

Romancing the Child: Curing American Education of its Enduring Belief that Learning Is Natural

by E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

The Disney Corporation's Celebration School sounded like yet another fairy tale from the creators of the Little Mermaid and the Lion King. It was supposed to be the ideal school, set in Disney's newly created Florida community, Celebration. According to the *New York Times*, the school was to follow the "most advanced" progressive educational methods. In fact these "new" methods were rebottled versions of earlier progressive schemes going back at least 100 years—as Diane Ravitch documented in her book *Left Back*—schemes such as multi-aged groups in which each child goes at his or her own pace; individualized assessments instead of objective tests; teachers as coaches rather than sages; projects instead of textbooks.

Such methods, although they have been in use for decades, have rarely worked well. The Celebration School was no exception. As the *Times* headline put it, there was "Trouble at the Happiest School on Earth." The *Times* article began, "The start of the school year here is just a few days away, so it was no surprise that there was a line of parents at the Celebration School office the other day. But the reason for the line was: they were queuing up to withdraw their children." Parents said they were dissatisfied with the lack of clear academic goals and measures of achievement, as well as with the lack of order and structure that accompanied the progressive methods.

The Celebration School's failure was wholly predictable. In the 1980s, the distinguished sociologist James Coleman conducted carefully controlled, large-sample research that demonstrated the ineffectiveness of progressive methods in raising general academic achievement and in closing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Coleman found that Catholic schools achieve more educational equity than public schools because they follow a rich and demanding curriculum; provide a structured, orderly environment; offer lots of explicit instruction, including drill and practice; and expect every child to reach minimal goals in each subject by the end of the year. All of this stands in stark contrast to the progressive ideals of unstructured, implicit teaching and "individually tailored" instruction that now predominate in public schools. As a result, disadvantaged children prosper academically in Catholic schools, and the schools narrow the gaps among races and social classes. When criticized for condemning public schools, Coleman pointed out that the very same democratic results were being achieved by the few public schools that were also defying progressivist doctrine. Along with large-scale international comparisons, Coleman's work is the most reliable observational data that we have regarding the validity of progressive ideas, and it has never been refuted.

The evidence against progressive educational theories mounts still higher if you combine Coleman's data with the research on so-called "effective schools." Effective schools are characterized by explicit, agreed-upon academic goals for all children; a strong focus on academics; order and discipline in the classroom; maximum time on learning tasks; and frequent evaluations of student performance—all principles repudiated by the Disney school and also by many "new" education reforms. In fact, the progressive way of running a school is essentially the opposite of what the effective-schools research has taught us. A review of this research by the late, great scholar Jeanne Chall may be found in *The Academic Achievement Challenge: What Really Works in the Classroom?* (2000).

One would think that the failures of progressivism might induce more skepticism among both its adherents and the public. Yet the unempirical theories of progressive educators—generally dressed up with empirical claims—remain highly influential among teachers, administrators, and distinguished professors. Their unspoken assumptions work a hidden sway over the American public as well. For example, test-bashing wouldn't be so popular if progressive theories about education didn't resonate somehow with widespread American beliefs about children and learning. One can understand why progressives should want to bash tests, when their methods consistently fail to improve test scores. But why should others accept the disparagement of, say, reading tests, which are among the most valid and reliable of existing instruments?

In my mind, progressive educational ideas have proved so seductive because their appeal lies not in their practical effects but in their links to romanticism, the 19th-century philosophical movement, so influential in American culture, that elevated all that is natural and disparaged all that is artificial. The progressives applied this romantic principle to education by positing that education should be a natural process of growth that flows from the child's natural instincts and interests. The word "nature" in the romantic tradition connotes the sense of a direct connection with the holy, lending the tenets of progressivism all the weight of religious conviction. We know in advance, in our bones, that what is natural must be better than what is artificial. This revelation is the absolute truth against which experience itself must be measured, and any failure of educational practice must be due to faulty implementation of progressive principles or faulty interpretation of educational results. Thus the results of mere reading tests must not be taken at face value, because such blunt instruments cannot hope to measure the true effects of education. The fundamental beliefs of progressivism are impervious to unfavorable data because its philosophical parent, romanticism, is a kind of secular theology that, like all religions, is inherently resistant to data. A religious believer scorns mere "evidences."

