

PROLOGUE

The Tyranny of Three Ideas

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

These chapters are organized around six well-recognized educational frustrations in the United States: the over-testing of students, the fade-out of preschool gains, the narrowing of the elementary curriculum, the low verbal scores of high school graduates, the lack of progress in closing achievement gaps between social groups, and the tribulations of the Common Core initiative. These problems have defied solution—but not primarily from lack of will or money, or from poverty or the shortcomings of teachers. They resist solution because they cannot be solved under the reign of the faulty ideas that caused them to arise. My long-standing view is that idea change will be the most effective educational reform of all.

Those who know my past work may wryly object: *you* haven't changed *your* ideas for thirty years.¹ That's both true and false. The basic themes are largely unchanged. The hedgehog knows one big thing.² I am still chiefly motivated by the social injustice of our dominant theories and their unwitting destruction of the American dream. On that topic, I say with Matthew Arnold: "Charge once more then, and be dumb."³ The reader will find the theme of equalizing opportunity a leit-motif of the book in all of its chapters. Against the tide of sociological and genetic explanations of achievement gaps, the path-breaking work of researchers like John Guthrie, Betty Hart, and Todd Risley should have made it unnecessary to assert once more at this late date that the

achievement gap is chiefly a knowledge gap and a language gap. It can be greatly ameliorated by knowledge-based schooling.

Once the centrality of knowledge (not general “skills”) is fully grasped by educators and the wider public, the right to parity of knowledge among young pupils will come to be understood as a civil right. This book continues my earlier theme that only by systematically imparting to *all* children the knowledge that is commonly possessed by successful citizens can all children gain the possibility of success—“success” understood as becoming a person with autonomy, who commands respect, has a communal voice that can write and speak effectively to strangers, can earn a good living, and can contribute to the wider community.

But this book is far more than a rehash of former ideas about what is needed for equality of educational opportunity. New findings in cognitive science have helped me gain greater clarity and depth. The book has benefited from my clearer understanding that the key task facing our elementary schools is to shift our emphasis from the goal of self-realization to the goal of community—from child-centeredness to community-centeredness. No sensible person would disparage either goal. But the emphasis must shift decisively for the sake of the community *and* the individual child.

With this book, I hope to reach readers who had barely come into the world when my *Cultural Literacy* was published in 1987. We live in an era of new possibility. We have witnessed the failures of recent educational theories, but at the same time we have also witnessed marvelous new modes of spreading knowledge—should better theories be adopted. The great physicist Max Planck, the progenitor of quantum physics, despaired of ever convincing his fellow professors to change their views. He looked to the young. He complained that professors never change their minds; they die off, and the younger generations take their places.⁴ And indeed some young scholars have recently begun to invoke my name in the blogosphere as a kind of superannuated mascot. The context and the national mood have changed. Heterodox ideas that were rejected a few

years ago might now be granted a new hearing after the frustrations of current reform efforts.

The most immediate impetus for this book is my discovery of shocking new evidence on these issues from France. There is a radical streak in French thinking that encourages sudden and complete national transformations—the French Revolution being only the most famous instance. For many decades the French elementary school had been the pride and the terror of the young, with every child, rich or poor, having to undergo the very same rigors under the same national curriculum. The egalitarian impulse of this uniformity was expressed early in the Revolution by Condorcet in his 1790 pamphlet *A Common Education for Children*, and re-expressed in the nineteenth century by Jules Ferry, the founder of modern education in France. In his 1883 letter to teachers, Ferry urged them to teach “that knowledge which is common to all and indispensable to all.” Those sentiments were reconfirmed in 1977 by the centrist president of France, Giscard d’Estaing, who stated, “The defining and acquiring of the very same knowledge by all French children, who from now on will all go to the same primary school, and the same middle school, will be an essential element in the unity of French society, and in the reduction of inequalities of opportunity.”⁵ But in 1989, the bicentenary of the French Revolution, France passed a radical new education law—the *loi Jospin*—requiring all elementary schools to cease teaching the national curriculum and begin teaching locally determined curriculums, individualized further by a special emphasis in each school, called its *projet*. This drastic change had been silently prepared for during two decades of teacher indoctrination within French education schools into American-style progressive education. The new law reflected those ideas: more attention was to be paid to the individuality of each student, to his or her native abilities, interests, and home culture. To compensate for all this novel heterogeneity, the unifying emphasis was to be on general skills such as “critical thinking” and “learning to learn.” In other words, in 1989 the French decided to completely Americanize their school system overnight.⁶

