OUT OF THE ECHO CHAMBER: ALTERNATIVE PREP MATERIALS FOR THE AMERICAN EDUCATOR

BY DANIEL BUCK

Introduction

Walking into the classroom for his first day of teaching, Milwaukee Educator Daniel Buck experienced less a transition shock and more a "disgraceful lack of preparation shock." He walked away from class that day with the understanding that self-care and transgender literacies didn't quite prepare him to educate the next generation of students and prepare them for the future.

That is why Daniel partnered with the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty and their Restoring American Education project to compile resources for educators below. This list is a product of a years-long intellectual journey for which the average teacher has no time. But the conversation is just beginning and together, we plan to Restore American Education across the nation.

Essays

Teachers are busy people and we don't always have time to sit down and read 300 pages of dense educational theory. As such, I start with a handful of essays that can be consumed in one sitting. Some are theoretical, some practical; all are worth your time.

Principles of Instruction — Barack Rosenshine

The Principles of Instruction identifies 10 basic rules for instruction and demonstrates what they mean in practice. It balances theory and practice, providing both the justification so teachers can understand why to implement practices, but also clear directions about how to implement these principles.

Why Minimal Guidance During Instruction Does Not Work — Sweller, Kirschner, and Clark

Project-based and inquiry-type instructional models receive gold-standard status—and so most instructional manuals run on their assumptions—but this essay pillories the efficacy of progressive education. It covers both the empirical research in support of teacher-led instruction and a useful overview of human cognition.

Strengthening the Student Toolbox —John Dunlosky

Many of the strategies that students and teachers alike use most—like rereading or summarization—are actually the least effective for learning. This short essay breaks down 10 different learning strategies into the most effective practice, promising strategies, and useless ones.

Teaching to What Students Have in Common — Daniel Willingham

While ostensibly a short essay on the commonalities between students, it actually works as a concise primer on what we know from recent research in cognitive science about how students learn, and what practical teaching techniques align with those ideas.

The Crisis of Modern Education — Hannah Arendt

This essay is something of a two-punch combo, addressing the place of both tradition and authority in schools. While largely theoretical, there are few other works that so effectively discredit progressive education and do so with such cogency and brevity.

The Key to Classroom Management — Robert and Jana Marzano

While it gets a little bogged down in progressive approaches to discipline—just build relationships with students!—this literature review rightly acknowledges the importance of teacher authority and behavioral consequences.

The Lost Tools of Learning — Dorothy Sayers

This essay is at once a work of evangelism for classical education and a roadmap for its implementation. Her thesis is simple: our schools so emphasize content that they forget to give students the very tools—grammar, rhetoric, formal logic, and language—they need to grasp that content. What could a carpenter do with a pile of boards but no hammers or saws?

The Tyranny of Three Ideas — E.D. Hirsch

Hirsch's books are superior, but this essay, an introduction to his book Why Knowledge Matters, has been published separately and is a succinct introduction to his thought. It outlines something

of a natural experiment—in one law, in 1989, France adopted progressive educational theories and practices across the country—and its results: a descent into educational mediocrity.

The Mighty River of Classics — Camile Paglia

To Paglia, our intellectual heritage functions like a river; it comes from countless sources, bends to other locations, and even may disappear underground only to reappear further down a mountainside. Paglia excoriates the post-structural educational theory popular in our schools and makes the case for a liberal arts tradition.

How to Teach Critical Thinking — Daniel Willingham

For the first several pages, Willingham questions two separate but linked ideas: that generalized critical thinking skills exist, and that there are proven educational practices for enhancing these critical thinking skills. He concludes that general thinking skills are largely chimeric, but domain-specific skills exist, and so he provides practical advice on how to foster critical thinking within specific domains such as history or science.

At a Loss for Words — Emily Hanford

American education has its own "dirty little secret: Elementary schools across the country are teaching children to be poor readers—and educators may not even know it," Hanford begins her essay. What follows is an incredible account of how children learn to read, and how our education system followed flawed ideas for generations.

Instruction & Theory

The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them — E.D. Hirsch

No other author has so influenced my thinking. Cultural Literacy is perhaps his most famous book, but The Schools We Need is his best. It opens with a critique of Romantic ideas about education, before outlining in meticulous detail the success of sequenced curriculum and teacher-led instruction.

Why Students Don't Like School? — Daniel Willingham

Willingham provides a simple answer: the most popular methods of instruction do not align with how students actually learn. Each chapter opens with and answers an essential question such as "why do students forget everything I say?"

The Power of Direct Instruction and Explicit Teaching — Greg Ashman

A doctoral student, Ashman has a seemingly exhaustive knowledge of educational research and does an effective job of covering the relevant studies without boring the reader.