The Chasm Between

There are many disputes within the education field, but none so vituperative as the reading and math wars—the battles over how best to teach children to read and to solve arithmetic problems.

These aren't just disputes over instructional techniques; they are expressions of two distinct and opposing understandings of children's nature and how children learn. The two sides are best viewed as expressions of romantic versus classical orientations to education. For instance, the "whole language," progressive approach to teaching children how to read is romantic in impulse. It equates the natural process of learning an oral first language with the very unnatural process of learning alphabetic writing. The emotive weight in progressivist ideas is on naturalness. The natural is spiritually nourishing; the artificial, deadening. In the 1920s, William Kilpatrick and other romantic progressivists were already advocating the "whole language" method for many of the same reasons advanced today.

The classical approach, by contrast, declines to assume that the natural method is always the best method. In teaching reading, the classicist is quite willing to accept linguistic scholarship that discloses that the alphabet is an artificial device for encoding the sounds of language. Learn the forty-odd sounds of the English language and their corresponding letter combinations, and you can sound out almost any word. Yet adherents of "whole language" regard phonics as an unnatural approach that, by divorcing sounds and letters from meaning and context, fails to give children a real appreciation for reading.

The progressivist believes that it is better to study math and science through real-world, hands-on, *natural* methods than through the deadening modes of conceptual and verbal learning, or the repetitive practicing of math algorithms, even if those "old fashioned" methods are successful. The classicist is willing to accept the verdict of scholars that the artificial symbols and algorithms of mathematics are the very sources of its power. Math is a powerful instrument precisely because it is unnatural. It enables the mind to manipulate symbols in ways that transcend the direct natural reckoning abilities of the mind. Natural, real-world intuitions are helpful in math, but there should be no facile opposition between terms like "understanding," "hands-on," and "real-world applications" and terms like "rote learning" and "drill and kill." What is being killed in memorizing the multiplication table? The progressivist says: children's joy in learning, their intrinsic interest, and their deep understanding.

The romantic poet William Wordsworth said, "We murder to dissect"; the progressivist says that phonemics and place value should not be dissected in isolation from their natural use, nor imposed before the child is naturally ready. Instead of explicit, analytical instruction, the romantic wants implicit, natural instruction through projects and discovery. This explains the romantic preference for "integrated learning" and "developmental appropriateness." Education that places subject matter in its natural setting and presents it in a natural way is superior to the artificial analysis and abstractions of language. Hands-on learning is superior to verbal learning. Real-world applications of mathematics provide a truer understanding of math than empty mastery of formal relationships.

Natural Supernaturalism

The religious character of progressivism is rarely noted because it is not an overtly religious system of belief. Romanticism is a *secularized* expression of religious faith. In a justly famous essay, T. E. Hulme defined romanticism as “spilt religion.” Romanticism, he said, redirects religious emotions from a transcendent God to the natural divinity of this world. Transcendent feelings are transferred to everyday experience—like treacle spilt all over the table, as Hulme put it. M. H. Abrams offered a more sympathetic definition of this tendency to fuse the secular and religious by entitling his fine book on romanticism *Natural Supernaturalism*. The natural is supernatural. Logically speaking, it’s a contradiction, but it captures the romantic’s faith that a divine breath infuses natural human beings and the natural world.

