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## Traditional Education in the Public Sphere: A Contested Terrain

La educación tradicional en la esfera pública: Un terreno en disputa

Otto Federico von Feigenblatt<sup>1</sup>  
*Keiser University*

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### Abstract

The resurgence of traditional education in the United States has generated intense debate in the public sphere. This article examines the discursive debate surrounding this phenomenon. As criticism of progressive educational approaches intensifies, advocates of traditional education argue for a return to more traditional pedagogical methods. These brief highlights the role of the public sphere as a space of conflict and negotiation of ideas around education. By exploring the competing perspectives and arguments, the article seeks to shed light on the resurgence of traditional education and its impact on the U.S. educational system.

**Keywords:** Traditional education, Comeback, United States, Discursive contestation, Public sphere

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<sup>1</sup> vonfeigenblatt@hotmail.com  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6033-6495>

## Resumen

El resurgimiento de la educación tradicional en los Estados Unidos ha generado un intenso debate en la esfera pública. Este artículo examina el debate discursivo que rodea este fenómeno. A medida que las críticas hacia los enfoques educativos progresistas se intensifican, defensores de la educación tradicional argumentan a favor de un retorno a métodos pedagógicos más tradicionales. Este resumen destaca el papel de la esfera pública como espacio de conflicto y negociación de ideas en torno a la educación. Al explorar las perspectivas y los argumentos en disputa, el artículo busca arrojar luz sobre el resurgimiento de la educación tradicional y su impacto en el sistema educativo de los Estados Unidos.

**Palabras clave:** Educación tradicional, Retorno, Estados Unidos, Impugnación discursiva, Esfera pública

## Introduction

The passing of the No Child Left Behind Act marked a critical moment in American education, bringing about significant changes in educational priorities and reflecting the rise of progressive education in the United States. This legislation crystallized years of struggle between opposing educational camps and represented a turning point in the field. The act gained bipartisan support, transcending political ideology and reflecting a broader international movement influenced by progressive education models from Finland and Sweden. The act introduced a paradigm shift in education, emphasizing individualized learning and focusing on the success of each student. It redirected resources and teaching methods towards students at the bottom, aiming to ensure that no child would be left behind. The impact of the act has been far-reaching, transforming classrooms with flexible seating and multiple opportunities for formative learning. However, it also brought about unintended consequences, such as an increased emphasis on standardized testing, grade inflation, and pressure on teachers.

Criticism of the No Child Left Behind Act has emerged from various stakeholders, including academics, parents, teachers, and the press. This lecture aims to explore examples of public criticism in mainstream media, identifying common themes. It delves into the historical context of education in the United States, highlighting the traditional and progressive educational camps that shaped the educational landscape before the act's passage. Traditional education, influenced by the industrial revolution, viewed students as raw materials to be shaped for societal needs. It prioritized socialization and conformity to group norms, often filtering out nonconforming students. In contrast, progressive education emphasized individual needs, drawing inspiration from Nordic countries like Finland and Sweden. The success of the No Child Left Behind Act stemmed from its appeal to diverse interest groups, offering opportunities for students to finish high school and restructuring educational incentives for greater equity.

However, comparing the United States to Nordic countries reveals significant differences in social, economic, and cultural contexts. The Nordic countries' homogeneity and social safety nets provide more favorable conditions for progressive teaching techniques. The United States, with its diverse socioeconomic system and lower taxation, poses unique challenges. The success of educational models cannot be solely attributed to adopting practices from one country, as evidenced by the achievements of Asian countries following traditional teaching methods. Internally, the United States faces crises in education, including low standardized test scores, teacher shortages, and discipline issues. Progressive educators attribute these challenges to external factors like socioeconomic polarization, racial discrimination, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Classical and traditional education proponents point to the lack of discipline and extreme individualism fostered by progressive education as contributing factors. However, empirical assessment of the competing claims is complex due to multiple intervening variables. Understanding the debates in education requires clarity on the concepts used. Terms like progressive and traditional education possess various meanings, evolving. Progressivism encompasses active, child-centered education with an emphasis on equity and images of progress. Traditional education, as a counterpoint, includes moral and ethical education, collectivism, and socialization towards societal norms.