Make it Stick — Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, Mark A. McDaniel

Many of the most effective learning strategies are counterintuitive. Most students think mass practice or rereading will lead to mastery. In reality, other strategies like low-stakes quizzing and interleaved practice—mixing up problem types—are far more efficient uses of class time.

Seven Myths in Education — Daisy Christodoulou

In Seven Myths, Christodoulou identifies and excoriates 7 fallacies rampant in schools of education:

- Facts prevent understanding
- Teacher-led instruction is passive
- The 21st century fundamentally changes everything
- You can always just look it up
- We should teach transferable skills
- Projects and activities are the best way to learn
- Teaching knowledge is indoctrination.

What Is Wrong with Our Schools? — Daniel Buck

When folks asked me what to read other than John Dewey or Paulo Freire, I never had a good answer for a first recommendation. Some books are hyper-focused on theory and others on practical application. Nothing covered it all; there was no introductory survey that touched on a breadth of topics ranging from the philosophy to the social science research and practical application of traditional approaches to the classroom. I tried to remedy that lack with my own book. Forgive my shameless self-promotion, but I wouldn't have written the book if I didn't think it worth reading.

Classical Education

The Paideia Proposal — Mortimer Adler

Where many classical education books can be bogged down in high-falutin rhetoric, Adler's book is a practical guide. Many books in the classical canon are dense, but Adler is delightfully accessible and that is likely a cause of his popularity.

Abolition of Man — C.S. Lewis

Abolition of Man is a dense but short philosophical work. To Lewis, all education inculcates a worldview, whether or not we are consciously aware of it. If we disparage virtues like courage, then we shouldn't be surprised to find cowards in our midst. The brevity of the work, fewer than 100 pages, makes it a distinctly digestible read.

Nicomachean Ethics — Aristotle

Probably the most inscrutable book on this list, it's also far and away the most influential. Like Christian scripture or La Tzu's Tao Te Ching, it's the kind of book upon which a society can build itself. Aristotle is the cornerstone of classical education, and his thought remains relevant today.

The Great Tradition — Richard Gamble

While an inaccessible to me at first glance, Gamble's book is just a compilation of excerpts of essential authors ranging from Plato through Seneca and Cicero, up to John Henry Newman and Michael Oakeshott. It needn't be read cover to cover but perused as one author or essay draws a reader's interest, making for a good first purchase for any interested in classical education.

Trivium21c — Martin Robinson

There's nothing new under the sun; rather our task is to defend ideas worth defending and reapply them to the modern world. Robinson's book contests that the grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric within traditional classical education are the same groundings that our children need today.

Classroom Management

Teach Like a Champion — Doug Lemov

If there's one book that I'd buy for every first-year teacher, it's this one. Need I say more?

Running the Room — Tom Bennett

Most advice for behavior management today takes a progressive approach—students should design their own classroom rules, punishments are ineffective, order is oppressive. Tom Bennett takes a different approach. Every student deserves a well-run, safe, orderly education, and teacher-led classrooms are best for that. A useful manual on teacher-centric behavior management systems.

They Don't Behave for Me and The Behavior Manual — Samuel Strickland

Similar to the above books, Strickland provides practical advice and strategies for running effective classrooms, but he also includes broader discussion about school policies and systems —a useful, often overlooked angle.

Content Specific Reads

Teaching Secondary Science: A Complete Guide — Adam Boxer

A hefty tome, Boxer is well-versed in the latest cognitive science and educational research. He covers every aspect of science instruction that any teacher could consider.

Reading Reconsidered — Doug Lemov

This is probably the most helpful handbook I've found for how to lead an effective English classroom.

The Reading Mind — Daniel Willingham

I left teacher prep with the impression that no one really understands how the brain learns to read. I was mistaken. A cognitive scientist by trade, Willingham explicates what we know about how the human brain learns to read and what that means for classroom instruction.

Traditional Math – Barry Garelick and JR Wilson

As reform and common core math get increasingly abstruse and even a source of ridicule, Garelick and Wilson take us back to the way that we learned math. It opens with a brief review of the research to back the proceeding recommendations, before moving into practical advice complete with sample problems, example warm ups, narratives of how they'd cover a topic, possible confusion points for students, and plenty more.

Daniel Buck is an Editorial and Policy Associate at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. He is the author of What Is Wrong with Our Schools? and taught English and English as a second language at the middle and high school levels. He earned his master's degree in curriculum and instruction from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, along with bachelor's degrees in English literature and the Spanish language. His work has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, National Affairs, National Review, the New York Post, First Things, and many other publications. He can be reached at dbuck@fordhaminstitute.org.

[1] https://newdiscourses.com/2022/05/your-kids-go-to-paulo-freires-marxist-schools/