

Education Reform 1995-1996

by [Chester E. Finn, Jr.](#), [Diane Ravitch](#)

08/01/1996

Education Reform
1995-1996

By
[Chester E. Finn, Jr.](#)
and
[Diane Ravitch](#)

A Report from the
Educational Excellence Network
to its
Education Policy Committee
and the American People

August 1996

Part IV: Instruction: The Tyranny of Dogma

Part IV: Instruction
The Tyranny of Dogma

While limited progress on standards and reinvention was visible this year, headway on another crucial front--instruction and curriculum--was harder to spot. To be sure, educators pay lip service to diversity and the uniqueness of each school, classroom, teacher, and pupil. When it comes to instructional philosophy, however, all the dominant approaches can be traced to a common ancestor: the progressive-education movement that arose in the early part of this century.

Strategies that heed this orthodoxy are described with such phrases as "student-centered," "child-centered," "learner-centered," "developmentally appropriate," "discovery-based," "self-directed," "constructivist," and the like. Their names, details, and emphases vary. These features, however, are less important than what their common dogma *excludes*. Practices that are deemed "teacher-directed" or "knowledge-based" or that involve "direct instruction" are most certainly *not* welcomed by contemporary instructional theorists. The pedagogic tent, it turns out, is not very big at all.

I continue to be struck by the inability of the educational establishment to change. They are

simply stuck, imprisoned by their dogma and, more important, by an unwillingness to recognize how much we have learned about the education of children.
--Rick C. Lavis

The reigning orthodoxy demands not only obeisance, but also the exclusion of dissenters. The results of rigorous studies and pilot projects that don't conform to progressive ideology are dismissed, while airy speculation, vacuous theories, and sloppy evaluations that buttress the prevailing wisdom are published in Ivy League education journals. Unproven methods are thus imposed on thousands of America schools. The failures that often follow are predictably attributed to lack of funding or time (no matter how much of either was available). Other excuses include lack of faith, inadequate staff development, ignorant parents, or a malevolent society. Never is it admitted that the concept itself may be flawed and the method ineffective, much less that different methods were ruled out and never tried.

Our purpose in this section is not to denounce progressivism (or "constructivism," as it is most commonly termed in today's pedagogy wars), nor to advocate a memorizing, "Gradgrind," back-to-basics approach. We give no letter grade here. Our purpose is to denounce dogma and faddism; to urge true instructional diversity, flexibility, and respect for evidence; and to call to readers' attention the considerable merits of another approach that we have chosen to dub "instructivism."

Whole Language and California

Perhaps the most notable example of progressive dogma in action in recent years is the epidemic of "whole language-ism" that has gripped reading instruction in most of the nation, including our largest state. Now the results are in, and whole-language advocates are increasingly on the defensive.

In truth, the results have been in on reading instruction for decades, certainly since Jeanne Chall of Harvard University published *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* in 1967. Chall's plea for a balanced approach, including both phonics and literature, was echoed in 1984 by a distinguished panel of scholars from the National Academy of Education. Their report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, presented the results of a comprehensive review of research on reading. This, too, was ignored by whole-language zealots.

Earlier versions of whole language—such as "look-say"—had been tried and abandoned when they yielded unfortunate outcomes. (Look-say was, by the way, the pedagogical basis for the banal "Dick and Jane" readers.) Yet encouraged by near unanimity among educational theorists, California endorsed a curriculum framework for language arts that bought the whole-language philosophy; this framework then became the basis for statewide adoption of textbooks. The influence of these decisions reached far beyond California's borders, since the state contains 11 percent of the national enrollment and dominates the textbook market.

In embracing the whole-language philosophy, California virtually jettisoned explicit phonics instruction. By 1994, as reported by NAEP, the state's reading scores had dropped through the floor. When fourth graders were assessed, California ranked below all other states except Louisiana! This was true for every racial and ethnic group.

To his great credit, Bill Honig, former California superintendent of instruction (on whose watch the move toward whole language took place), recently set out to determine what went wrong and, along the way, to rediscover what is known about effective reading instruction. His excellent new book, *Teaching Our Children to Read*, concludes that a balanced approach is called for, one that includes both good literature and systematic phonics.

