," and an "active learning environment"? These buzzwords and all they represent, the nuts and bolts of *The Disciplined Mind*'s imagined classroom, turn out to date to an exceedingly influential document published by the Bureau of Education and called *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*—published in 1918. The main focus of this document, as it happens, was an attack on the idea—one resonating these 80-plus years later in Gardner's arbitrary trio of evolution, Mozart, and the Holocaust—that subject matter per se should anchor a curriculum. "This hostility to academic subject matter," writes Hirsch, "has been the continued focus of educational 'reform' ever since *Cardinal Principles*—a tradition that needs to be kept in mind when current reformers attack 'mere facts' and 'rote learning.'"

Just as what is significant in *The Disciplined Mind* is not new, so its particular novelty—that architectonic of trios, quartets, sextuplets, and septuplets of principle, intelligences, and entry points and all the rest—is not terribly significant. In fact, the most vaunted part of that architectonic—the identification of the multiple intelligences, and the insistence on a curriculum intended to elicit all of them—is, unfortunately for the rest of Gardner's argument, its weakest link.

Consider only what multiple-intelligence theory forces him to say about one of his own chosen subjects, the teaching of the Holocaust. No

one could object to the reading of survivor stories, say, or to an in-depth look at Eichmann's trial in Israel in 1961, or to reviewing the literature on the Wannsee conference. But the insistence that these are mere "entry points" for certain kinds of "intelligences," entry points no more or less "privileged" than any other, will not stand up. It is very difficult to accept that the author himself believes it. After all, the Holocaust could also be "entered" through a study of, say, how concentration camps boosted local employment rates. Would Gardner really sanction that approach, rather than appear to "privilege" conventional sources?

Even worse are the tortured passages where the cumbersome requirements of his theory force him to invent other "entry points" aligned to the more avant-garde "intelligences." It is hard, for example, to read under "interpersonal points of entry" his assurance that "The Holocaust provides many opportunities for role play" without a twinge of uneasiness. Occasionally, one feels the strain of his material stretching round his theory to the ripping point—as in his admission that "when it comes to the relationship between the Holocaust and artistry, one must tread carefully," or in the howler, "Hands-on involvement with the Holocaust must be approached carefully, especially with children." To say that the multiple-intelligences approach runs the risk of trivializing serious subjects—a risk Gardner briefly acknowledges here—is one thing. But to advance beyond those claims about entry points to say that it does not even matter *whether* the Holocaust is taught, much less how, is to enter a zone of relativism where few readers would care to follow. Clearly, Gardner expects good taste to govern the classroom. But this preference must go unspoken, since to introduce it is to open the way to objective "standards" and other rigidities he disavows.

What, finally, of the author's promise to deliver progressivism with a difference? For all the reassurances ("I am a demon for high standards and demanding expectations"), for all the talk of "rigor," "high standards," and the rest, no ways and means are introduced here that would translate these terms into accountability—none, that is, beyond the upholding of "regular assessments," and what that means is anybody's guess. As James Traub put it pointedly in the *New York Times Book Review*, "One would like to ask Gardner, an erudite and wide-ranging thinker, if that was how school equipped his own mind."

Gardner, of course, would protest that such ideas have never really been tried. "Educational experimentation" in this century, he believes, "has occurred chiefly on the margins"; progressive educators "have had

relatively little impact on the mainstream of education throughout the contemporary world." The argument that something has never been tried, that last gasp of exhausted ideology, is in this particular case quite wrong; the Everyclass all these educators love to hate—one with "prevalent lecturing, the emphasis on drill, the decontextualized materials and activities ranging from basal readers to weekly spelling tests," as Gardner puts it—has been out of fashion and in many schools stigmatized, apparently without the progressives' ever having noticed it, for decades now. To the extent that it is reviving in American schools today, it is on account not of the establishment educational culture, but of a counterculture that is now declaring, whether overtly like the educational reformers or tacitly through the many experiments now under way in the schools, that a hundred years of progressive experimentation is enough.

To Each, According to His Means?

It appears, then, that progressive educational ideology has come full circle. Born near the turn of the century in hopes of raising the downtrodden up, it survives now as the ideology of choice of, by, and for the educational elite.

Indeed, it is increasingly recognized as such. Consider this comment by Nathan Glazer, writing last year in the *New Republic* of the sharply opposed visions of E.D. Hirsch, Jr., and progressive educator Theodore Sizer: "The question of what's best for the classroom," Glazer concluded, "may simply be a matter of class—social class. In some schools, with some students, one can teach for understanding and depth. . . . For others—frankly and regrettably—there are no such things." Gardner, similarly, for all his talk of an "education for all human beings," notes that "for those disadvantaged children who do not acquire literacy in the dominant culture at home, such a prescribed curriculum [as that recommended by Hirsch and others] helps to provide a level playing field and to ensure that future citizens enjoy a common knowledge base." Progressivism, it appears, is not for the weak—or the backward, or the poor.

So what's in it for the elite—all those headmasters and teachers and parents still elbowing their way into Gardner's lectures? Why the enduring appeal to them of progressive ideas? Three sorts of explanations come to mind.

