



how we succeed and how we fail The Debate About What Works In Education

Jay Hutchins
Executive Editor

A valued advisor to *Sockeye* who is a professor of education believes inquiry-based learning is the backbone of our democracy and that DI and similar methods put children plus both the economic and political future of our nation at risk. We have engaged in a long-term debate about the value of programs such as DI. In this debate I have stubbornly persisted in my layperson's view that if it helps at-risk students learn, then educators should do it.

Arthur Academies

In the fall of 2007, my colleague and I visited a Portland School District charter school, one of seven Arthur Academies in Oregon that use DI reading and math programs as their core curriculum. We both hoped to find some common ground.

On the day of our visit, my colleague expressed concern about the lack of art on the hall walls and the absence of rich literature used in the basic reading instruction. She made a point of pressing founder Charles Arthur about the lack of tangible objects, referred to as manipulatives, used as aids for teaching math. In response, Arthur demonstrated a notation that students pencil-in, which helps them understand the abstract units manipulated when doing simple arithmetic. My colleague left highly skeptical about DI. But that spring, taking the same reading comprehension and math tests as every third grader in Oregon, 90 percent of third graders in Arthur Academies' seven charter schools met state benchmarks.

Progressive Programs are Child Centered

Progressive educators seem to believe students taught primarily by direct instruction are, by analogy, learning to play the flute without ever playing real music. A particular "child-centered" progressive approach my colleague considers to be a spectacular empirical success is the one used by Reggio Emilia's municipal preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, a town the size of Eugene, Oregon.

In Reggio Emilia schools, students are expected to develop perceptions about their own learning experience, a process called metacognition. Each child also is assumed to have rights in their community and to be active participants in creating

A famous picture of George Walker Bush on September 11, 2001, taken right after he was informed that the second World Trade Center tower was under attack, shows him reading *My Pet Goat* to a group of school children. The image has been the subject of much derision by those opposing the Bush administration's policies, including progressive educators who object to the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

The author of *My Pet Goat* is the "inventor" of direct instruction (DI), Siegfried Engelmann. DI is a copyrighted approach to teaching that focuses instruction on small increments of learning, using constant assessment to track and respond to a child's progress in math, reading, and writing. Engelmann, who has had a long association with the University of Oregon, has explained to *Sockeye Magazine* that DI is not a return to traditional methods, but a new technique designed to address the way children learn cognitive tasks that are not intuitive.

The Bush administration's NCLB legislation put approaches such as DI at the center of a passionate political debate, when the predominately conservative National Reading Panel endorsed DI as a science-based approach to teach reading to young children.

Many progressive educators who are critical of the panel and its endorsement describe DI's focused way of teaching elemental skills as "teaching to the test," lumping it together with strategies designed to meet the needs of high-stakes testing and therefore discounting its empirical successes. Progressive, inquiry-based teaching approaches, however, have long incorporated similar methods.

the view from here

the learning environment. Theater, the use of sophisticated materials in art, and the use of manipulatives are major components of the curriculum. The schools make no standard assessments of a preschooler's progress. Parents, teachers and students manage the school. Progressive teachers in the United States prefer similar but more structured approaches for elementary and secondary grades because they allow for professional, critical, and creative judgment in creating and altering lesson plans.

One of the most famous progressive preschool interventions in the United States was the Perry Preschool Project, which ran from 1962 to 1967, for children age 3 and 4. Though the program was expensive, Perry successfully developed child-centered projects supported by parental involvement for highly disadvantaged kids. Perry is one of very few experimental interventions ever conducted in education that has tracked the students of the school and a comparison group into their 40s. Researchers have measured some lasting academic progress and, most importantly, positive long-term social outcomes. Perry inspired the Head Start program.

In this debate I have stubbornly persisted in my layperson's view that if it helps at-risk students learn, then educators should do it.

The Vernon School

My belief that programs such as DI can help at-risk kids began in 2007 when I interviewed Oregon educators at four elemen-

tary schools that had received awards for reducing the achievement gap. All were using an approach similar to DI for their core curriculum. One of these schools was Vernon School, in Northeast Portland. Vernon was a failing school long before No Child Left Behind highlighted the achievement gap by testing every child. In 1996, Portland Public Schools was ready to reconstitute Vernon's entire staff. Vernon then adopted a direct instruction program called Success for All.