## 1. The No Child Left Behind Act: A Watershed Moment in American Education

The passing of the No Child Left Behind Act was a critical moment in American education. Not only did the act change the educational priorities of thousands of schools, but it also marked a watershed moment in the rise of progressive education in the United States. Thus, the passing of the law simply crystallized years of struggle between opposing camps in the field of education. A powerful international movement favoring progressive education, inspired by the Finnish and Swedish models, had achieved considerable support in academia and political circles. It should be noted that support for No Child Left Behind was bipartisan, and thus the debate transcended political ideology. Educational success shifted from an individual duty to a collective entitlement.

Interestingly, American individualism survived in the form of a very peculiar interpretation of personalized education. Education became not only an entitlement in terms of access but also in terms of achievement. The philosophical idea, partly borrowed from Nordic European countries, is that individualized education with fewer restrictions would lead to academic success. Therefore, the entire education system had to focus on the success of the individual student, rather than the other way around—the student focusing on succeeding in the existing education system. Another important change was that the emphasis of resources and teaching methods would not be on the top percent of students but rather on the bottom, explaining the name of the act, No Child Left Behind. The repercussions of the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act on American education have been deep and widespread. Teachers have been encouraged to provide more flexibility to their students in the classroom, from flexible seating to transitioning from station to allow greater freedom of movement. The resubmission of assignments several times to provide formative opportunities for students to learn the material became the norm.

Principals became obsessed with standardized tests and the performance of the bottom percent, resulting in a sharp increase in grade inflation and pressure on teachers to pass students. The argument behind this shift to student-centered education is that the goal is for

every student to succeed, and the most effective approach is to adapt to the students' needs and learning styles. Therefore, if a student prefers to move around the classroom while doing their work, then the teacher should allow it and focus on the essence of learning rather than on form—in this case, where to sit or not to sit. This is just one of many examples encompassed by this shift in paradigm, which has played out over many decades but was brought into focus with the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act. Nevertheless, the paradigm shift did not lead to the expected results. It is true that the bottom benefited from the change, with greater access to resources and a restructuring of the academic incentive structure to favor them. However, the overall results for the education system were dismal. Reading and math scores lag those of most other developed countries, and discipline is at an all-time low.

The results of the No Child Left Behind paradigm have come under attack by a wide range of stakeholders, such as academics, parents, teachers, and the press. This lecture focuses on exploring some examples of public criticism of the No Child Left Behind orthodoxy in mainstream media, with the purpose of identifying common themes. Education in the United States for most of the 20th century was divided into a wide range of philosophical camps. One camp can be labeled the traditional education camp, while the second camp can be labeled the progressive education camp. Even though the educational landscape was and is more complex than the two previously mentioned labels, they do help us understand the decades leading up to the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act.

One of the main criticisms leveled against traditional education is that it is based on the model of the industrial revolution. Students are considered raw materials that need to be turned into a finished product to serve society. It is a collectivist model in which education is part of the socialization process. Therefore, education is meant to transform a child into a full member of society. A good metaphor to understand this process, as framed by the traditional education model, is that a child is like an unpolished gem that needs to be polished and shaped to fit the use required by society. The polishing and shaping require removing the raw edges and sharp tools, and it's a long process to shape the gem to fit the design of the jewel. From a

philosophical perspective, this approach prioritizes the needs of the group over the interests of the individual. Moreover, students who do not conform to the needs of the group are considered deviant, and the system tends to filter them out. Traditional education leads to students failing, which has real-life consequences in terms of college admission and disciplinary measures.

A confluence of factors, interest groups, and extreme individualism resulted in the achievement of a critical mass to pass the No Child Left Behind Act with bipartisan support. Part of the success behind this educational revolution was the emphasis on the individual and the reforms that had something to offer to a vast array of interest groups. For many parents, it was an opportunity to help their children finish high school, and for others, it was a way to restructure the incentive structure of education at the K-12 level to be more equitable. From their point of view, the law focused on increasing testing of basic skills for students and greater accountability for schools and districts. At the core of the act was the idea that no child should be left behind, so the emphasis was on students who were not performing well. The act does not include any provisions for gifted students with intellectual quotients of or above, but it included a vast array of provisions for students with disabilities. The act requires standardized testing to track student achievement, resulting in a greater emphasis at the national level on preparing students for exams. Mounting criticism resulted in Congress removing the national aspects of the act. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the bottom remains because the most important impact of the act was the process of reframing the goal of K-12 education in the United States. The emphasis of American education before the act was to prepare most of the student population to enter the workforce by socializing them into the norms and mores of an industrial society. The new goals were redefined as helping individual growth to promote educational equity.

