Civility

We are living in the midst of an epidemic of rudeness and desperately need civility. Kerby Anderson looks at the rise of incivility and documents its effects in society, education, and politics. He concludes by providing a biblical framework for civility.

The Rise of Incivility

We seem to be living in the midst of an epidemic of rudeness. Articles in the newspaper document the number of incidents of road rage. And if you doubt that, just try to merge onto a busy freeway and see how many drivers honk their horn or try to cut you off.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. A 1997 American Automobile Association report documents a sharp rise in the use of cars as weapons (people trying to run over other people on purpose). A Colorado funeral director complains about impatient drivers darting in and out of funeral processions. Instead of waiting for the procession to pass, they threaten life and limb while ignoring both law and tradition in their rush to get somewhere.

Rudeness seems to be at an all-time high in airports. There is the story of the man who was angry at missing a flight connection and threw his suitcase at an eight-month pregnant airline employee. Or there is the story of the woman who learned that there were no sandwiches on her flight and punched the flight attendant and pushed her to the floor. And there is the tragic story of the man who rushed the cockpit and had to be restrained. In the process of stopping him, the passengers apparently used too much force and killed him.

Cursing and vulgar language are on the increase. Character assassination and negative political advertisements are up.

Meanwhile, charitable giving seems to be on the decline along with volunteerism.

No wonder so many are talking about the need for civility. George W. Bush's inaugural speech talked about "a new commitment to live out our nation's promise through civility, courage, compassion and character. America, at its best, matches a commitment to principle with a concern for civility."

Commentators are wringing their hands over our social distress. Former education secretary and virtues guru William Bennett has addressed the issue of civility. Gertrude Himmelfarb has written about *The Demoralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled*, has devoted a book to the problem, as has Yale Law professor Stephen Carter.

Newspapers are running stories asking, "Why are we so rude?" *U.S. News and World Report* talks about "The American Uncivil Wars."{1} They conclude that "Crude, Rude and Obnoxious Behavior Has Replaced Good Manners."

So in this article I will be addressing this very important concept of civility. In a sense, it is a second installment on a previous article I wrote on integrity. If integrity is the standard we use to judge our own moral development, then civility is the standard we use to judge our moral interaction with others.

As we will see, the rules of civility are ultimately the rules of morality, which are rooted in biblical morality.

The Moral Basis of Civility

The word *civilité* shares the same etymology with words like *civilized* and *civilization*. Quite simply, the root word means to be "a member of the household." Just as there are certain rules that allow family members to live peacefully within a

household, so there are rules of civility that allow us to live peacefully within a society. We have certain moral responsibilities to one another.

While there have been many philosophical discussions on what civility is and how it should be practiced, I believe Jesus simply expressed the goal of civility when he taught that, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). If we truly love our neighbors, then we should be governed by moral standards that express concern for others and limit our own freedom.

Perhaps that is why civility is on the decline. More and more people live for themselves and do not feel they are morally accountable to anyone (even God) for their actions or behavior. We are told to "Look Out for #1," and not to let anyone limit our freedom to be ourselves.

Civility also acknowledges the value of another person. Politeness and manners are not merely to make social life easier. Stephen Carter, in his book on *Civility,* says that our actions and sacrifice are a

> . . .[S]ignal of respect for our fellow citizens, marking them as full equals, both before the law and before God. Rules of civility are thus also rules of morality; it is morally proper to treat our fellow citizens with respect, and morally improper not to. Our crisis of civility is part of a larger crisis of morality.{2}

Again, this may help answer why civility is on the decline. An increasing majority in our society no longer believes in moral absolutes. These deny that absolutes of any kind exist, much less moral absolutes. So as our crisis of morality unfolds, so does barbarism and decadence. Civility is what is lost from society.

If this is so, then the rise of rudeness and incivility cannot be easily altered. Miss Manners and others have written books

about how our nation can regain its civility. But if the crisis is greater than a lack of manners (and I believe that it is), its solution must be found in a greater social change than merely teaching manners or character. Ultimately, an increase in civility must flow out of a moral and religious change. Spiritual revival and reformation are the ultimate solutions to the current problem of incivility. And I believe Christians should lead the way by exemplary behavior. In essence, Christians must be the best citizens and the best examples of civility in society.

Civility in the Schools

We have documented the rising incivility in our society. What is so tragic is to find that our children are mimicking the incivility of the adult world. A poll conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals found that 89 percent of grade school teachers and principals reported that they "regularly" face abusive language from students.{3}

Contrast this situation with the nature of public education just a few decades ago. It is likely that when you grew up, you were instructed in manners and etiquette. The day began with the pledge of allegiance to the flag, and throughout the day you were instructed to show respect to your country and to your teachers.