Today, some whole-language revisionists claim that their only purpose was to balance phonics instruction with an appreciation for literature. Would that it were true, because that combination--systematic phonics plus good stories and books--is exactly what works best for most youngsters. Savvy reading teachers have always known that such a blend is necessary--and that's what they practice when nobody is trying to shove a particular ideology down their throats. But the revisionists' claim just doesn't wash as an account of what whole language sought to do. In reality, leaders of that movement launched an all-out war on every kind of phonics and savaged Chall's work because she showed that research conclusively supports decoding.

In response to the glum NAEP results, the California legislature passed a law requiring greater attention to phonics and the state board of education adopted a policy endorsing a balanced approach that includes phonics instruction. Nebraska's state board has adopted a similar policy. Virginia now requires phonics in all language-arts classes. Elsewhere we can see signs of a pro-phonics countermovement.

We are not admirers of the notion that legislatures should dictate pedagogy. We are not even sure that school boards should. Most elected and appointed officials don't have a clue how teachers should teach, and they should ordinarily keep out of the details of professional practice. However, when a state or local board has dictated a single method that has proven ineffective, it bears responsibility for rolling back its edicts. *We do* think that legislators (and citizens) also have a right to know about the performance of their schools, and in this case it is school performance that put egg on the faces of whole-language zealots. Still, the issue is not resolved. The zealots will be back, perhaps with a new label ("meaning-based" reading?). Our own view is that teachers should be free to use whatever methods produce the best results for their students. For most children-and teachers-that is very likely to be a version of the balanced methods urged by Chall, Honig, and others.

Mathematics: England Shows the Way

A similar debacle is brewing in mathematics instruction. This one, though, is subtler because in this field the regnant orthodoxy, the curriculum standards promulgated by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), has some genuine strengths. It emphasizes challenging content for all students, including young people who were traditionally served only a watered-down curriculum of "general" or "consumer" math. To better prepare students for high-school math, the standards advocate early introduction of more advanced topics, including geometry, probability, and pre-algebra. We share the NCTM's conviction that serious math is not only for college-bound elites--and that it must address the challenges the real world presents, not just exercises on classroom work sheets.

But the instructional approach suggested in NCTM's curriculum standards, and elaborated more fully in that organization's 1991 teaching standards, does not lend enough explicit support to a balanced approach that includes strong computational skills as well as constructivist methods such as use of calculators in the early grades, problem-solving as the most "authentic" way to gain competency, and exploring students' attitudes about mathematics. Even more important, while NCTM theorists argue that their approach does not shun computation and basic math skills, NCTM math as *practiced* in many U.S. classrooms is often as neglectful of such skills as whole-language reading is of phonetically based decoding skills.

"Authentic assessment" is new and good. But the good parts are not new and the new parts are not good. For at least a century, educators have employed the results of actual writing, empirical observations, artistic performance, mathematical problem-solving, and special projects. What is new in U.S. education is attempting to standardize such measures. Without consensus on goals and curricula, however, standardized performance assessments are doomed. Huge trials in California, Kentucky, Vermont, and the United Kingdom showed the

gross technical and practical inadequacies of such assessments.
--Herbert J. Walberg

Aroused by reports of fourth and fifth graders counting on their fingers and relying on calculators for the simplest arithmetic tasks, parents around the country are forming protest groups. (This, too, is most visible in California.) Some mathematics experts are beginning to level serious criticism at NCTM math. University of Wisconsin professor Sara G. Tarver, for example, has criticized the NCTM standards for their inattention to computation skills and the lower standards they tolerate for mathematical speed and accuracy. Frank Allen, a former president of the NCTM itself, writes that "the secondary school mathematics curriculum must be organized around its own internal structure, and not around problem solving as the NCTM's `Agenda for Action' requires. . . . Problems are the life blood of mathematics. But we must not fail to convey to our students that the body of mathematics is given structure and coherence by the bones and sinews supplied by definitions, postulates, and proofs."

With similar changes sweeping math education in England in recent years, it is instructive that the British government recently banned calculators from at least one of its national tests and altered its math curriculum. The ensuing changes have been applauded by the London Mathematical Society, which was unhappy with the NCTM-style national curriculum because of its inattention to fundamentals:

There needs to be more emphasis in national curriculum mathematics on important basic topics and on the acquisition of those techniques which will form a firm foundation for further study. . . . It is also essential that the exactness of mathematics and its notion of proof should not be distorted and that close attention should be paid to accuracy and clarity of oral and written mathematical communication, including the setting out of logical arguments in good English.