## 2. A Comparison of Education Systems: Nordic Countries and the United States

If we compare internationally, it is important to note that many of the ideas incorporated by the movement leading up to the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act were borrowed from the experiences of other countries, particularly the educational practices of Nordic countries such as Sweden and Finland. To understand how those practices developed and how they were translated for the American context, it is necessary to provide some social, political, economic, and cultural contextual background. Sweden, Norway, and Finland became the gold standard for education systems in the last decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st. Reading scores were high for most students, and they consistently excelled in international benchmarks such as the PISA scores. Moreover, the teaching style used in Nordic classrooms provided great freedom for individual expression and an emphasis on learning by doing. Small classroom sizes also allowed the teacher to help those students who struggle with the material and to adapt assessments to the strengths of each pupil. Flexible seating, inverted classrooms, experiential learning, among other techniques, were used by those countries.

The example of those Nordic countries has been used by progressives to justify the adoption of their teaching techniques and support their teaching philosophy. However, there are several factors that need to be taken into consideration when comparing the United States and the Nordic countries. The United States is a very diverse nation with a capitalist system, while the Nordic countries are homogeneous and social democracies. These differences are significant because teachers in Finland or Sweden can expect their students to be culturally and socioeconomically homogeneous. The Nordic countries have extensive economic and social safety nets, which guarantee a certain minimum quality of life for all households. School teachers in those countries can focus on teaching rather than compensating for unequal home conditions. A good indicator of the social differences between the United States and the Nordic countries is the safety rankings, with the United States ranking among the lowest third of developed countries, while Finland ranks among the highest.

Classroom management is much easier when students are homogeneous and come from relatively stable households in terms of socioeconomic issues. On the other hand, the United States has a diverse socioeconomic system based on American capitalism, which prioritizes the free market as the main guiding factor in the economy. Additionally, taxes in the United States are much lower than those in the Nordic countries, making the idea of high economic redistribution through high taxation incompatible with the American system. As a result of the American system, there is a meritocracy that creates a high degree of polarization in terms of socioeconomic status and class. Consequently, the gap between households in terms of educational level and income is much wider in the United States than in the Nordic countries. Furthermore, the United States has higher cultural and ethnic diversity compared to the Nordic countries.

The correlation between progressive teaching techniques and teaching philosophy in the Nordic countries and high-test scores in standardized examinations cannot be solely attributed to the teaching techniques themselves. Rather, it is influenced by the demographic characteristics of the countries in question. The argument made by proponents of the No Child Left Behind coalition, that adopting the techniques used in the Nordic countries would automatically improve academic achievement in the United States, is incorrect. A counterexample is the case of Singapore, South Korea, and the People's Republic of China, all located in Asia, favoring a traditional classical education model. These countries have achieved high scores in standardized examinations, surpassing those of the Nordic countries. Therefore, it is fallacious to claim that the only way to achieve high scores in reading and mathematics is by adopting the progressive educational practices of the Nordic countries.

Moreover, the recent rise to the top of the PISA charts by many Asian countries cannot be explained solely by innovative student-centered teaching techniques, as those countries uphold a very traditional teacher-centric model. It would also be problematic to claim that the academic success of China, Singapore, and South Korea is solely based on the classical education model, as they show that this model can deliver excellent results in the 21st century. However, it should be noted that a Confucian legacy permeates every aspect of their societies.

Now, let's shift our focus to domestic issues in the United States. Several domestic crises in education at the national level have prompted a re-examination of the dominant student-centered progressive model of education. The core crisis is evidenced by low scores in standardized exams and a severe national shortage of qualified teachers. Additionally, there has been a rise in violent incidents in public schools and a sharp drop in overall discipline in several regions of the country.

