Peerless Educator: The Life and Work of Isaac Leon Kandel
By J. Wesley Null

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As reviewed by E.D. Hirsch Jr.

Isaac Kandel was an eminent professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, during its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1940s, when an American commission, made up mainly of university presidents, was asked to reconstitute the education system of a defeated Japan, Isaac Kandel was one of two Teachers College professors selected to serve. He chaired a key committee and, being the most deeply knowledgeable member of the commission, was influential in creating what has turned out to be the most democratic and effective education system in Asia, one that since the 1940s has outstripped the school system of the United States in equality of educational opportunity and level of achievement.

Knowledgeable he was. He authored or coauthored some 65 books and monographs, many concerned with the school systems of the world, and over 200 articles. He was literate in nine languages, including Greek and Latin. His breadth of learning and mental acuity made him the intellectual equal of Dewey, for whom he had a high regard, regretting only that Dewey’s education disciples had narrowed and debased the wisdom of the master. Kandel may have been the originator of that received view. My own view is less charitable. Dewey did little to correct the “misinterpretations” of his acolytes, but rather “like Cato, gave his little senate laws, and sat attentive to his own applause.” Kandel was less politic than Dewey and more forceful in his denunciations of the anti-intellectual self-righteousness of the progressives who, he rightly predicted, would do a great deal of harm to social justice and to the nation as a whole.

In taking this view Kandel was joined by another important member of the Teachers College faculty, his friend William C. Bagley. Together, they were formidable foes of the romantic excesses of their progressivist colleagues at Teachers College. Now we have up-to-date biographies of these two figures, both written by Professor J. Wesley Null, of Baylor University, a careful and thorough scholar and, given the uniformly progressivist sentiments of schools of education today, a courageous one. (His biography of Bagley is entitled A Disciplined Progressive Educator: The Life and Career of William Chandler Bagley.)

Professor Null has also coedited with Diane Ravitch an important anthology of writings by the chief figures of the resistance movement that failed: Forgotten Heroes of American Education. It was in that valuable anthology that I first read the following illuminating remarks of Isaac Kandel:

Rejecting...emphasis on formal subject matter, the progressives began to worship at the altar of the child. Children should be allowed to grow in accordance with their needs and interests.... Knowledge is valuable only as it is acquired in a real situation; the teacher must be present to provide the proper environment for experiencing but must not intervene except to guide and advise. There must, in fact, be “nothing fixed in advance” and subjects must not be “set-out-to-be-learned”... No reference was ever made to the curriculum or its content.... The full weight of the progressive attack is against subject matter and the planned organization of a curriculum in terms of subjects.

Kandel went on to describe the ferocity with which this view was supported through ethical and political polemics. He said that those who favored a definite core curriculum were called “authoritarian,” inducers of passivity and docility rather than independent-mindedness. They claimed, he said, that under a definite curriculum “individual differences are disregarded, and promotion is determined by a standardized lockstep.” Proponents of a core curriculum were called “reactionary in political and social affairs,” whereas progressive educators were “radicals who advocate their educational theories and practices to reconstruct society and change the social order.”

Kandel made these observations in 1939, but I read them only a year or so ago and was struck by how incisive and accurate they were as an account of the attack that my own views would receive from the education world 50 years later in the 1980s and ’90s. Kandel made me...
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realize that few of the reasons that are marshaled in opposition to a specific core curriculum are the real objections to it. It’s not weakening of local control, nor claimed insensitivity to other cultures, nor closing off of creativity, nor elitism, nor Eurocentrism. People who pronounce such complaints, having been trained in our schools of education, believe them. But these aren’t the fundamental objections. Kandel made me realize that the more fundamental, and usually hidden, issue is whether there should be any definite core curriculum at all.

If you doubt that Kandel identified the key issue, you can make a simple test: When you hear an objection against a definite content curriculum, say that of cultural insensitivity, or a vast vague need for more global literacy, ask yourself whether any definite proposals for the content of a curriculum follow. This never happens. For the real objection is to a definite core curriculum that is planned out in detail and in advance, the very thing that is most desperately needed to raise achievement and narrow the achievement gap between groups.

History is written by the victors. The history of American education as taught today to prospective teachers makes scant mention of Kandel. In the typology of educational theories, he is labeled, if mentioned at all, an essentialist. If you are not familiar with the current labels, reprinted from one textbook to the next, they are essentialism, perennialism, progressivism, existentialism, and behaviorism. Of these, only progressivism and existentialism, the latter described as an up-to-date version of progressivism, are cast as humane. They are the only “philosophies” that stress problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, promote cooperation and tolerance, and address the “whole child.” They alone are student centered. Views like Kandel’s, by contrast, which advocate teaching definite subject matter, are “teacher centered.” These see the child as an empty vessel to be filled up. The child sits passively in rows listening to lectures. Essentialism has affinities with Skinnerian and Pavlovian behaviorism.

It is worth noting that this supposedly neutral historical typology is empirically wrong in connecting a core curriculum with lecturing and student docility. Kandel and Bagley never advocated boring, lecture-driven pedagogy. Existing schools around the world simply disprove ed-school propaganda that a definite core curriculum, such as Kandel advocated for the sake of equal opportunity and national solidarity, must be connected to a lecture style of teaching. In the United States and elsewhere in the world, a specific curriculum is being taught with so-called progressive methods: hands-on learning, concern for the individual student, projects, and field trips. Kandel was dead-on when he described the real issue among current education “philosophies” as whether there should be a definite grade-by-grade core curriculum in elementary school. Period.

Kandel was, like Bagley, a democrat in every sense. He was baffled and annoyed by the successful rhetorical move of the progressives to equate educational with political progressivism. He shrewdly observed that educational progressivism is at bottom an individualistic idea that springs from European romanticism. It focuses on the development of the child according to its individual nature. Political progressivism, by contrast, is communitarian. Kandel thought that a politically progressive and democratic education should offer equal opportunity to all students and also strengthen the solidarity of the nation by providing all students with common learning.

More than 60 years ago, Kandel exposed the rhetorical bullying that connects specific content with “standardized lockstep,” with “disregard of individual differences,” with “passivity and docility,” and with being “reactionary in political and social affairs.” The labeling of the deeply democratic Kandel as a reactionary illustrates how useful an informed analysis of the tendentious misinformation that is being force-fed to our prospective teachers would be. One of the most fruitful results of such an analysis might be a weakening of the artificial, historically contingent connection between progressivist concepts of education and the views on education adopted by the Democratic party, which has unwisely bought into the tale told by the victors. The best interests of both political parties, of teachers, and of their unions is in creating a public school system that works, a thing that cannot be accomplished on anticontent, progressivist principles. Professor Null has performed a valuable service in writing this illuminating biography. Kandel, thou shouldst be living at this hour!

E.D. Hirsch Jr. is the founder and chairman of the nonprofit Core Knowledge Foundation and professor emeritus of education and humanities at the University of Virginia.