Teachers would be greatly aided if the National Curriculum were more explicit about the basic facts, methods, and ideas which are fundamental to subsequent mathematical progress. . . .

Back in the U.S., the math education establishment continues to defend its favored approach, and many people cite "NCTM math" as a good example of what national standards should be. But the test of standards in this field must not be what they aspire to; what counts is how they affect students' ability to master mathematical skills. We grow more worried as we see the NCTM standards put into practice. We want to see them succeed, because strong math standards will help teachers and improve student performance, but it's time for a midcourse correction. In math, as in reading, students need a solid command of skills as well as opportunities to use those skills in challenging settings. Students cannot be good problem-solvers unless they possess deft, even semiautomatic, computational skills. NCTM has an obligation both to state unequivocally that this is its concept and to press for classroom practices that mirror this balance.

The Romance of "Natural" Learning

The "child-centered" version of progressivism from which so much of today's constructivism flows is hostile to standards, assessments, and accountability. In the child-centered classroom, teachers are supposed to "facilitate," not teach. Teaching is scorned as didactic, almost authoritarian. Objective knowledge is replaced by learner-constructed knowledge, as though each child is ideally situated to reinvent what has been painfully learned by humankind over the centuries. This philosophy flowered in the 1960s in "free" schools and "open" classrooms. It's back.

Constructivists like to think that they are lineal descendants of early-twentieth-century Progressivism, but even John Dewey went to pains to disassociate himself from the child-centered schools that claimed him as their inspiration. He wrote in 1926:

There is a present tendency in so-called advanced schools of educational thought . . . to say, in effect, let us surround pupils with certain materials, tools, appliances, etc., and then let pupils respond to these things according to their own desires. Above all let us not suggest any end or plan to the students; let us not suggest to them what they shall do, for that is an unwarranted trespass upon their sacred intellectual individuality. . . .

Now such a method is really stupid. . . . Since the teacher has presumably a greater background of experience, there is the same presumption of the right of a teacher to make suggestions as to what to do, as there is on the part of the head carpenter to suggest to apprentices something of what they are to do.

Of course, there are elements of progressivism that are sound: children do learn more when they are actively involved, rather than passive listeners; education does work best when it concentrates on thinking and understanding, rather than rote memorization. The wise educator uses experience, his own as well as the children's, to improve teaching and learning. Yet the progressive legacy has also left in its wake a strong bias against purposeful teacher direction of student learning, an unreasonable fear of the "teacher-dominated" classroom. Progressivists are also uncomfortable with the notion that youngsters in our complex society need to master a comprehensive body of knowledge and skills defined in advance by adults. When all else fails, progressivists sometimes claim that an externally managed learning environment is incompatible with the development of free personalities and democracy. Yet we can't figure out how a democratic society can expect to remain that way unless its members acquire a solid foundation of civic knowledge and democratic institutions—as well as the knowledge and skills needed to change their society as they see fit.

Three decades of research on children with conduct problems indicates that the most effective interventions are not counseling or other "talking" therapies, but high structure, clear rules, and immediate consequences. In the words of one researcher, what these youth need is not higher self-esteem but more self-control.

--Wade F. Horn

Some of our own children attended excellent progressive schools. In the hands of outstanding (and non-doctrinaire) teachers and supported by like-minded parents, this approach can work well. Over the decades, it seems clear that progressivism has been most successful with children who have grown up in privileged circumstances, whose parents are well-educated, and whose homes are filled with books and conversation about the world. It seems to be least successful with disadvantaged children who need explicit assistance in mastering the secrets of language, mathematics, science, and other school studies.

In truth, progressivism didn't work with all "privileged" kids, just those who had advantages at home and were smart enough to do discovery learning.