Today when schools try to teach manners, parents and civil libertarians often thwart those plans. And when a school does succeed in teaching civility, the story becomes headline news; as it was when *U.S. News and World Report* opened its account on "The American Uncivil Wars" with a story of a school that was actually trying to teach manners.{4}

Consider what would have happened a few decades ago if you misbehaved at school. Your teacher or your principal would have disciplined you. And when you arrived home, your parents would have assumed you were disciplined for good reason. They

probably would have punished you again. Now contrast that with today's parents who are quick to challenge the teacher or principal and are often quick to threaten with a lawsuit.

When I was growing up there seemed to be a conspiracy of the adults against the kids. Every parent and every teacher had the same set of moral values. So if I misbehaved at Johnny's house, I knew that Johnny's mother had the same set of rules as my mother. If I misbehaved at school, I knew my teachers had the same set of rules as my parents.

Today that moral consensus is gone. If anything, we have a conspiracy of the kids against the adults. Most kids spend lots of time telling their parents what *other* parents let their kids do. We have sunk to the least common denominator in our morality.

To rebuild civility in our society, we need to begin with the next generation. Sadly they are not learning to respect authority. They are learning to disrespect authority and to play one set of parental values against another. And parents must begin to trust a teacher's authority. My parents trusted the teachers and the school to enforce the rules appropriately. Trust and respect are two essential ingredients in rebuilding a foundation of civility.

Civility in Politics

Often when we talk about the need for civility, we focus on the political arena. Character assassination and negative political advertisements are on the increase. Many commentators lament what they call the "politics of personal destruction." And savvy candidates have tried to tap into this growing concern by calling for greater civility in our public discourse.

At the outset, we should acknowledge that politics has always been a dirty business. More than two centuries ago, the

founders of this country often had harsh and critical things to say about each other during political campaigns. Yet we also have some very positive examples of civil discussions of major social ills.

According to Stephen Carter in his book *Civility,* one shining example of this is the Civil Rights Movement. “The leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) knew that the protests would be met with violence, because they were challenging a violently oppressive system. But they also knew that success would be found not through incivility, but through the display of moral courage.”

Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders trained their protestors to remain civil and even loving in the face of repression. He called this the “process of purification,” and it “involved both prayer and repeated reminders that the Biblical injunction to love our neighbors is not a command to love only the nice ones.” It’s instructive to remember that the stated purpose of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was “to save the soul of the nation.”

Those of us involved in social action today should be mindful of this as we fight against social ills in our society. I firmly believe that Christians should be good citizens and models of civility. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be passionate about trying to rectify social problems. And we can disagree with those who do not hold to a biblical view of morality. But we should learn to disagree without being disagreeable. We should make our case with logic and compassion. And I believe we will be more successful if we do so.

Consider the abortion debate. A majority of citizens have a great deal of ambivalence about abortion. They do not feel good about abortion on demand, but they also fear what might happen if abortion was totally banned in this country. Will we attract these millions of people by being angry, vociferous

Bible-thumpers? Or will we attract them by being thoughtful, compassionate Christians who demonstrate our love for both mother and child at crisis pregnancy centers? I think the answer should be obvious, and that is the power of civility in the public arena.

Civility: A Biblical Framework

At the heart of civility is the biblical command to love your neighbor as yourself. While it is relatively easy to love people who are your friends or people who are nice to you, the real test of Christian love comes when we are with strangers or with people who are not civil to you. When we find ourselves in the presence of strangers, we should treat them with dignity and respect even if they are not civil to us. Even if they are not gracious toward us, we should not repay them with incivility. Romans 12:21 says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Our duty to be civil to others should not depend on whether we like them or agree with their moral or political perspectives. They may be disagreeable, and we are free to disagree with them, but we should do so by giving grace. Often such a gentle response can change a discussion or dialogue. Proverbs 15:1 reminds us that, “A gentle answer turns away wrath.”

Civility also requires humility. A civil person acknowledges that he or she does not possess all wisdom and knowledge. Therefore, one should listen to others and consider the possibility that they might be right and that he is wrong. Philippians 2:3 says, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself.”

Civility also requires that we watch what we say. The Bible clearly warns us of the danger of the tongue (James 3:5-8). We should work to cleanse our language of harsh, critical, and condemning words. We should rid ourselves of nasty and vulgar

language. Ephesians 4:29 says, “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

If Christians want to reform society and return to civility, one excellent model is William Wilberforce (1759-1833). Most people know Wilberforce as the man who brought an end to the British slave trade. He served for half a century in the House of Commons. And led by his Christian faith, he tirelessly worked for the abolition of slavery. But that was only one of the “two great objects” of his life. The other, even more daunting was his attempt to transform the civil and moral climate of his times. Although he is known as an abolitionist, the other great accomplishment of his life was in the reformation of manners.

