

# why Traditional Education is more Progressive

by E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

I would label myself a political liberal and an educational conservative, or perhaps more accurately, an educational pragmatist. Political liberals really ought to oppose progressive educational ideas because they have led to practical failure and greater social inequity. The only practical way to achieve liberalism's aim of greater social justice is to pursue conservative educational policies.

This is not a new idea. In 1932, the Communist intellectual Antonio Gramsci detected the paradoxical consequences of the new "democratic" education that stressed naturalistic approaches over hard work and the transmission of knowledge. Writing from jail (where he had been imprisoned by Mussolini) Gramsci observed that

Previously pupils at least acquired a certain baggage of concrete facts. Now there will no longer be any baggage to put in order... The most paradoxical aspect of it all is that this new type of school is advocated as being democratic, while in fact it is destined not merely to perpetuate social differences but to crystallize them in Chinese complexities.

Gramsci saw that it was a serious error to discredit learning methods like phonics and memorization of the multiplication table as "outdated" or "conservative." That was the nub of the standoff between himself and another prominent educational theorist of the political Left, Paulo Freire. Like Gramsci, Freire (a Brazilian) was

interested in methods of educating the poor. Unlike Gramsci, Freire has been quite influential in the United States.

Like other educational progressives, Freire rejected traditional subject matter and derided the "banking theory of schooling," whereby the teacher provides the child with a lot of "rote-learned" information. This conservative approach, according to Freire, numbs the critical faculties of students and preserves the oppressor class. He called for a change of both content and methods. Teachers should present new content that would celebrate the culture of the oppressed, and they should also instruct in new methods that would encourage intellectual resistance. In short, Freire, like other modern educational writers, linked political and educational progressivism.

Gramsci took the opposite view. He held that political progressivism demanded educational traditionalism. The oppressed class should be taught to master the tools of power and authority—the ability to read, write, and communicate—and should gain enough traditional knowledge to understand the worlds of nature and culture surrounding them. Children, particularly the children of the poor, should not be encouraged to follow "natural" inclinations, which would only keep them ignorant and make them slaves of emotion. They should learn the value of hard work, gain the knowledge that leads to understanding, and master the traditional culture in order to command its rhetoric, as Gramsci himself had learned to do.

History has proved Gramsci a better prophet than Freire. Modern nations that have followed Gramscian principles have

improved the condition and heightened the political, social, and economic power of their lower classes. By contrast, nations that have adopted the principles of Freire (including our own) have failed to elevate the economic and social status of their most underprivileged citizens.

Gramsci was not the only observer to predict the inegalitarian consequences of the educational methods variously described as "naturalistic," "project-oriented," "critical-thinking," and "democratic." I focus on Gramsci as a revered theorist of the Left in order to make a strategic point. Ideological polarizations on educational issues tend to be facile and premature. Not only is there a practical separation between educational conservatism and political conservatism, but there is an inverse relation between educational liberalism and social liberalism. Educational liberalism is a sure means for preserving the social status quo, whereas the best practices of educational conservatism are the only means whereby children from disadvantaged homes can secure the knowledge and skills that will enable them to improve their condition.

Unfortunately, many of today's American educators paint traditional education as the arch-enemy of "humane" modern education. Even everyday classroom language unfairly pits the two alternatives against one another. Here are some typical descriptions used by progressives to compare old and new methods:

Traditional	vs.	Modern
Merely verbal	vs.	Hands-on
Premature	vs.	Developmentally appropriate
Fragmented	vs.	Integrated
Boring	vs.	Interesting
Lockstep	vs.	Individualized

Parents presented with such choices for their children's education would be unlikely to prefer traditional, merely verbal, premature, fragmented, boring, and lockstep instruction to instruction that is modern, hands-on, developmentally appropriate, integrated, interesting, and individualized. But of course this is a loaded and misleading contrast. Let's look at those simple polarities one at a time.

### Traditional vs. Modern Instruction.

Reproduced below is a typical progressivist caricature of traditional knowledge-based education:

The emphasis that permeated the traditional school was recitation, memorization, recall, testing, grades, promotion, and failure. And for this kind of education it was necessary that children primarily listen, sit quiet and attentive in seats, try to fix in their minds what the teacher told them, commit to memory the lessons assigned to them, and then, somewhat like a cormorant, be ready at all times to disgorge the intake.... This fixed, closed, authoritarian system of education perfectly fitted the needs of a static religion, a static church, a static caste system, a static economic system.