The sudden organizational change introduced by the new *loi Jospin* instituted a vast natural experiment. Which mode of schooling would work better and more fairly: the community-centered and knowledge-centered mode of the past, or the child-centered and skills-centered mode of the future? The broad new law enabled the Ministry of Education to conduct longitudinal studies comparing the effects of the communal elementary curriculum before 1989 with those of the individualized, skill-centered curriculums that followed.⁷ It was a natural experiment because many key elements of French education, other than curriculum, stayed constant over time. Teacher quality stayed the same by objective measures. School buildings and budgets did not change significantly. The superb French preschools were not covered by the new law, and stayed essentially the same. The most decisive change was in the curriculum and pedagogy of the elementary school.⁸

Ministry researchers have now analyzed the results over twenty years among various demographic groups. Their data was gathered from ten-year-olds at the end of primary school. They reported an astonishingly steep decline in achievement in each demographic group—children from the homes of wealthy executives and professionals, children from the middle classes, children from various other well-defined demographic groups including the unemployed, with their ever-higher percentages of immigrants from North Africa. Each group was academically harmed by the new system, and the harm became ever greater as one went down the economic scale. The children of the unemployed declined most of all. Achievement decreased. Inequality increased dramatically.

The massive declines that occurred at the very top among children of white-collar workers and high-level professionals and executives cannot be blamed on the influx of North African immigrants, as some American experts are inclined to say.⁹ Why are American education experts inclined to blame immigrants for the French decline? They know little about the details. This book contains the first extensive discussion in English.¹⁰ It would certainly be reasonable to blame a big influx of im-

migrants for a decline in the *average* of French test scores. But a fair-minded person would hardly blame the children of immigrants (who suffered most of all from the new regime) for a big decline among the children of native-born executives and professionals.

An entire educational theory has been put to the test in France, with incontrovertible results that everyone in France now calls “the crisis of the school.” The American-style, individualistic theory yielded far worse results for every demographic group. As a tenacious theory holder myself, I can’t blame educational experts for seeking an alternative explanation. But I’d like to believe that I’d be willing to give up my theory rather than resist such decisive evidence. Compare this French research with our own best research—for example, our longitudinal analyses conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). That research is based on a sample size of eighty-seven hundred students from an age cohort of six million. The French longitudinal studies are based on a sample size of forty-two hundred students from an age cohort of one million. By those numbers alone, even without the refinements introduced by French and American experts, the two samplings yield very similar levels of confidence.¹¹ I will use the details of the French results throughout this book, and devote chapter 7 to an analysis of the French experience.

THE SILVER AGE

Underlying these chapters is a historical narrative—the story of a decline in American schooling to be followed by a renewal, if we are wise.¹² The practical policy changes that I will advocate are founded on ever-stronger scientific evidence and an ever-clearer picture of that historical narrative. It is folly to pretend that our historical mistakes are irrelevant to the problems we currently confront and the policies we need to put in place. There were past causes of our educational decline, and there are still-current reasons why we have not recovered from it. The verbal scores of our seventeen-year-olds have stayed low and largely unchanged

ever since NAEP began recording them in 1971. But by that year, the decline was already in full swing. The ideas that caused the decline still remain in full force today. These historical facts, coupled with recent cognitive research, will add credibility to the view that our educational fate is largely controlled by ideas rather than by irresistible social forces.