--E.D. Hirsch

Today the progressivist philosophy enjoys overwhelming dominance in American education at all levels (including universities). It comes close to being the profession's only approved curricular philosophy and

pedagogical strategy. Certainly that's true within U.S. colleges of education. (We can think of just a couple of exceptions.) Such uniformity creates what could today be termed a regimen of approved thought about education: pedagogical correctness. Given its mixed track record, its unsuitability for many youngsters--especially the most disadvantaged--and the distaste with which many parents view it, we deplore the fact that it reigns supreme on these campuses, which can be thought of as the central nervous system of the education profession, the places where ideas and practices get validated. Worse still, with minor exceptions, the government now throws its powerful weight behind that philosophy--and only that philosophy, as we elaborate below.

The Instructivist Alternative

The reigning ideology routinely ignores and rejects alternative instructional strategies, no matter how well established by research. Ideally, education research should be experimental, pragmatic, open to new ideas, and willing to acknowledge the failure of practices that, after proper trials, turn out not to work very well. Unfortunately, many researchers prefer to seek validation of favored approaches, find excuses when they don't work, and reject findings that do not confirm their own biases. Because of the overwhelming preference for progressivism among education-school faculty, few researchers evince interest in what we now term "instructivist" programs, no matter how successful they appear to be, even with disadvantaged and low-achieving students.

Progressivism bypasses accountability; instructivism insists on it.
--William J. Moloney

Variouly called "direct instruction," "mastery learning," "explicit teaching," or "precision teaching," these classroom strategies have key points in common. Teachers who use them are specific about what students are expected to learn, and they communicate these expectations clearly to their pupils; virtually all school time and energy are focused on the desired learning; testing provides frequent feedback on progress; success is rewarded; failure is not accepted; and effort continues until the goals are attained.

Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of indifference to such results is illustrated by the fate of direct instruction (known in one version as DISTAR). Few schools or districts use it even though it was convincingly validated by a huge field test against a broad array of competitive methods. In the early 1980s, the federal government spent over a billion dollars on the massive "Follow Through" study, the most rigorous comparative evaluation of instructional strategies ever performed. Of the many strategies that were tried and studied, direct instruction and behavioral analysis were found to have much stronger impact than the rest. But because these generally instructivist approaches did not conform to the field's prevailing orthodoxies, researchers promptly sought to discredit or disregard the project's findings. Indeed, the journals of some of the nation's highest-status schools of education went on the attack as soon as the results were known. One suspects that if their preferred strategies had received high marks, the evaluation would have been hailed as a definitive breakthrough.

Despite their unpopularity among education-school faculty, instructivist methods seem to produce solid results, especially for children who need help in learning to read, write, and cipher. They start by assuming that the teacher knows something that children need to learn. They rely on carefully planned and purposeful teaching. They hinge, above all, on high-quality instruction by knowledgeable instructors. That's why we call this philosophy instructivism.

Clearly, instructivism works. Barak Rosenshine and N.L. Gage synthesized many studies that show pervasive beneficial effects in the major subjects in primary and secondary schools.
--Herbert J. Walberg

Instructivist schools have a clear understanding of what their pupils should learn and how they are expected to behave. They believe that the teacher's most solemn job is to instruct the young in the knowledge, skills, and behaviors determined by adult society to be valuable.

Some successful schools today adhere to the instructivist philosophy, but such schools must usually struggle against the weight of received opinion, no matter how successful they may be. Today, for example, at the Barclay public school in Baltimore, inner-city students are taught using a curriculum carefully devised and refined over the decades by the nearby Calvert independent school, which for most of this century has sent Calvert-method materials and instructional strategies to homebound children and families living in faraway places. When Gertrude Williams, Barclay's extraordinary principal, asked the system's administrators for permission to use the rigorous Calvert curriculum in her school, which was at the bottom of the barrel, she was turned down. She was told that it's a "rich man's" curriculum and therefore inappropriate for her pupils. But Williams refused to give up, and eventually Mayor Kurt Schmoke intervened to support her request. Today, Calvert provides daily lesson plans in each subject, monthly assessments of student progress, and constant correction of and feedback on student work. Despite some bumps, the Calvert curriculum has helped Barclay's students make significant achievement gains. Albert Shanker has termed Barclay "an extraordinary success story" and describes its results as "outcomes of which any school district in the country could be proud."