In emotional terms, romanticism is an affirmation of this world—a refusal to deprecate this life in favor of pie in the sky. In theological terms, this sentiment is called “pantheism”—the faith that God inhabits all reality. Transcendent religions like Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism see this world as defective, and consider the romantic divinizing of nature to be a heresy. But for the romantic, the words “nature” and “natural” take the place of the word “God” and give nature the emotional ultimacy that attaches to divinity. As Wordsworth said,

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can
—*The Tables Turned* (1798)

The romantic conceives of education as a process of natural growth. Botanical metaphors are so pervasive in American educational literature that we take them for granted. The teacher, like a gardener, should be a watchful guide on the side, not a sage on the stage. (The word “kindergarten”—literally “children-garden”—was invented by the romantics.) It was the romantics who began mistranslating the Latin word *educare* (ee-duh-kar’e), the Latin root word for education, as “to lead out” or “to unfold,” confusing it with *educere* (eh-diu’ke-re), which does mean “to lead out.” It was a convenient mistake that fit in nicely with the theme of natural development, since the word “development” itself means “unfolding.” But *educare* actually means “to bring up” and “instruct.” It implies deliberate training according to social and cultural norms, in contrast to words like “growth” and “development,” which imply that education is the unfolding of human nature, analogous to a seed growing into a plant.

The same religious sentiment that animates the romantics’ fondness for nature underlies their celebration of individuality and diversity. According to the romantics, the individual soul partakes

of God's nature. Praise for diversity as being superior to uniformity originates in the pantheist's sense of the plenitude of God's creation. "Nature's holy plan," as Wordsworth put it, unfolds itself with the greatest possible variety. To impose uniform standards on the individuality of children is to thwart their fulfillment and to pervert the design of Providence. Education should be child-centered; motivation to learn should be stimulated through the child's inherent interest in a subject, not through artificial rewards and punishments.

Whether these educational tenets can withstand empirical examination is irrelevant. Their validation comes from knowing in advance, with certainty, that the natural is superior to the artificial.

A More Complicated Nature

Plato and Aristotle based their ideas about education, ethics, and politics on the concept of nature, just as the romantics did. A classicist knows that any attempt to thwart human nature is bound to fail. But the classicist does not assume that a providential design guarantees that relying on our individual natural impulses will always yield positive outcomes. On the contrary, Aristotle argued that human nature is a battleground of contradictory impulses and appetites. Selfishness is in conflict with altruism; the fulfillment of one appetite is in conflict with the fulfillment of others. Follow nature, yes, but which nature and to what degree?

Aristotle's famous solution to this problem was to optimize human fulfillment by balancing the satisfactions of all the human appetites—from food and sex to the disinterested contemplation of truth—keeping society's need for civility and security in mind as well. This optimizing of conflicting impulses required the principle of moderation, the golden mean, not because moderation was a good in itself, but because, in a secular view of conflicted human nature, this was the most likely route to social peace and individual happiness. The romantic poet William Blake countered, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." But again, that would be true only if a providential nature guaranteed a happy outcome. Absent such faith in the hidden design of natural providence, the mode of human life most in accord with nature must be, according to Aristotle, a *via media* that is artificially constructed. By this classical logic, the optimally natural must be self-consciously artificial.

Renewed interest in evolutionary psychology has given the classic-romantic debate new currency. Darwinian moral philosophers such as George Williams reject the notion that evolution should be a direct guide to ethics or to education. On the contrary, evolutionary psychology reintroduces in its own way the classical idea that there are inherent conflicts in human nature—both selfishness and altruism, both a desire to possess one's neighbor's spouse and a desire to get along with one's neighbor. The adjudication of these contradictory impulses requires an anti-natural construct like the Ten Commandments. Similarly, from the standpoint of evolution, most of the

learning required by modern schooling is not natural at all. Industrial and postindustrial life, very recent phenomena in evolutionary terms, require kinds of learning that are constructed artificially and sometimes arduously on the natural of the mind—a point that has been made very effectively and in detail by David Geary, a research psychologist specializing in children's learning of mathematics at the University of Missouri. Geary makes a useful distinction between primary and secondary learnings, with most school learnings, such as the base-ten system and the alphabetic principle, being the “unnatural,” secondary type.