This argument ignores the fact that traditional knowledge-based schooling is currently employed with great success in most other advanced nations. It fails to note that challenging subject matter—the core of traditional education—can be taught in a lively, demanding way.

If parents were told straightforwardly that the so-called “untraditional” or “modern” mode of education now dominant in our schools has coincided with the decline of academic competencies among our students, they might be less enthusiastic about the experiment. When these dismal outcomes are pointed out, progressive educators usually reply that progressivism has never been tried “properly.” That is false. It is merely the fail-safe defense that apologists use for all unsuccessful theories.

**Merely Verbal vs. Hands-on Instruction.** The idea that students will learn better if they see, feel, and touch the subjects they are studying has such obvious

merit that it would be amazing if traditional education did not make use of multisensory methods of teaching. And indeed, if one studies the history of educational methods, one finds that every traditionalist theorist advocates hands-on methods where they lead to good results. The hidden progressivist agenda on this issue lies in the disparagement of verbal learning. An essential aspect of understanding in human beings is the ability to speak or write about what one has assimilated. Disparaging verbal learning is especially harmful to children who come to school with restricted vocabularies because of family disadvantages.

**Premature vs. Developmentally Appropriate Instruction.** A fear of “premature” instruction has led to the removal of significant knowledge from grade-school curricula. Once again, the primary victims of this impoverishment of education are disadvantaged children. Advantaged children gain much of the withheld knowledge at home. If “premature” instruction is such a grave risk, why do young children of comparable ages in other lands absorb such knowledge with great benefit and no ill effects? The label “developmentally appropriate” is generally applied without any empirical basis—simply on the basis of a “gut reaction” by progressive educators.

**Fragmented vs. Integrated Instruction.** Both traditionalists and progressives prefer instruction which shows how things fit together and at the same time helps secure what is being learned by reinforcing it in a variety of contexts. The pseudopolarization over “fragmented” teaching has been exploited ever since the teens of this century to disparage the direct teaching of subject matters such as mathematics, spelling, and biology in classes that are specifically devoted to those topics. The whole outdated concept of subject matters is to be replaced by “thematic” or “project-oriented” instruction. The result has been not integration at all but the failure of students to learn the most basic elements of the different subject matters.

### Boring vs. Interesting Instruction.

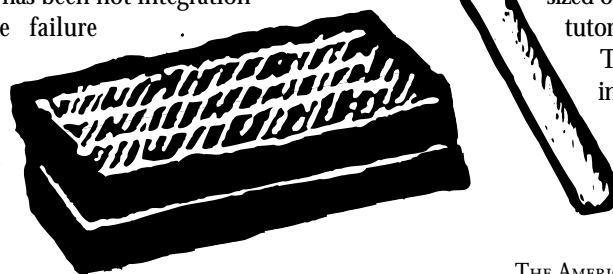
This opposition is used to withhold academic subject matters such as ancient history and science from children in the early grades on the grounds that true education proceeds from the child's own experience rather than externally “imposed” concepts. Because it is true that children learn best when new knowledge builds upon what they already know, progressives insist that early schooling should be limited to subjects that have direct relevance to the child's life, such as “my neighborhood” and similar “relevant” topics.

Yet every person with enough schooling to be reading these words knows that subject matters by themselves do not repel or attract interest. An effective teacher can make the most distant subject interesting, and an ineffective one can make any subject dull. The presumption that the affairs of one's own community are more interesting than those of faraway times or places is contradicted in every classroom that studies dinosaurs and fairy tales. Progressives' warnings about classic subject matter being “boring” or “irrelevant” simply conceal an anti-intellectual, anti-academic bias.

### Lockstep vs. Individualized Instruction.

Traditional instruction is said to impose the same content on every student, without taking into account the child's individual strengths, weaknesses, and interests, whereas modern instruction is tailored to each child's individual temperament. Unquestionably, one-on-one tutorials are the most effective mode of teaching. How, then, can we explain the paradox that individuals learn more and better in schools where greater emphasis is placed on whole-class instruction than on individualized tutoring? How do we explain the research finding that even students needing extra help make more progress when whole class instruction is emphasized over individual tutorials?

The answer lies in simple arithmetic. It is impossible to provide



## Underachieving America

The latest in a series of rankings of schoolchildren from different countries was recently released by a team of Boston College researchers. Half a million youngsters in 41 different nations or territories took tests that measure achievement in mathematics and science.

In mathematics, American eighth-graders ranked 28th out of 41 countries. In science, the U.S. students rated 17th.