The decline in our student test scores in the 1970s was caused by the dominance of conceptions that had begun to take over American public schools starting in the 1920s. The ideas did not complete their conquest right away. As late as the 1940s and 1950s the public education of the United States, for all its racial and social shortcomings, scored near the top among nations in both achievement and equality.¹³ Moreover, as John Bishop has long pointed out, the education gap between blacks and whites had narrowed steadily until recent decades.¹⁴ But between 1960 and 1980 American academic scores fell rapidly *at all grade levels*—more than 25 percent of a standard deviation, a big drop for large populations.¹⁵ The verbal scores on the SAT fell 50 percent of a standard deviation! Those puzzling disasters caused the Reagan administration to convene a national commission that produced the famous alarmist report *A Nation at Risk* (1983). When the French later adopted those same ideas they suffered a decline of similar massive proportions. Our “*Nation at Risk*” of 1983 became their “*Crise de l’école*” of 2007.

The belief that there was once a golden age of American education is scorned by educational historians. They are of course right. But they concede that there was indeed a large test score decline—over a quarter of a standard deviation—in grade school and high school test scores between 1960 and 1980.¹⁶ As this book shows, the decline occurred at all grade levels among all demographic groups.¹⁷ Thereafter, in our own times, test scores have remained low and stable within a tenth of a standard deviation.¹⁸ So let’s call the higher-scoring era before the decline—the 1940s and 1950s—a “silver age.” The subsequent test-score decline and its causes are important to know about, acknowledge, and rectify.

The chief cause of the decline was the nationwide adoption of a set of inadequate ideas.¹⁹ Though the ideas were partly true and beneficial, they were also partly incorrect and harmful because they neglected the communal dimension of education in favor of individualistic child-centered development. The French have now repeated our experiment in educational individualism in a more concentrated and better-documented form.

Here are the three basic ideas that depressed education in both nations:

- Early education should be appropriate to the child's age and nature, as part of a natural developmental process.
- Early education should be individualized as far as possible—to follow the learning styles and interests of each developing student.
- The unifying aim of education is to develop critical thinking and other general skills.

The new policies that I (and others) recommend are based on a different set of ideas and emphases that are more consistent with current cognitive science, developmental psychology, and social science:²⁰

- Early education should be chiefly communal—focused on gaining proficiency in the language and the conventions of the public sphere.
- Every child in each locality should study basically the same early curriculum.²¹
- The unifying aim of early schooling is autonomy and equality of opportunity: to impart to every child the enabling knowledge that is possessed by the most successful adults in the wider society.

No doubt our current principles—natural development, individuality, and critical thinking—will continue to be regarded with favor by many people. The ideas are attractive. They counsel empathy with the

individual child, and they claim to comport with the child's natural development. Naturalists will of course concede that communal knowledge is important, while communalists will concede that nature cannot be thwarted.²² That agreement sounds very promising. But emphasis is critical, and foes of inequality like me caution that if an advantaged child at age seven knows certain things without harm, then it *cannot* be inherently harmful or "developmentally inappropriate" for a disadvantaged child also to know those very same things at the same age.

And the communalist will further caution that there is a big distinction between accommodating shared curriculum topics for each child as the best schools do in the community-centered schools of Finland and Japan, and devising different curriculum topics for different children as we and the French now do in the child-centered school. Elementary school is a time for building socialization as the only means through which individuality can ultimately express itself. Children need to master the shared conventions of the standard language and of social interaction.²³ They need to learn the shared knowledge and vocabulary of the nation, the shared spelling, pronunciation, and other conventions in the public sphere of the grown-up world. Only full membership in the tribe leads to individuality, as G. H. Mead profoundly observed.²⁴

Caricatures of the communal view dismiss it as "lock-step education," "indoctrination," "one size fits all," "the factory model of schooling." But I will show in chapter 1 that, paradoxically, it is the naturalistic and individualistic view that has turned schools into soulless test-prep factories, with endless practice of strategies and skills, as they desperately attempt to overcome children's lack of enabling knowledge—a lack partly induced by an individualized rather than a communal curriculum. I hope that my recommendation of a shift in emphasis from individual to community will not be misunderstood as lack of affection and solicitude for the individual child. On the contrary, our assumptions about how children learn have led to instruction that is far from child centered, and that perpetuates inequality among children from different backgrounds.

