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Rethinking the Classical Approach

Upon reading E.D. Hirsch's work in comparison with an article by Diane Ravitch, I was prompted to reconsider my views of traditional versus classical education. My previous opinions of traditional education were that it was a dreary, conventional method used in generations past. I saw it as using basal readers, lectures, and other such accepted methods. In comparison, my student teaching experience was filled with hands-on, innovative, exciting, and engaging methods. I assumed that students taught in classical schools would find school tedious and uninteresting by default. However, due to reading more closely about these various philosophies and practices of education, my views of both classical and progressive education have been challenged.

In an article entitled "Traditional Education is Progressive," author E.D. Hirsch challenges the standard progressive portrayal that traditional education is its polar opposite. He proposes that traditional education is viewed by many as solely verbal, premature, fragmented, boring, and lockstep, while progressive education is thought to be hands-on, developmentally appropriate, integrated, interesting, and individualized. Clearly, with these descriptors, one would favor progressive education. Indeed, this reflects largely the way I viewed traditional education. In my mind it was uninteresting and rote, while the progressive approach was far more appealing with its unique focus on student needs.

Hirsch argues that traditional education, like progressive education, utilizes multisensory methods of teaching as well as verbal. Furthermore, in his opinion, it is beneficial to expose students to new ideas even if they are not developmentally ready for it. The exposure will not stunt their growth, he asserts. In his next point, Hirsch credits both the progressives and the classists with a preference for integration where possible. However, the fault comes, as he contends, when the progressives take integration too far in thematic units, which neglect diversity and basic elements in a variety of subject matters. Next, Hirsch examines the key component in education—instruction. Instruction, logically, is dependant upon the instructor. Whether traditional or progressive, the enthusiasm of an educator directly correlates with the enthusiasm of her pupils. Finally, Hirsch makes a case for traditional whole group instruction whereby "more students are learning more of the time." With individualized instruction, in a class of twenty-five, while one student is receiving one-on-one attention, twenty-four other students are not receiving instruction.

While championing traditional education, his views come across at times as slightly biased. Nonetheless, his point is well taken that traditional education is not so provincial as many would typically think. In fact, this model of education may prove more beneficial to at-risk students with its clear expectations and set goals for learning. Yet, I wonder how many at-risk students are enrolled in traditional schools, thus skewing poll results.

Another article that challenged my thinking was Hirsch's *Romancing the Child*. Upon first glance at this article, I thought that a school by Disney would be a stimulating environment where kids couldn't help but learn. However, after reading further I was

surprised to find such lax standards with no clear goals, especially in the age of the standards movement.

Hirsch's anecdotal use of the Disney school in this article led me to consider education and our entertainment driven culture. This phenomenon may be seen in the age-old institutions of both the church and schools. In the church, there is a "mega church" movement in which many services have become elaborate shows, eerily similar to cirque du soleil, in which audiences sit and watch and then frequent related vendors outside. Similarly, schools have a "sesame street" generation to contend with. These children are accustomed to constant spurts of stimulation and have a hard time focusing on a single task for an extended period of time. Both these steady institutions have bowed to cultural whims that demand entertainment and constant stimulation. The Disney school is the very pinnacle of an entertainment driven society gone too far. The idea of a movie company beginning an educational institution is, bluntly, ludicrous. Imagine if the military, a machine like, effective institution, subscribed to an entertainment based philosophy. Here, again, my progressivist leanings were shaken. I had to rethink my attraction to the innovative, exciting, and engaging methods used in my student teaching experience. Was I attracted to them because they were progressive or because they benefited my students?

This article further challenged my views of progressivism as it relates to teaching reading. I was surprised to find that whole language, the method I learned to read under as a child, stemmed from a romantic notion about language and learning. The whole language method originates from the notion that oral language, being more natural than alphabetic writing, is preferable. Although I have never subscribed to the ideal that "natural is better," I am pleased that a more "balanced" perspective has become the norm for reading instruction.

Diane Ravitch takes a more moderate view of traditional versus classical education in her article *Progressive and Traditional Education*. By this juncture, I was convinced that traditional education was, without a doubt, the paramount model for education. However, as Ravitch points out, both sides can have their faults—one for preoccupation with content, the other for a preoccupation with the student. In the end, she sites the teacher as the prime bearer of responsibility in education. Teachers need to be educated in order to inspire a love for learning in their own students.

While I took a critical look at these two models of education, I came away with a clearer picture of what constitutes classical education and what comprises progressive education. Upon reading E.D. Hirsch's articles on traditional education and the counter, balancing article by Diane Ravitch, I was prompted to reconsider my views of traditional and progressive education. My previous opinions of traditional education were altered to include hands-on elements and integration of subject areas. I now realize that either one may be taken to the extreme. But most importantly, as an educator, my interactions with students and the curriculum I teach have the potential to aggravate and bore or to inspire and ignite.