

Why Core Knowledge Promotes Social Justice

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This is my first visit to Chattanooga but it's not my first time in Tennessee. I was born in this state, I grew up here, and it was here that I formed, like many Southerners of my generation, a determination to work for greater social justice. I think it may be hard for those of you in your twenties or even your fifties to understand the brutal character of the social injustice that existed in Memphis, Tennessee sixty years ago when I was growing up there. I'm glad it's hard for you to imagine those days. There has been real progress in the relations between blacks and whites in this state. But in no state or region of the nation, north or south, east or west, have our schools achieved true equality of educational opportunity — which is the heart and soul of progress towards social justice.

It is one of the tragic paradoxes of our history in the last half of this century that the Brown decision which desegregated our schools was handed down just when romantic progressivism finally succeeded in abolishing the emphasis on traditional academic content in the early grades. By the 1970s and 80s the public schools into which our children were integrated were schools in which the traditional lore necessary to communication and full participation in our society was very inconsistently taught. This meant that children from privileged homes learned from their parents and peers the vocabulary and knowledge which the schools neglected to teach, whereas children who lacked such exposure to literate culture in their homes did not receive it at all. To those who had was given, even if not well, but from those who had not was taken away even that which they had. In the wake of the Brown decision, at the very moment of our highest hopes for social justice, the victory of progressivism over academic content had already foreclosed the chance that school integration would equalize achievement and enhance social justice.

Progressivism is a faulty theory at any time. But as it came to dominate our public schools in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, it precipitated a social misfortune whose effects we can now see ever more acutely — for instance, in the bitter debates going on over affirmative action. If school integration had actually achieved its promise, there would be ever less need for affirmative action in the colleges, because student achievement would be much more broadly distributed among social groups. It is certainly true that affirmative action at the college level can now modestly help the cause of social justice.

Yet if it is true that educational deficiencies can be partly redeemed at age 18 by attending a good college, far, far more progress can be made towards equal opportunity by giving students a chance to attend a very good school from the earliest grades. Intelligent early intervention obviates the need for race-conscious intervention after so many children have already fallen through the cracks.

I don't know how many of you intend to devote yourselves to public education. We need the best and most idealistic of your generation. It is up to all of us who are in education, and especially in early education, where schooling has the greatest effect on social equity, to redeem the promise of public schooling, and help make the very need for debate over affirmative action gradually disappear. We must make it possible for all children to achieve at higher levels, and thereby reduce the tragic achievement gap between social groups.

There is only one way to do this. Each child in each grade must learn what he or she needs to know in order to be ready to learn the lessons of the next grade. This entails that the things children need to learn in each grade must be agreed upon very specifically, so that every child does in fact learn what is needed in that grade. Education is a slow and cumulative process. Knowledge builds upon knowledge, skill upon skill. And the skill of skills-reading well, which is the key to further learning, is not just a mechanical skill. Reading well isn't just knowing how to sound out words and perform rapid eye movements, or look for the main idea. It entails having

a wide vocabulary so that one can understand newspapers, serious books, and training manuals for new skills. And a wide vocabulary means having correspondingly wide knowledge. Words stand for things. To possess a wide vocabulary without wide knowledge is a thing that has never existed and never will. In the early grades, breadth of knowledge is ultimately the key to depth. Broad, well-chosen knowledge in the academic disciplines is the one thing needful in effective early schooling.

Apologists for the current state of public schools continue to blame the persistent achievement gap between ethnic and racial groups on social conditions or on shortcomings in the innate abilities of some groups. But the proof that such social and psychological determinism is false is the fact that the achievement gap between social and racial groups has been greatly reduced in France and other democracies. If social or IQ determinism were true, then the educational success of those nations would be impossible. It is no accident that progressivism never took hold in nations which have greatly narrowed the test-score gap between groups. By criticizing progressivism, I don't of course criticize its emphasis on humane, lively, and imaginative teaching. That has been a hallmark of good education in all times and places. I mean only to criticize its all-too-successful attack on traditional academic subject matter as being boring, useless, and even soul-deadening.

Let me remind you of the founding idea of democratic education as it was envisaged after the great democratic revolutions in Europe and America first by thinkers like Jefferson, then by Horace Mann and W.E.B. Du Bois. They wanted the focus of the schools to be on strong content in history, science, mathematics, and the arts. Those subjects were to form the common content which everyone learned. Commonality of content was the essence of the so-called "common school." The idea was that schooling should enable every person to stand on his or her own two feet, equal to every other person of similar talent and virtue, rather than, as in the past, having one's role in life determined by the status, wealth, or education of one's parents. This democratic ideal was shared by all the great founders of democratic education everywhere in the world. The common school was to be a place where children of all races and conditions would be offered the same opportunity to amplify their talents. How far short of this ideal our schools have fallen in the 20th century is highlighted by the degree to which other democracies have lived up so much better than we have to this egalitarian ideal.

They have achieved this by two basic policies that are directly opposed to the principles of progressive education — first, they have determined that the emphasis of schooling should fall on the academic curriculum, not on slogans about growth, critical thinking, and individually tailored study plans — and second, that all children should share a core of common intellectual capital. The most acute thinkers about democratic education, including Jefferson, Horace Mann, and Du Bois, believed that it is not intelligence that increases knowledge but knowledge that increases intelligence. Du Bois, who was himself the product of the New England common school, would have scorned the sentimental absurdity that each child must have his or her own special curriculum suited to his or her special personality. Yet this very month the latest issue of the widely-read professional magazine "Educational Leadership" focuses on the progressive theme "Personalized Learning." On the cover, right underneath the phrase "Personalized Learning" there is a photograph of a young African-American student — a bitter irony. But, on this ceremonial occasion, my intention is not to inveigh against progressivism despite its bitter social fruit. My hope is to encourage all of you to work directly or indirectly for truly democratic public schools, and to view their creation as the chief unfinished business of the struggle for civil rights. The late James Farmer, the great civil rights activist, once honored our annual Core Knowledge conference by giving a keynote address in the tradition of Du Bois which said, in effect, that strong common content in the early grades is the new frontier of the civil rights movement. I hope that that idea rings true to many of you, and that you and your generation will help make it a reality. It's my fervent belief, reinforced by everything I have learned from study and experience, that public education has no more right to continue to foster segregated knowledge than it has to foster segregated schools.