There is a consensus over certain facts related to the previously mentioned crisis of standardized testing, particularly in the areas of reading and mathematics. It has been observed that test scores have dropped over the last few years and lag other industrialized countries. The Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona, has voiced concern about the increasingly severe shortage of teachers, and the numbers indicate that the shortage is not improving. Just in the state of Florida, there are over [number needed] open positions for teachers. The rise in violent incidents in schools is also amply documented by police reports and the reports released by the Department of Education and individual school districts. Nevertheless, there is disagreement regarding the root causes of the crisis in education. Progressive educators and academics focus on external processes such as economic polarization, traditional social ills like racial discrimination, lack of access to public services, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to progressive academics, the drop in scores and the shortage simply reflects wider social forces, such as a tight labor market due to low national unemployment rates, stagnating salaries in the public sector, and socioeconomic polarization leading to mental health issues. While there is no doubt that these external factors play an important role in shaping education, there seems to be a contradiction in the argument of progressives in terms of originally positing student-centered models as the solution to the social problems mentioned in the No Child Left Behind Act, and now attributing the lack of progress to those same social ills. Thus, there is a circular logic to the argument.

On the other hand, scholars favoring classical and traditional education point to the lack of discipline and extreme individualism fostered by a progressive, student-centered education as

the cause for the drop in standardized scores and the widespread discipline problems throughout the United States. The causes are multi-causal, and there are a plethora of intervening variables, making it very difficult to empirically assess the validity of the claims of the competing camps. Nevertheless, an interesting phenomenon is the discursive contestation over the philosophical underpinnings of both camps. For many decades, progressive education has held a stranglehold over the public sphere in terms of debates over education. However, cracks are starting to show in this hegemonic control, partly because of the clear disconnect between the promised improvements and the actual results.

### **3. Discussions in Education: Progressive vs. Traditional Approaches**

Now let's talk a little bit about the theoretical framework that we can use to understand this issue. One of the central challenges in studying the debates in the field of education is the ambiguity of many of the concepts used in opposing educational discourses. Many terms used in education are part of daily parlance, and thus, there is great confusion between the academic meaning of terms and their meaning in colloquial language. This is particularly the case for terms with political underpinnings, such as progressive and traditional. Those two labels mark the contested border between the two main philosophical camps in education.

Nevertheless, the meaning of both shifts and terms, depending on the historical period and specific issues discussed. Even though there are many definitions of both philosophical camps, namely progressive and traditional education, for the present lecture, we will focus on the definition provided by Scott Davis. Davis posits that the various strands of progressivism have been historically united continuously by their antagonism to traditional forms of schooling and that a counter-frame of dated inefficient, and inhumane traditional schools has historically offered progressives a common identity. Other important elements mentioned by Davis include a core consisting of a belief in active, individualized, child-centered education aimed at the whole child, as well as attachment to images of progress. Another important aspect of progressive education is an emphasis on equity and equality. The centrality of this issue has risen and waned from decade to decade but remains important.

Another important aspect of progressive education is its emphasis on equity and equality. The centrality of this issue has fluctuated over the decades but remains significant in the ethos of the philosophical movement. Traditional education, on the other hand, is an equally vague term with many strands linked to political conservatism. It is challenging to generalize the core of traditional education, partly because it is defined as a counterpoint to progressive education. However, there are a few central beliefs worth mentioning.

One strand of traditional education focuses on the inclusion of moral and ethical education as part of the curriculum. While moral and ethical education can be linked to religious traditions, it is not always the case. Another important aspect of traditional education is its tendency to be collectivist, emphasizing respect for social rules and order. Often, patriotism and respect for institutions are also emphasized, prioritizing social norms over individual ones. Traditional education views its role as shaping law-abiding citizens, where individuals are expected to adapt to the requirements of society through a long process of socialization. Therefore, traditional education aligns well with anthropological and sociological views of socialization and acculturation processes. Moreover, traditional education accepts some of the same assumptions made by most theories of socialization and acculturation, such as the existence of certain social norms that can be considered fundamental to a social group. It also implies that social cohesion and agreement on core social principles are necessary for society to function.