The very idea that skills as artificial and difficult as reading, writing, and arithmetic can be made natural for everyone is an illusion that has flourished in the peaceful, prosperous United States. The old codger Max Rafferty, an outspoken state superintendent of education in California, once denounced the progressive school Summerhill, saying:

Rousseau spawned a frenetic theory of education which after two centuries of spasmodic laboring brought forth...Summerhill....The child is a Noble Savage, needing only to be let alone in order to insure his intellectual salvation...Twaddle. Schooling is not a natural process at all. It's highly artificial. No boy in his right mind ever wanted to study multiplication tables and historical dates when he could be out hunting rabbits or climbing trees. In the days when hunting and climbing contributed to the survival of Homo sapiens, there was some sense in letting the kids do what comes naturally, but when man's future began to hang upon the systematic mastery of orderly subject matter, the primordial, happy-go-lucky, laissez faire kind of learning had to go.

The romantic versus classic debate extends beyond the reading and math wars to the domain of moral education. The romantic tradition holds that morality (like everything else) comes naturally. The child, by being immersed in real-life situations and being exposed to good role models, comes to understand the need for sharing, kindness, honesty, diligence, loyalty, courage, and other virtues. Wordsworth's account of his own education, which he called “Growth of a Poet's Mind,” contained a section entitled, “Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind.”

The romantic wishes to encourage the basic goodness of the natural soul, unspoiled by habit, custom, and convention. The principal means for such encouragement is to develop the child's creativity and imagination—two words that gained currency in the romantic movement. Before the romantics, using the term “creativity” for human productions was considered impious. But that ended when the human soul was conceived as inherently godly. Moral education and the development of creativity and imagination went hand in hand. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, textbooks like the McGuffey Readers strongly emphasized moral instruction and factual knowledge. With the rise of progressive ideas, however, the subject matter of language arts in the early grades began to focus on fairy tales and poetry. The imparting of explicit moral

instruction gave way to the development of creativity and imagination. Imagination, the romantic poet and essayist Samuel Taylor Coleridge said, “brings the whole soul of man into activity.” When we exercise our imaginations, we connect with our divine nature, develop our moral sensibilities.

Romance or Justice?

One cannot hope to argue against a religious faith that is impervious to refutation. But there can be hope for change when that religious faith is secular and pertains to the world itself. When the early romantics lived long enough to experience the disappointments of life, they abandoned their romanticism. This happened to Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. One of Wordsworth’s most moving works was the late poem, “Elegiac Stanzas,” which bade farewell to his faith in nature. Similar farewells to illusion were penned by the other romantics. There is a potential instability in *natural* supernaturalism. Romantic religion is vulnerable because it is a religion of this world. If one’s hopes and faith are pinned on the here and now, on the faith that reading, arithmetic, and morals will develop naturally out of human nature, then that faith may gradually decline when this world continually drips its disappointments.

So far, progressivism has proved somewhat invulnerable to its failures. But its walls are beginning to crumble, and none too soon. Only when widespread doubt is cast on public education’s endemic romanticism will we begin to see widespread improvements in achievement. Everyone grants that schooling must start from what is natural. But schooling cannot effectively stay mired there. With as much certainty as these things can be known, we know that analytical and explicit instruction works better than inductive, implicit instruction for most school learning. To be analytical and explicit in instruction is also to be artificial. Also, it is to be skeptical that children will naturally construct for themselves either knowledge or goodness.

The romantic thinks nature has a holy plan. The classicist, the modernist, and the pragmatist do not. And neither does the scientist. In the end, the most pressing questions in the education wars are not just empirical, scientific questions, but also ethical ones regarding the unfortunate social consequences of the progressive faith, especially the perpetuation of the test-score gaps among racial and economic groups. Are we to value the aesthetics of diversity and the theology of spilt religion above social justice? That is the unasked question that needs to be asked ever more insistently. Economic and political justice are strenuous goals. They cannot be achieved by doing what comes naturally.

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