The first is institutional. The means by which academic ideologies perpetuate themselves have been closely studied elsewhere; the partic-

ular case of progressive ideology has probably been explained best, again, by Hirsch in *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*. Almost all the leading figures in the field of education—all the most prestigious institutions—are considered, and consider themselves, heirs to Dewey's tradition. This fact is important. It means, for example, that graduate students seeking out the "best" schools and professors will find themselves educated—and, of course, penalized or rewarded in their professional lives—by people imbued with the ideas that overwhelmingly dominate these schools. It also means that teachers, headmasters, and others who pride themselves on staying au courant will likewise gravitate to the same ideological home base.

A second way of explaining progressivism's latest lease on life is more prosaic, and concerns those on the consumer end of private education. In a review of Gardner and his ideas for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Robert Holland recently quipped that multiple-intelligence theory "encourages the egalitarian delusion that we all are utterly brilliant in equally important ways," thus providing "an escape route from accountability." He is, of course, absolutely right; that "delusion" is the main source of the theory's very human appeal.

On any bell curve, after all, half the results will fall below the norm; *somebody* is going to be in that bottom quintile, or two quintiles, and so on. Now, parents everywhere have a natural aversion to thinking their own child is average or worse; from the parental point of view, as the Russian joke has it, every baby is a "normal genius child." Add to that natural aversion the fact that, at the upper reaches of the private school world, some parents are paying $10,000 to $14,000 a year per child; these sums alone are a powerful disincentive against giving parents bad news. Many parents send their children to private school, after all, precisely so that they do not have to worry about their education. Grades and standardized tests are a constant reminder that problems might still surface at any time. Thus, private school parents, possibly more than others, may be susceptible to multiple-intelligence-style ideas that emphasize the talents of their children, while not putting those talents on the line in any way that will rouse parental concern. There is also, of course, no denying the fact that classrooms like these have always had a certain snob appeal. Grades and tests, they imply, are for the ordinary kids; no means of measurement could do justice to ours.

But there is a larger, more sociological explanation for the success of such a vision in the private schools today, an explanation that ought to

make progressives themselves uncomfortable if they ever take occasion to reflect on it. For the fact is that in placing their bets on the most advantaged children—those children of the kind of people who have taken multiple-intelligence theory to heart—progressive educators can hardly lose.

How could they? Teach those children Inuit and Swahili all you like; they, unlike their less advantaged counterparts, will pick up the French or Italian or whatever they need when the time comes for traveling abroad. Withhold from them all that distasteful factual information with no fear of penalty—most of them, again unlike their less fortunate fellows, will pick up the facts from their reading and conversation outside the classroom. Deny them, if you like, geography; they will find, say, Madrid or the Euphrates from the airport when they get there. Refuse to administer tests—excepting of course the intelligence tests so tellingly required by almost every private school in the land—again, with impunity; most of them will have individual tutors for the SAT and AP exams when the time comes.

All of which is to say that when the children of today's Gardner- or Sizer-influenced schools go on from strength to strength later in life, that fact will tell us very little about the intrinsic worth of progressive ideas or the merits of the classrooms where those ideas roam free. All success will prove is that the overwhelming advantages with which most of those students are blessed—the homes packed with books, the money that makes travel and other forms of personal enrichment a fact of life, the literate and high-functioning parents and peers, the expectations and, for many, the genetic advantages with which they are born—amount to more human capital than any classroom, including mediocre and worse ones, can reduce by much.

Viewed this way, the revival of progressive ideas among elite schools and students may seem a harmless enough experiment; and so, from the perspective of those particular individuals, it probably is. All the same, this ideological renascence has its dark side. The more the private schools tack to the wind—abolishing grades, eradicating tests, and otherwise disposing of the instruments that have traditionally allowed worse-off students the means by which to elevate themselves—the harder it will become for any child to join those schools except through accident of birth.

After all, they will not be able to join them by dint of hard work; the curriculum is constantly in flux, so there is nothing to prepare for. Nor will their graded schoolwork elsewhere grant them entrée; this merely

proves they have been "force-fed" facts. As for more subjective measures, like a teacher's recommendation—well, that teacher was almost certainly not trained according to theory; she probably just was "privileging" certain kinds of performance in the usual suspect way. The school without recognizable assessments and a fixed curriculum—the school of which progressive educators, today or yesterday, continue to dream—is a school stripped of handholds from below.

As for the poor and disadvantaged themselves—well, as enlightened voices are now saying, let them have Hirsch. Come to think of it, the implied contest there has a certain charm. Let the games begin.

What Is an Educrat?

Debra J. Saunders

This selection first appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on 4 January 1998. Debra Saunders is an editorial writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

What is an educrat? The word is a hybrid, combining the Latin part of *educator* with the Greek part of *bureaucrat*, an educrat. I didn't invent the term, although I wish I did.

I use it because it captures a special kind of person in the education world: pinheads who are so process-oriented that they are more excited about the process of learning than the myriad wonders that can be learned.

Simply put, educrats believe in process—as opposed to educators, who believe in results. Educrats focus on how children learn. Educators focus on what they learn.

Can a teacher be an educrat? Yes, although I should think most teachers are educators, not educrats. (Bet that a teacher with a Ph.D. in education is an educrat, one with a Ph.D. in math is an educator.)

Are there any good educrats? Sure. Percentage-wise they probably average out to about the same as reformed ex-cons.