Baltimore is also a good place to observe another promising instructivist program. "Success for All" is a comprehensive package of scripted lessons for reading in the early grades, developed primarily by Robert Slavin at Johns Hopkins University. It includes pretesting, ability grouping and regrouping, frequent assessment of progress, and tutors for students who need extra assistance. Some of its elements are progressive, but the program's main thrust is decidedly instructivist. Under controlled testing, it has managed to get 60 percent of highly disadvantaged students up to the national norm (although some experts, such as Herbert J. Walberg, note that other evaluations show less impressive results for the program). Yet it is not widely used.

Nor are other successful strategies and methods with an instructivist bent. The excellent Core Knowledge program inspired by E.D. Hirsch is spurned by most U.S. schools and held in contempt by education professors because of Hirsch's insistence on spelling out in detail what children are expected to learn in each grade. In many of the between two and three hundred public schools where it is operating, however, student performance has been remarkable. And it is slowly spreading into more communities.

Thaddeus Lott's Wesley School in Houston, which serves one of the poorest neighborhoods in that city, has gotten terrific results with DISTAR and other instructivist approaches. Despite the fact that Lott took his school from the bottom to the top of Houston's rankings--a recent state accountability report identified Wesley as one of the best schools in Texas--district leaders have not replicated his approach. Indeed, they responded to the school's remarkable success by accusing the principal of cheating. The good news is that Lott is planning to take advantage of the new state charter law to open his own charter schools in Houston.

The most remarkable fact about successful inner-city schools like Barclay and Wesley and programs like Hirsch's is not that they exist, but that there is no effort by education professionals to beat paths to their doors and encourage the spread of their successful methods.

Despite the code of silence-verging-on-hostility toward such methods, individual teachers occasionally happen upon them. Thus the Washington Post reported in June on the remarkable transformation of Mark Lewis's second- and third-grade classroom in D.C.'s predominantly minority Garrison Elementary School,

which boosted its test scores from the 35th to 75th percentile over the past year. Lewis is a former Library of Congress historian who turned to teaching four years ago. Appalled by his pupils' weak academic performance, he decided to change things. As he said to the reporter, "It was just hard-core reading, writing and math. It was fun, but it was intense. I also did something else. I kept injecting a belief in them. I kept saying, 'Yes, they can do it.' I was like Vince Lombardi. . . ."

Somehow the message sunk in. "Mr. Lewis said he believed in us," said Gerald Thornton, a third-grade student. "He kept saying we could do it. We kept doing what we could. If we would read an easy book, Mr. Lewis would say, 'Put down that easy book and get a harder book. You can do better.'"

Mark Lewis. Gertrude Williams. Jaime Escalante. Thaddeus Lott. Hundreds and thousands of similarly devoted if less celebrated educators. They practice instructivism and get good results. Attention should be paid.

The Case for Diversity and Balance

In contrasting constructivism and instructivism, our goal is not to banish the one or mandate the other. It's to appeal for tolerance of honest diversity in instruction, to argue against pedagogical orthodoxies of every kind, to urge respectful attention to what is actually known about what works with children, and to insist that no one size can fit all. Pluralism is important both because youngsters really do differ and because teachers should be seen as professionals, not robots to be programmed.

Balance currently doesn't exist because it is not politically correct to talk about direct instruction in certain education circles, even though there is evidence emerging that such strategies are working well with disadvantaged students.

--Gary K. Hart

Balance is important, too. Too much constructivism and we get kids who can neither read nor cipher though they may be inquisitive and overflowing with self-esteem. Too much force-feeding by teachers and we get kids who may know their multiplication tables and state capitals but are passive and unaccustomed to using their imaginations.

The very best teachers instinctively achieve such balance within their classrooms and fend off efforts to tip them in either direction. The very best teachers are slaves to no one's dogma; they are able to use constructivist and instructivist methods as the child, the subject matter, and the situation require. But today the profession, the system, and the government support only one approach, which makes it an orthodoxy rather than a tool in the educators' kit bag and means that the teacher who wants to use diverse methods is up against a powerful combination.

In most U.S. schools and classrooms, therefore, imbalance means too much progressivism and too little instructivism. It's the latter that must fight an uphill battle against pedagogical correctness. We don't think that states or districts (much less the federal government) should impose it, but we suggest that it is an important component of almost all good teaching.

Copyright ©2003-2006 The Thomas B. Fordham Institute. All Rights Reserved.

The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.