

REALITY'S REVENGE: RESEARCH AND IDEOLOGY

BY E.D. HIRSCH, JR.

THE FIRST step in strengthening education in America is to avoid the premature polarizations that arise when educational policy is confused with political ideology. In the United States today, the hostile political split between liberals and conservatives has infected the public debate over education—to such an extent that straight thinking is made difficult.

Here's an example. Political liberals in the United States advocate greater equality in per-pupil spending among different school districts within a state. Many conservatives oppose shifting funds from one school district to another. Jonathan Kozol's book *Savage Inequalities* (1991) dramatized the injustices inflicted on poor children by the unfair distribution of public resources, and recently courts in Texas, Kentucky, and many other states have ruled that greater equity of funding is indeed required by law. Sadly, some of these rulings have been circumvented by conservative resistance—reflecting the degree to which a sense of community between rich and poor has further declined in the nation and given way to an us-versus-them mentality even with respect to children.

But one's political sympathies with equitable funding have no logical or practical connection with one's views about what ought to be happening inside schools once they are equitably funded. My political sympathies are with those who, like Kozol, advocate greater funding equity. But Kozol, perhaps influenced by his study at education school, expresses many "progressive" educational ideas that I oppose. I would label myself a political liberal and an educational conserva-

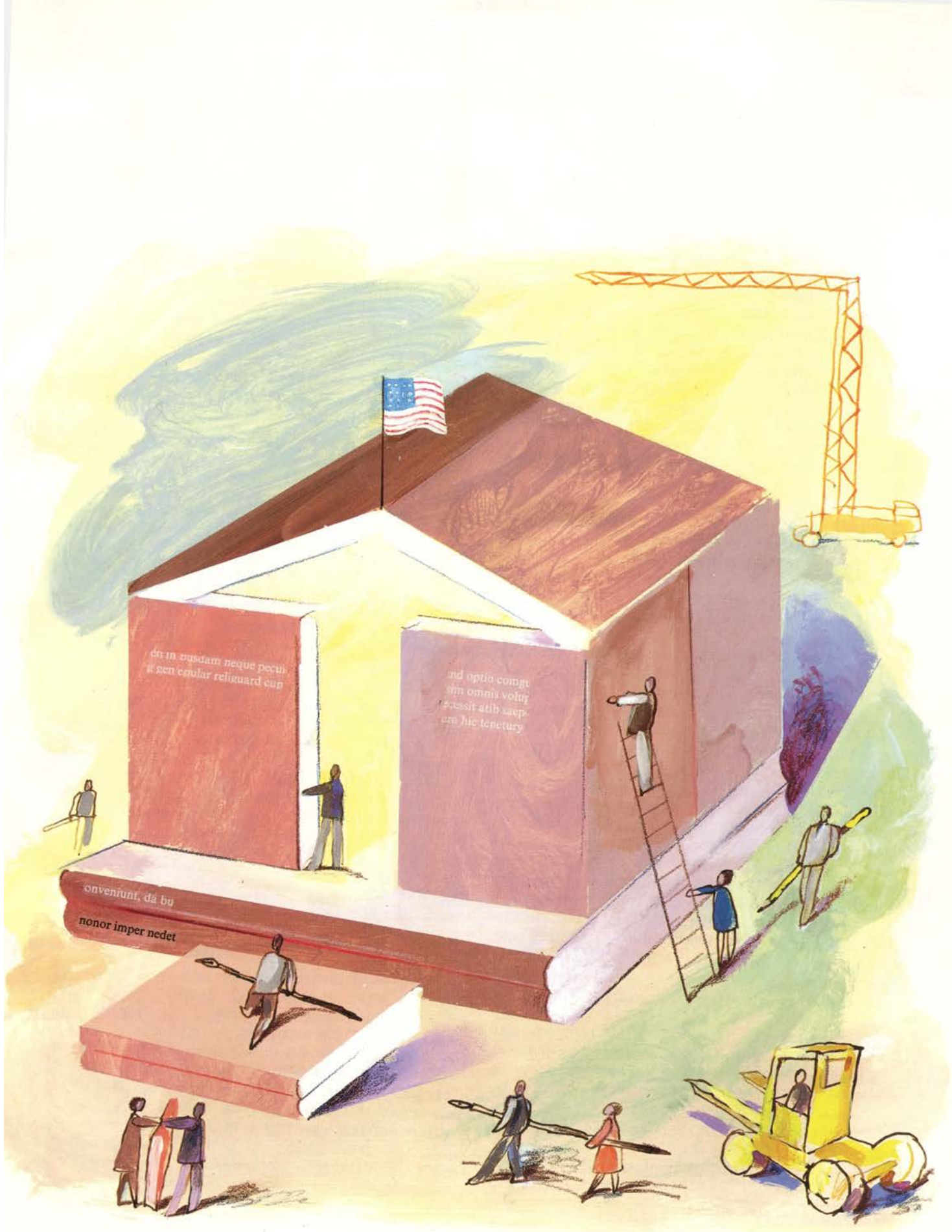
tive, or perhaps more accurately, an educational pragmatist. Political liberals really ought to oppose progressive educational ideas because they have led to practical failure and greater social inequity. The only practical way to achieve liberalism's aim of greater social justice is to pursue conservative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

