

BOOK REVIEW

The Academic Achievement Challenge: What Really Works in the Classroom? Jeanne Chall, New York: Guilford Press, 2000, 210 pages, \$25.00 (hardcover).

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The Academic Achievement Challenge: What Really Works in the Classroom? was Jeanne Chall's last book. It was completed shortly before she died in November 1999. In this book, Chall identifies instructional procedures in the classroom and the home that have resulted in improved student academic achievement. Underlying this review of research, in each chapter, is a major problem that has haunted educational research and practice throughout the 20th century: the conflict between the empiricists, who base their recommendations on objective data, and the romantics, who favor progressive, student-led instruction. At one pole, we have romantic notions of discovery learning and children joyfully teaching themselves. These ideas have been expressed in Whole Language, Language Experience, Open Education, Discovery Learning, Student-Centered Education, Hands-On-Learning, and Constructivism. At the other pole, we have the results of empirical research—results that have shown the advantage of instructional support and systematic instruction. Chall's book provides research and thoughtful analysis on this unrelenting conflict.

The book begins with a history of trends and shifts in educational policy during the 20th century. Chall uses this material to assemble a comprehensive table explaining the differences between romantic and empirical approaches in goals, methods, and the role of the teacher. Chall focuses this chapter on the competing ideas of John Dewey and Robert Thorndike: Dewey sought to change society through educational reform and Thorndike saw education as a place to implement the findings of laboratory research. Reluctantly, Chall sees Dewey as the winner in

educational practice because she believes that most educators prefer the multiple activities that occur during student-centered instruction.

Chapter 4 is a scholarly history of the swings between student-centered and teacher-centered instruction in reading, math, science, and social studies. The chapter summarizes a number of evaluations comparing the romantic and empirical approaches. Chall notes that in the area of beginning reading, the research syntheses by Chall (1967), Bond and Dykstra (1967), Adams (1990), and Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) all reached the same conclusion: The use of systematic phonics in primary grades results in better achievement. Chall asks, "Why do we not accept the research findings and base our instruction on it?" (p. 65). The answer she gives is that most educators have a preference for student-centered instruction and will not accept results that conflict with their ideology. Chall wrote that the romantic view of children (and *romantic* is her term)

is imbued with love and hope. This view holds that a child learns to read as naturally as he learns to speak, if only we encourage him to use his language and his cognition when he reads interesting books. But sadly, this view has been proven by research, theory, and practice to be less effective than a code-emphasis, particularly for children who are at risk for learning to read. (pp. 67–68)

Chapter 5 presents a review of the empirical research in instructional procedures, particularly the process-outcome research as summarized by Gage and by Brophy and Good.

Chapter 6 summarizes descriptive studies of three progressive schools: Dewey's laboratory school; Bertrand Russell's Hill School; and the Gary, Indiana Schools. Chall describes the practices in these schools and notes the academic difficulties the schools encountered in implementing their ideas on progressive education.

Chall concludes this book with two recommendations for improving the academic achievement of our students: (a) a greater emphasis on a traditional, teacher-centered approach to instruction and curriculum and (b) the need for a greater awareness of scientific results in the education community. One problem, of course, is that in the past, scientific results have been rejected by those who put ideology before data.

Thus, we note that after 50 years of extensive, heavily funded research, there is still no common consensus regarding best teaching practice, no common body of knowledge about instruction, and no common standards of practice. This problem is not due to a lack of research or of consistent, replicated findings. As Chall noted, "the problem, in beginning reading, is not the research. The results of the research on beginning reading have been the same since the 1920s. The problem is getting people to accept the results of this research." And here, no compromise, no reconciliation has been possible. The romantics reject all objective test results, claiming

that the tests are only testing “mere facts” and “rote learning.” Instead, the romantics make unsupported claims that their methods will lead to critical thinking skills and problem-solving abilities. But, as research has shown, expertise in any area is highly dependent on well-organized, extensive, overlearned, and accessible background knowledge—the very knowledge that is dismissed by romantics.

Chall notes systematic instruction is particularly effective for those who enter school with limited knowledge, language, experience, and skills, regardless of social class. She writes that, “The traditional teacher-centered education works for children with learning difficulties because it provides more structure, more support, and more systematic instruction than does a progressive, child-centered approach” (p. 177). This instructional support includes providing students with prompts, scaffolds, and guided practice. This support includes sequencing material so that confusion is minimized, teaching small amounts of new material and then providing for practice, and providing for sufficient practice until mastery is obtained. If there is any “learning style,” it is that students from low-income families profit when they receive a great deal of instructional support. But it is unfortunate that these very supports and scaffolds are rejected by the romantics in their misguided efforts to help children. The losers, in this conflict, are children from less advantaged families.

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