It is important to note that conservatism and progressivism in political discourse do not always align with the meaning of traditional and progressive education. While the moral and ethical aspects of conservatism align with some strands of traditional education, the emphasis of conservatism changes over time. The same is true in the case of traditional education. Contemporary American conservatism is very individualistic in certain aspects, while traditional education includes important aspects of collectivism. Moreover, from an economic perspective, American conservatism supports a liberal approach to economics. Thus, the two labels are not perfectly concomitant. The same holds true for progressive politics and

progressive education, as there are several strands of progressive political thought, with some favoring individual choice and others favoring collective needs.

#### **4. Discursive contestation in the public sphere**

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a rare loosening in the stranglehold of progressive educational discourse on the public sphere. Another reason for this loosening is that the education system was under severe stress nationwide due to the shutdowns and the weaknesses exposed by the transition to virtual education. Christopher Perry and Anika Prather provide a powerful explanation in their National Review article about the resurgence of classical education. They highlight examples of practices and statements made by progressive school officials that expose the flaws in some of the policies espoused by progressive education. For instance, Governor Kate Brown of Oregon suspended both reading and math graduation requirements, arguing that this would help students of color. However, this approach diminishes the importance of gaining actual skills and knowledge and reduces education to mere certification. Perry and Prather argue that minorities need to acquire real skills instead of receiving high school diplomas without the necessary competencies. Furthermore, attempts to translate the inverted classroom model to an online environment during a time of crisis resulted in a loss of learning. Many educators and parents decided to return to a classical educational approach, focusing on great works, reading, and mathematics. In other words, they chose to go back to the basics of learning, emphasizing reading, writing, and mathematics. The pandemic showcased the importance of foundational education and the desire to attain practical skills.

On the other hand, the pandemic also unveiled some of the empty promises of progressive education, such as the fallacy of equating certifying achievement with the actual achievement of skills and competencies. In addition, minority parents and educators have challenged many of the dogmas of progressive education. Christians and conservatives have seized the rare opening of the public sphere to challenge progressive education in higher education. This presents a changing landscape in public opinion. In a recent special report published by The

Washington Times, Rachel Fulton Brown from the University of Chicago is quoted as positing that the goal is to make academia medieval again. The comment was made regarding a return to the study of the classics and to the emphasis on preserving the original uncensored versions of great works of literature and art. In this case, "medieval" refers to the free discussion of ideas at the university level and an emphasis on broad and holistic learning rather than specialized and vocational training.

It is important to note that higher education presents a contradictory picture in terms of the ideological landscape of teaching. On one hand, most professors tend to align with important tenets of progressive education, such as a rhetorical preference for individualized education and increased diversity in the classroom. Nevertheless, the common teaching technique at the college level continues to be the traditional lecture, and there is a parallel yearning for freedom of speech and academic freedom, which implies the free discussion of uncensored texts. Moreover, there is a certain paternalism in the ethos of higher education due to the composition of the faculty, which represents the intellectual aristocracy. Faculty members have achieved the highest level of academic attainment and thus have earned the right to teach at the college and university levels. The senses of elitism and privilege that permeate higher education are being challenged by certain members of academia who see a limitation of their academic freedom, particularly concerning their freedom to teach the great works of Western civilization. Another important trend mentioned by Salai is the rejection of the utilitarian emphasis of certain strands of progressive education, which aim to conflate education with vocational training. A return to Humboldt's concept of Bildung, a more holistic education focused on individual growth, is favored by many Christian conservatives and academics.

One event cracked the stranglehold of progressive education over the public sphere: the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which showed considerable drops in reading and math scores in almost the entire United States. Even though learning losses were expected during the pandemic, the surprising part of the report was the uneven drop in scores. American Catholic schools fared very well, earning the highest scores in the NAEP tests. The difference was two grade levels for eighth grade reading between the national public school

average and Catholic school students. Disaggregated data showed that Black students and Hispanic students gained points, while the same demographic groups dropped in terms of their scores in public schools. Moreover, Porter notes that many Catholic schools serve underprivileged urban students, and the economic privilege argument does not hold. Those Catholic schools managed to achieve more with less funding. The specific reasons for the gap between Catholic schools and national public schools are subject to interpretation from an emic perspective.