To illustrate the achievement gap between U.S. students and students in the top-rated nation (which was Singapore on both tests), the researchers provide several illustrative analogies:

The advantage that Singaporean eighth-graders hold over their American counterparts in math is six times as big as the spread between a full grade level (seventh to eighth grade) in the U.S. In science, the Singaporeans lead by the equivalent of three grade levels.

In math, the top U.S. youths scored the same as average youths in Singapore.

Along with these measures of achievement, the researchers studied the curricula used by students in each of the 41 nations. They found that the mathematics taught to American eighth-graders is taught in seventh grade in most of the other countries, and that the highest scoring nations teach algebra and geometry to all eighth-grade students. U.S. students get those subjects later, or not at all.

—The editors

effective one-on-one tutorials to 25 students at a time. When one student is being coached individually, 24 others are being left to their own devices, usually in silent seatwork. When, on the other hand, knowledge is effectively given to the entire group simultaneously, more students are learning much more of the time. The occasional individual help they receive is all the more effective. By contrast, classrooms that march under the banner of individual attention are often characterized by individual neglect.

In short, many progressive educational assertions that have attained the status of unquestioned fact by being repeated constantly are huge oversimplifications. They wither under close scrutiny. And they have done serious harm.

Among other results, hostility to traditional schooling methods and subjects has fostered inequality. The record is clear. In the period from 1942 to 1966—before progressive theories had spread throughout our schools—public education had begun to close the economic gap between races and social classes. But after 1966, as SAT scores went into steep decline, the black-white wage gap abruptly stopped shrinking.

Black Americans currently earn about 16 percent less than whites at the same grade level. Social scientists studying this have recently shown that 12 out of those 16 percentage points can be explained by the fact that blacks have been less well schooled. When black and white earners are matched by their actual educational attainment, rather than just the grade level they achieved, the black-white wage disparity drops to less than 5 percent, and some of this remainder can be explained by factors other than racial discrimination.

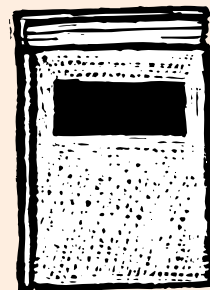
It is poor children who have been hurt most by the dominance of “progressive” ideas, but they are not the only victims. Almost all American children have been receiving inferior schooling that hinders them from developing their capacities to the fullest. Compared to the rigorous educa-

tions received by many Europeans and Asians, most American children are “underprivileged.”

Is there an available alternative to today's failed progressive education? Yes. That alternative is knowledge-based education.

I presented for knowledge-based education in my 1987 book *Cultural Literacy*. Since then, thanks to some very independent-minded principals and teachers, I have gained valuable direct experience with teaching challenging subject matter in early grades. In 1990, Dr. Constance Jones, the principal of Three Oaks Elementary School in Fort Myers, Florida, made her large, mixed-population public school the first in the nation to follow the principles of *Cultural Literacy*. The stunning success of Three Oaks then led another principal, Mr. Jeffrey Litt, to introduce the same principles to his school, the Mohegan School, No. 67, located in the South Bronx. The Fort Myers experiment received a lot of attention, but it was the remarkable early results achieved in the South Bronx that drew the attention of network news programs, *Reader's Digest*, and other magazines and newspapers. Public notice for both schools led other

### Stretching Jesse Jackson



...When I was in the sixth grade and our family had just moved up to the housing projects, we went to Mrs. Shelton's class, and she was writing these long terms on the board. We kept saying, “This is the sixth grade, not the eighth.” And she turned around and said “I know what grade this is. I work here. These are no longer big words, they are polysyllabic terms, and over here's a dictionary and a *Roget's Thesaurus*, and right down the hall is a library, and there's something called the Dewey Decimal System. I will never teach down to you. One of you little brats might run for governor or president one day, and I don't want to be found guilty.”

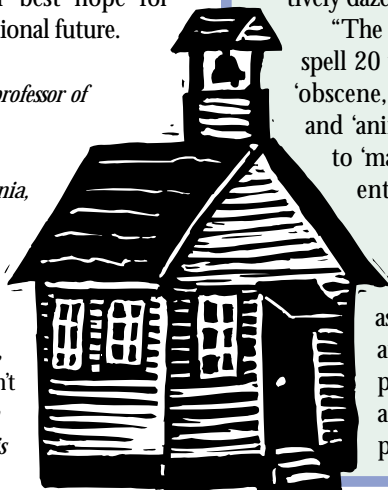
—Jesse Jackson, “Meet the Press,” 12/22/96

## High Standards Sparse Resources Big Results

elementary schools to make the arduous shift to a solid, knowledge-based curriculum. The education press now calls our school reform effort the Core Knowledge Movement. It has been fully adopted in more than 350 public schools in 40 states, and a much larger number of schools are successfully using the foundation's principles and materials.