That is not a new idea. In 1932, the Communist intellectual Antonio Gramsci, writing from jail (having been imprisoned by Mussolini), was one of the first to detect the paradoxical consequences of the new "democratic" education, which stressed "life relevance" and other naturalistic approaches over hard work and the transmission of knowledge. Il Duce's educational minister, Giovanni Gentile, was, in contrast to Gramsci, an enthusiastic proponent of the new ideas emanating from Teachers College, Columbia University, in the United States.¹ Today, Gramsci's observations seem prescient:

The new concept of schooling is in its romantic phase, in which the replacement of "mechanical" by "natural" methods has become unhealthily exaggerated.... 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 crystalize them in Chinese complexities.²

Gramsci saw that to denominate such methods as phonics and memorization of the multiplication table as "conservative," while associating them with the political right, amounted to a serious intellectual error. That was the nub of the standoff between the two most distinguished educational theorists of the political Left—Gramsci and Paulo Freire. Freire, like Gramsci a hero of humanity, devoted himself to the cause of educating the oppressed, particularly in his native Brazil, but his writings also have been influential in the United States. Like other educational progressivists, Freire rejected traditional teaching methods and subject matters, objecting to the "banking theory of schooling," whereby the teacher provides the child

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with a lot of "rote-learned" information. The consequence of the conservative approach, according to Freire, is to numb the critical faculties of students and to preserve the oppressor class. He called for a change of both methods and content—new content that would celebrate the culture of the oppressed, and new methods that would encourage intellectual independence and resistance. In short, Freire, like other educational writers since the 1920s, associated political and educational progressivism.

Gramsci took the opposite view. He held that political progressivism demanded educational conservatism. The oppressed class should be taught to master the tools of power and authority—the ability to read, write, and communicate—and to 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 flourish "naturally," which would 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.

In this debate, history has proved Gramsci to be the better theorist and prophet. Modern nations that have adopted Gramscian principles have bettered the condition and heightened the political, social, and economic power of oppressed classes of people. By contrast, nations (including our own) that have stuck to the principles of Freire have failed to change the social and economic status quo.

Gramsci was not the only observer to predict the inegalitarian consequences of "naturalistic," "project-oriented," "hands-on," "critical-thinking," and so-called "democratic" education. I focus on Gramsci as a revered theorist of the Left in order to make a strategic point. Ideological polarizations of educational issues tend to be facile and premature.

The educational standpoint from which this article is written may be accurately described as neither "traditional" nor "progressive." It is pragmatic. Both educational traditionalists and progressivists have tended to be far too dogmatic, polemical, and theory-ridden to be reliable beacons for public policy. The pragmatist tries to avoid simplifications and facile oppositions. Thus, this article will argue that the best guide to education on a large scale is observation of practices that have worked well on a large scale, coupled with as exact an understanding as possible of the reasons why those practices have succeeded in many different contexts.

Reliable guidance depends on reliable research. Ideology and research should be disentangled as much as humanly possible. Research findings that are accurate and reliable must transcend partisanship and must be seen to do so. When research is cited with misleading selectivity, or when it is second-rate and unreliable, it ceases, after a time, to be useful even as rhetoric.

This discussion of educational research treks through a certain amount of technical detail. The trip is worth taking because of the practical benefits that solid, mainstream research can yield. High-quality, refereed research summarizes the most reliable accumu-

lated educational experience available to us. Its intelligent applications usually work much better in the classroom than mere hunches, because the conclusions of good, replicated research are far more often right than wrong. Good research represents the reality principle in education.

But, since much educational research is concentrated in such "soft" subjects as history, sociology, and psychology, it necessarily contains unknown factors, uncontrolled variables, and ineradicable uncertainties. There *is* consensus on certain important matters, however, and I try to focus on some of the most widely agreed-upon and disinterested conclusions.

By "disinterested," I refer to a cast of mind, not to a lack of concern. Because educational research is applied research, the topics studied will have been generated by direct, practical goals, but a good researcher's preferences will not have predetermined the results. In good medical research, too, practical aims decide what questions get asked and what money gets allocated, but the answers and the results of this applied research are dictated by the realities, not by preferences.

The questions we ask of educational research sometimes reflect conflicted aims, such as: How can we educate everyone to a fairly high competence without holding back our ablest and most motivated students? Research can describe and quantify the trade-offs involved in such questions, but it cannot evaluate how to act upon them. Such evaluation is a matter of policy, and in a democracy, educational policy should be decided openly and with the most accurate knowledge available. Research is the servant of policy, not its master.

But in another sense, good research *is* a kind of master, exhibiting a certain finality. Although it cannot decide policy, it can at least connect us with reality. Many of our failures in precollegiate education have been caused by the lack of fit between our dominant theories and the realities they have claimed to represent. Our educational failures reflect reality's revenge over inadequate ideas. The history of American education since the 1930s has been the stubborn persistence of illusion in the face of reality. Illusion has not been defeated. But since reality cannot be defeated either, and since it determines what actually happens in the world, the result has been educational decline.

What Is Higher-Order Thinking?

The goal of present-day educational reformers is to produce students with "higher-order skills" who are able to think independently about the unfamiliar problems they will encounter in the information age, who have become "problem solvers" and have "learned how to learn," and who are on their way to becoming "critical thinkers" and "lifelong learners." The method advocated for achieving these "higher-order skills" is "discovery learning," by which students solve problems and make decisions on their own through "inquiry" and "independent analysis" of "real-world" projects—what Kilpatrick in the 1920s called the "project method."

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