As reported by Porter, Catholic schools favor a conservative, family-focused education with a high degree of participation from parents. Catholic education is infused with moral and ethical teachings, and there is no doubt about the centrality of socialization in the education process. The individual is taught that certain tenets must be followed and that he or she must adapt to the norms of society—in essence, the basic principles of traditional education. The undeniable results of the national exams were reported by the media, and logical gymnastics were attempted by progressive pundits to avoid engaging in the basic argument of traditional education. Nevertheless, parents and the silent majority took note, reflected by an almost immediate increase in enrollment in Catholic schools. The Associated Press reported on the increased enrollments and further opened the public discussion over the merits of traditional education.

Another very interesting opening in the public sphere related to the struggle between proponents of traditional and progressive education is the debate over the attempted censorship of Roald Dahl's books. As one of the most widely known authors of children's books, his stories are read in schools all over the world. Progressive groups have put pressure on publishing houses to censor and edit classic books. The ideas in many of those books, such as *Matilda*, challenge many of the tenets of progressive education and favor strong families and morals. One of the publishing houses that succumbed to the pressure was Puffin, the publisher of all of Dahl's books.

A very interesting article published by The Guardian newspaper in the UK, known as a progressive newspaper, published a scathing critique of the attempted censorship. Among the critics of the proposed censorship, Booker Prize laureate Salman Rushdie is quoted as expressing anger due to some of the passages dealing with mental health, gender, and weight being edited or entirely rewritten. Another prominent critic of the censorship is Laura Hackett, Deputy Literary Editor of London's Sunday Times newspaper, who is quoted as saying, "The editors at Puffin should be ashamed of the botched surgery they've carried out on some of the finest children's literature in Britain." She asserted that, as for herself, she'll be carefully stowing away her old original copies of Dahl's stories so that one day her children can enjoy them in their full nasty, colorful glory.

The strong reactions are not surprising, but the frankness and openness of the challenge in the public sphere are refreshingly new. Challenging the censorship of books publicly exposes one to attacks by proponents of progressive education and can have grave consequences for a person's career prospects. Nevertheless, the willingness of heavyweights such as Rushdie to challenge the censorship openly and with extreme frankness shows that the grip of progressivism over the public sphere is weakening.

## Conclusions

The present exploratory lecture on public discourse dealing with the progressive-traditional divide in education reveals a few important characteristics of the debate over progressive and traditional education. One obvious conclusion is that the debate is complex due to its ambiguity and the permeability of the sides. Higher education academics may support some ideas espoused by progressives, while supporting others linked to traditional education. The concept of academic freedom is one such meeting point. Several strands of contemporary progressive education favor adapting texts to the students by selecting texts targeted to demographics and censoring great works to tailor them to contemporary tastes. However, many academics reject this paternalism and are averse to any form of censorship, putting them in the same camp as traditional educators on this issue.

The reaction against the attempted removal of the original versions of Roald Dahl's books provides clear evidence of the increasingly energetic debate over the censorship of books, favored by many progressive educators. Another important conclusion is that there has been a loosening in the grip of progressive education over the public sphere, resulting in more open criticism of some of the central tenets of the ideology. This has prompted opponents of some of the tenets of progressive education to come forward and engage in constructive debate in the public interest. One likely reason for this opening in the public sphere is the appalling performance of the United States in the PISA exams and the sharp drop in reading and math scores at the national level. The success of Catholic schools in relation to public schools further strengthens the need to have a friend an open discussion over the merits of certain policies espoused by progressive education, such as an obsession with political correctness and an emphasis on equity rather than equality of opportunities.

Now, we will provide a few recommendations. It is necessary to conduct more research on the leadership of schools favoring traditional education. The outstanding results of Catholic schools in national reading and math tests indicate that it is possible to learn reading and writing without inverting the classroom and reading the unedited versions of the great works of Western civilization. It also strongly suggests that students can learn how to write, even if they must sit in straight rows of desks rather than on bean bags. Moreover, it shows that integrating values and morals as part of the hidden curriculum, with the support of parents and the wider community, does not preclude the development of the individual but rather supports and sustains it.

Finally, more research on the importance of the centrality of the teacher in the process of learning is warranted. After all, one of the principal disagreements between the two camps is the centrality of the teacher in education. Does the rise of countries following a traditional model of education in the PISA rankings and the relative success of religious schools in the United States point to a need for a further debate and training in traditional methods of education? At the very least, it is necessary to reopen the debate over the effectiveness of many techniques espoused by progressive educators.

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