The fact that so many energetic principals and teachers have been willing and even eager to break out of "progressive" education and return to more effective traditional methods is our best hope for America's educational future.

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*E.D. Hirsch, Jr., professor of education and humanities at the University of Virginia, is the author of Cultural Literacy and the new book The Schools We Need, and Why We Don't Have Them, from which this article is adapted.*



It is instructive, and a bit shocking, to look at what average American schoolchildren were being taught in their schools just a couple generations back.

About 15 years ago a woman named Avis Carlson published a short book describing her upbringing in a typical small farm town in Kansas in the early 1900s. At that time, all eighth graders in the state had to take a standardized achievement test to complete their schooling. Carlson writes:

"Recently I ran onto the questions which qualified me for my eighth grade diploma. The questions on that examination in that primitive, one-room school, taught by a person who never attended a high school, positively daze me.

"The orthography quiz...asked us to spell 20 words, including 'abbreviated,' 'obscene,' 'elucidation,' 'assassination,' and 'animosity.' We were also required to 'make a table' showing the different sounds of all the vowels....

Among the other eight questions (each subject had ten questions) was one which asked us to 'divide into syllables and mark diacritically the words profuse, retrieve, rigidity, defiance, priority, remittance and propagate.'

"Two of arithmetic's ten questions asked us to find the interest on an 8-percent note for \$900 running two years, two months, six days; and also to reduce three pecks, five quarts, one pint to bushels.

"In reading we were required to tell what we knew of the writings of Thomas Jefferson, and for another of the ten questions to indicate the pronunciation and give the meanings of the following words: zenith, deviated, misconception, panegyric, Spartan, talisman....

"Among geography's ten were these: 'Name three important rivers of the U.S., three of Europe, three of Asia, three of South America and three of Africa.'

"As one of physiology's ten we were asked to 'write 200 words on the evil effects of alcoholic beverages.'

"In history we were to 'give a brief account of the colleges, printing, and religion in the colonies prior to the American Revolution,' to 'name the principal campaigns and military leaders of the Civil War,' and to 'name the principal political questions which have been advocated since the Civil War and the party which advocated each.'"

Avis Carlson passed this exam in 1907 when she was 11 years and eight months old.

Certainly there were problems in one-room schoolhouses. Low standards, however, was not one of them.

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ment of parochial schools. A wide range of educational options and institutions now offer Protestants, Catholics, and Jews a refuge from the deluge. While the ways of life these sanctuaries provide may appear wildly reactionary to some, the fact is a mere 30 years ago they would have seemed perfectly mainstream. Such has been the speed with which our wider society has jettisoned its cultural inheritance.

The loss of innocence, respect, and purpose among children today is stark. Never mind today's loss of the traditions that give us a dignified place in a larger world. Many children are not even getting the basic tools they need to navigate the world, understand themselves, and communicate with others. And the dominant modernism that has created all these disasters increasingly

tolerates no dissent. Speech codes, sensitivity training, anti-religious lawsuits, book bans, and the like make traditionalist cultural remnants feel like criminals.

And unlike the French decadents of the late nineteenth century (or the American cultural radicals of a generation ago, like rock musician Lou Reed), today's cultural decadence has no grace, style, or other hint of a search for transcendence. The decadence which envelopes us now is dull, habitual, and thoughtless.

The schools I visited for this article are part of a countercultural protest against all that. They are fairly pure versions of a movement that includes many thousands of other places and people acting on the same impulses. In many ways, these Americans represent a beacon of hope in our darkness—the hope that it is still possible to choose and follow a life which is not domi-

nated by contemporary fashions and corruptions, which is more in keeping with the faiths, thoughts, and ideals of earlier generations of European civilization.

The individuals I interviewed at these schools all acknowledged a moral responsibility to care about their societies and fellow citizens. But before attending to that difficult task, at this late hour, most have concluded that they must first solidify their faith and deep traditions—within themselves and their children. This they have decided to accomplish within deeply orthodox schools for the young.

And in these places I found young people experiencing the robust joys of youth, in combination with an exalted pursuit of traditional faith.

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*Rabbi Mayer Schiller teaches Talmud at Yeshiva University High School in New York City.*