Old-timers in education reform might suppose that when I use the phrase *communal curriculum* I am implicitly promoting the Core Knowledge Sequence for the early grades—a coherent, cumulative, and content-specific curriculum guide offered for free on the Core Knowledge website.²⁵ New readers need to be aware that I started the Core Knowledge Foundation back in 1986. After four years of labor and consultation the Foundation produced the Core Knowledge Sequence for preschool through grade eight in 1990. How it was created is described in the introduction to the Sequence.²⁶ That Sequence proposes to teach everyone the enabling knowledge (including up-to-date, multicultural knowledge) shared by the most successful adults in America today.

But the promotion of any single curriculum guide has been far from my mind, and is not a motivation for this book. Rather, this book's aim is to promote the general communal principle. The Core Knowledge Sequence has always been offered as just one exemplification of the more general idea that there exists a *de facto* public commons that enables our national language to be deployed effectively, and that every child in a democracy should have access to that shared, enabling knowledge and language. No matter what the home culture might be, every child deserves to become proficient in the taken-for-granted knowledge of the standard language. The main mission of the Foundation is to serve that general communal idea, which can be realized by different curricula that vary in interesting ways.²⁷

I have recently begun to name that general principle “communal knowledge.” Whole nations have successfully followed communal knowledge in the form of national curriculums that have a similar communal purpose. No large nation has done so more successfully than France did from 1975 to 1985, when it had the highest achieving, most egalitarian school system of any large country in Europe. After 1989, the French in effect duplicated the American decline of the 1960s and 1970s by means of the same basic change in guiding ideas. The Americans, of course, never had a national curriculum like the French, but the schools

of most American districts did in earlier days have a strong communal purposiveness.²⁸

Education without an explicit communal purpose is unlikely to achieve a communal result that offers every child economic competence and entrée into the public sphere. The adoption of more communal ideas than those that now prevail in the United States and France could offer both nations a new birth of fairness and excellence.

TWO CHEERS FOR THE THREE PREVAILING IDEAS

Any idea such as developmental appropriateness and child-centeredness that keeps earning the adherence of teachers all over the world must have a strong tincture of truth. That's surely the case with two out of the three guiding ideas of current American elementary education: naturalism and individualism. But the third guiding idea, which one could call *skill-centrism*—the aim of imparting critical-thinking skills and similar general skills like problem solving—is altogether problematic.

Naturalism and individualism go together.²⁹ They arose from a belief that nature, as the earthly manifestation of a beneficent God, is unerring and benign. Hence the natural growth of a child is an instance of God unfolding His purposes in the world. (The root meaning of *development* is “unfolding.”) So nature cannot betray. It is the true guide that will lead to physical and spiritual health. And since each child's nature is special and different, following nature will mean adjusting education to the naturally developing interests and abilities of each child. I have adopted the phrase *providential individualism* to capture this point of view. I have found it useful in describing the widely held faith that if we let affairs take their natural course we are in the hands of a benign Providence, so all will be well, even optimal, in education. The source of this faith is the unspoken assumption that a benevolent purpose is present in Nature, and will assure a beneficent result.³⁰

This naturalism plus individualism is emotionally compelling. It is reinforced by our love and solicitude for young children. It leads to em-

pathetic teaching, since love and concern for the individual child is a more sustaining and agreeable mode of instruction than fear. Of course, naturalism and individualism have no monopoly on a loving and empathetic teaching, which is in all cases the best pedagogy for young children.

But an implication has been drawn from providential individualism that has created a serious problem for American education. Naturalism and individualism, beyond implying a loving pedagogy, have also been taken to imply—and this is a fatal weakness—a *curriculum* that arises from the child’s individual abilities and temperament: “different strokes for different folks,” “multiple learning styles,” “multiple intelligences.” American school mission statements usually proclaim that the school will provide an education tailored to the individuality of each child.

