

Naturally Appealing

Progressive ideas endure because they resonate with people's fundamental romanticism.

By E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

Whenever I'm asked which education reform program is likely to be the most effective — better teacher training, more charter schools, various governance reforms — my reply is that there's less need for change in the structure of governance than for change in the structure of ruling ideas.

It has been the dominance of progressive ideas, not the incompetence of education professors, which has induced our teacher-training institutions to de-emphasize subject matter and thus produce teachers who know too little about the topics they should teach.

In the face of the continuing practical failures of progressive education, it would be hard to explain its more than nine lives, except on the premise that its unspoken assumptions work a hidden sway not just over ed schools but over people's minds generally. If progressivism were not in harmony with well-established ideas about children and schools, the ideas would not maintain their power.

The fundamental beliefs of progressivism seem impervious to unfavourable data because progressivism is an expression of Romanticism, and Romanticism is a religious outlook that, like all religions, is inherently resistant to data.

Even science tries to preserve its old theories against new findings, as when it held to the idea that the earth is the centre of the solar system. But religious beliefs are the most resistant to change of all.

Progressivism has all the characteristics of religious belief, including the sense of a direct connection with the holy, which it invokes by the word 'nature.'

For the Romantic, the words 'nature' and 'natural' take the place of the word 'God.' In the words of William Wordsworth:

"One impulse from the vernal woods
Can teach us more of man
Of moral evil and of good
Than all the sages can."

The Romantic conceives education as a natural growth. Botanical metaphors are so pervasive in the educational literature that we take them for granted. For example, the word 'kindergarten' (literally, children-garden) was invented by the Romantics.

And it was the Romantics who began confusing the Latin root word for education — which actually means 'instruct' — with a different word meaning 'leading out' or 'unfolding.'

Just as 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 dissection, the Romantic wants integration and natural development, as happens naturally in the real world. Thus the Romantic preference for 'whole language,' 'integrated learning,' and 'developmental appropriateness.'

Education that places subject matter in its natural setting is superior to the 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.

The 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 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.

This then is the overarching principle of Romantic theology: the natural is good, the artificial bad. It is a principle that persists even when all consciousness of its original religious underpinnings has disappeared.

I still remember my own astonishment, as an American bred in American Romanticism, to discover that the Elizabethans frequently used the word 'artificial' to express approval. Today, most of us still share the Romantic identification of the non-natural with the non-good.

It must be obvious from the tenor of my brief account of progressive education, as being based on a religious faith in nature, that I believe it to be a thoroughly misplaced faith. We will begin to see widespread improvement in our public education only when we see widespread doubt cast on its endemic Romanticism.

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. One of Wordsworth's most moving works was the late poem "Elegiac Stanzas" which bade farewell to his faith in nature.

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, then that faith may gradually decline when this world continually drips its disappointments.

In the end, the most pressing question is not empirical or scientific, however, but rather the ethical one regarding the unfortunate social consequences of the progressive faith, especially the perpetuation of the test-score gap between groups.

Economic and political justice is a strenuous goal. It cannot be achieved by doing what comes naturally

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