Eight years later, 85 percent of its students were meeting state benchmarks despite the fact that almost 90 percent had socioeconomic indicators that officially put them at risk for failure in US schools. All students and teachers were subject to the discipline created by the rigorous implementation of Success for All, which included individual attention to each child's progress. Students were not tracked but leveled, an approach placing them with similarly skilled students, even across different grades, in math and reading. All students were moved up to new challenges as soon as they were ready.

Teachers were excited about their students, many of whom (especially the boys) had begun to compete with each other to learn to read. Vernon had gone from being a failing school with serious discipline problems to one that was talking with parents about preparations for the International Baccalaureate program. Vernon's staff seemed to be learning by doing. My colleague, however, pointed out that Success for All was not particularly successful in other places.

Democracy at Risk

The modern version of the national debate about the best way to teach children began in 1983 when conservatives embraced the report, "A Nation at Risk." Created by the National Commission on Excellence in Education during the Reagan administration, this political document declared that American children were unable to compete in learning with their peers in other developed countries. It set the country on a path to accountability, school choice in the form of charters and vouchers, and eventually the mandates of the underfunded NCLB.

Last spring, my colleague sent me a white paper entitled

the view from here

“Democracy at Risk,” put together by The Forum for Education and Democracy and published by The Brookings Institution. The study’s authors state that the reforms of the NCLB era have narrowed the scope of education in the United States and endangered the quality of our democracy. The report concludes that NCLB has forced schools with high numbers of poor and minority children to focus their curriculum exclusively on drills in basic skills, rather than on inquiry-based problem solving. It cites examples of education systems around the world better preparing their young to “solve problems not yet fully envisioned, using knowledge and technologies not yet invented.” It also reports that there has been a national decline in the rate of improvement in test scores.

And a 2008 report, published by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), claims that students in the federal NCLB Reading First program—which emphasizes direct instruction programs for early grades in at-risk schools—have fared no better on state assessments than at-risk kids outside the program.

But critics of the IES report and “Democracy at Risk” claim that at-risk students in Reading First were compared to students in schools that had also adopted the Reading First curricula in order to compete. They say it merely compares apples to apples and finds apples.

Consistent with this criticism, there is plenty of data showing that the decline in the rate of test score improvements reported in “Democracy at Risk” resides in the upper middle class, and significantly in the top decile. Meanwhile, The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics shows that at-risk students for the first time dramatically moved up the ladder in two basic subjects—reading and math.

This politicized debate continues with each side jockeying for the last word from the most recent study or analysis.

Keep Each Child Learning

My colleague, however, genuinely fears that methods used at Vernon Elementary School will not adequately address students’ potential as they become more capable. She worries that children at Vernon and Arthur Academy are not learning by

doing. She also worries that gains made using pre-planned lesson and tests are not sustainable; that this educational approach will leave gaps in critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Her point that programs such as Success for All are

We too often fail in education and, I think, it is because we miss the point that the essential factor in education is a focus on each child, gifted or not, every day, any way that works.

failing in other places is valid. But many progressive interventions have also failed to make improvements on a large scale. The small schools initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is just one example. So, what is it that so many well-intentioned reformers miss?


From my lay perspective, two conditions inspire students to learn, and they are not so obvious to those deeply committed to one approach or theory. The first condition is a focus on knowing what kids know and what each needs to learn every day to succeed in their communities. The second condition is the proactive coordination between each child’s past, present, and future teachers, which keeps each child learning and developing her unique strengths.

While unnervingly different, the methods being used at both Vernon and in Reggio Emilia municipal preschools satisfy

SOCKEYE

DISCUSSION DELIVERED™

my two conditions. The attention and commitment given to individual students at Vernon School is embedded in preplanned approaches. These methods should not be so easily discounted or politicized because of their association with a spectacularly unpopular administration. We too often fail in education and, I think, it is because we miss the point that the essential factor in education is a focus on each child, gifted or not, every day, any way that works.

Students at Vernon are learning fundamental skills that are not intuitive to many at-risk children or their parents. At-risk students are given real chances to fit in and stand out in the world of learning. 

SUSTAIN THE VISION

We believe that topics explored in-depth by interesting writers will foster debate across party lines.

Whether it is the latest news that affects us locally or nationally, we strive to bring our readers 360 degrees of the discussion. We never shy away from tough issues and strive to make them accessible to all audiences. Credibility is the watchword of our organization.

All donations to Sockeye are tax-deductible

www.sockeyemagazine.org or mail to Sockeye Magazine
PO Box 10553, Portland, Oregon 97296 USA

archive

the archive of past issues of Sockeye and our former name Oregon's Future is available at www.sockeyemagazine.org