But I will argue, with support from developmental psychology, that equating early education with the metaphor of individual “development” is misleading; that so-called “unnatural” social impositions are the most natural things in the world; that school systems with so-called “lockstep” curricula in the early grades (Finland, Japan) have very child-happy effective schools that score near the top in international studies.³¹ Indeed, international studies have shown that a differentiated curriculum is harmful to achievement and equity.³² To make the emphases and content of the child’s early schooling largely dependent upon the child’s uniqueness is an idea unsupported by developmental psychology.³³ The evidence for individual learning styles is weak to nonexistent.³⁴ And in practice the individualizing of the elementary-school classroom has led to fragmentation of the curriculum.

This fragmentation is defended and supposedly turned to benefit by a third doctrine: that the goal of education is the imparting of general skills like critical thinking, creative thinking, problem solving, and cooperative thinking. But reality has not accepted this hopeful idea about skills, and recent cognitive science has been fatal to it.³⁵

Educational individualism has always required the general-skills idea. To make thinking skill the ultimate goal renders irrelevant the fragmenting of school topics that must occur when the teacher is urged to tailor the curriculum to the uniqueness of each child.³⁶ Current thinking holds that the fragmenting of the early curriculum will work out in the end, because the goal is not chiefly to impart the specific content of the curriculum but rather to train the mind to critical thinking and problem solving for any content. This connection between the general-skills idea and individualism in the curriculum was the subject of a 1910 book by John Dewey called *How We Think*. He says this in his preface: “Our schools are troubled with a multiplication of studies, each in turn having its own multiplication of materials and principles. Our teachers find their tasks made heavier in that they have come to deal with pupils individually and not merely in mass. Unless these steps in advance are to end in distraction, some clue of unity, some principle that makes for simplification, must be found. This book represents the conviction that the needed steadying and centralizing factor is found in adopting as the end of endeavor that attitude of mind, that habit of thought, which we call scientific.”³⁷

This statement has seismic importance for understanding recent American educational history. By no means should Dewey be scapegoated for articulating this central idea in 1910. He is stating a practical necessity: if the content of the curriculum is to be scattered and diversified by “dealing with pupils individually and not in mass,” then some further principle is needed to guide instruction and lend unity to the experience of the individual student. That can only be accomplished, Dewey says, by making critical thinking rather than mere facts the proper goal of child-centered education. Dewey is right about the structure of the difficulty, and he has also identified what may be the most recalcitrant political problem in American education—that few dare challenge our emphasis on individualism.

The proposal that critical thinking is an aim that unifies fragmented and individualized schooling made sense in Dewey’s era, when

scientists had incorrect ideas about skill development. But research on thinking skills is now a well-developed field, and its findings are fatal to this crucial refuge of current educational theory. Here's a brief summary of findings from a recent book on the subject, *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (2006): "Research clearly rejects the classical views on human cognition in which general abilities such as learning, reasoning, problem solving, and concept formation correspond to capacities and abilities that can be studied independently of the content domains."³⁸

Modern cognitive psychology holds that the skills that are to be imparted to a child by the school are intrinsically tied to particular content domains. This is called the *domain specificity* of skills. Thinking skills cannot readily be separated from one subject matter and applied to other subject matters. The domain specificity of skills is one of the firmest and most important determinations of current cognitive science. The Cambridge compendium from which the passage is taken is *not* called *A Handbook of Skills*, which could imply all-purpose skills. It's called a *Handbook of Expertise*, implying that the basis of skills is specific domain knowledge. Think of how significantly our view of schooling might change if suddenly policy makers, instead of using the term *skill*, had to use the more accurate, knowledge-drenched term *expertise*.³⁹

Dewey's worry was well founded. The principle of unity was devised to support child-centered education and keep it from ending in fragmentation. Yet that single, overarching skill doesn't exist. Believing in that mirage has actually resulted in the "distraction" Dewey feared. It has induced an ever-more-desperate effort to gain nonexistent skills through soul-deadening drills. A benign child-centeredness coupled with a faulty theory about general skills has led us to a child purgatory of skill drills. These have produced neither good skills nor good scores on the ever-looming tests.⁴⁰ Those distracting tests will be the subject of my first chapter.