I believe he provides a positive example of how Christians should engage the world. We should do so with courage, compassion, character, and civility.

Notes

1. John Marks, “The American Uncivil Wars: How Crude, Ruse and Obnoxious Behavior Has Replaced Good Manners and Why That Hurts Our Politics and Culture,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 22 April 1996, 66-72.

2. Stephen Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 11.

3. Antonia Barber, “Rough Language Plagues Schools, Educators Say,” *USA Today*, 11 March 1997, 6D.

4. Marks, “The American Uncivil Wars,” 66.

5. Carter, *Civility*, 28.

©2001 Probe Ministries

“Should Christians be Studying Literature and History from Secular Textbooks?”

After homeschooling my children for 5 years we were led to put them into our church’s Christian school. My question for you has to do with our school’s adoption of a few textbooks that are not from the Christian worldview and how we are supposed to train our children with these books.

My 5th grade daughter’s textbook is politically correct, multicultural and full of pictures, graphs and charts. The content that is there is slim and boring; in other words, “dumbed down.” The school adopted it for reasons that it is popular and they want the kids to do well on the SAT’s.

The 6th to 8th grade literature textbooks changed from Bob Jones (traditional Christian) to McDougal Littell (secular). The stories in the new textbooks are awful. Most of the authors I have never heard of and from their biographies in the textbook, they do not embrace a Christian worldview. Their stories are negative, immoral, and depressing. Again I believe that our school adopted these books because they are popular, may cause the kids to do better on the standardized tests and they offer a diverse view of the world.

On that last point is where I am having the most problem. The school says that they will combat the negative and immoral stories with Biblical principles to help the children defend their faith. There is no written teacher or student materials, however. Further, when I ask my daughter about the teacher’s

rebuttal from a Christian worldview she could not explain to me what the teacher had said in class. I can't say I blame her in that she is only 11 years old.

One story in her 6th grade textbook is called "Scout's Honor" by Avi. This so-called comedy is about three arrogant Boy Scouts that earn a badge by lying, cheating and stealing. This story not only depicts the Boy Scouts in a bad light – have you heard about their pro-traditional family stand which they took recently – but it promotes the path of the ends justifying the means.

Should Christians be studying literature and history from secular textbooks? Are the school's arguments valid in that the immoral readings can be used as a apologetics-type course? What is the best way to train our children to respond to immoral behavior? Do we start apologetics in the 6th grade, 7th grade, or 8th grade in this manner? Is there another way? Are we sheltering the kids too much by not letting them read the works of the world and them tempering them in Biblical truth?

You have touched on one of the most important questions for Christian educators. Part of an answer to your question includes the importance of age appropriateness. I believe that the younger children are, the more vital it is that we give them an uncompromised Christian perspective. As they grow older and can understand more complex or abstract issues it becomes important to introduce them to other worldviews. This is dangerous for children who have yet to understand that there is a spiritual and intellectual battle going on in our society and in the world. However, if we never introduce them to other perspectives while still under Christian instruction they are open to discouragement and confusion when exposed to opposing ideas in college or later in life. The point is that when students are mature enough they should encounter difficult ideas under the direction of capable Christian instructors. This often acts as an inoculation against

discouragement later.

The use of secular textbooks also depends on the subject matter at hand. A good math text from any source can be integrated into a Christian classroom by an alert instructor without much concern. History and literature texts provide a much more difficult challenge. I would want to know that considerable time had been spent on worldview instruction beforehand. Students must be able to comprehend the different faith presuppositions being made by the different worldviews in order to evaluate works of literature sufficiently. I am not against a multicultural component in history and literature as long as it is genuinely attempting to inform students about other cultures belief systems and traditions. Attempts to make all belief systems or worldviews morally equivalent has to be rejected and shown to be invalid to the students, as does religious pluralism. Offering a multicultural curriculum simply to comply with state or testing standards is not a sufficient cause. The material should be as inclusive as truth demands and must be interpreted through a Christian worldview.

I do not doubt that some middle school students are capable of understanding the worldview issues at hand and that they can benefit from reading and discussing works that challenge the Christian perspective. However, the instructor should be very careful to introduce this material only after properly preparing the students and to maintain a healthy balance between works that reinforce the students faith and those that present a challenge to it. Those schools who offer a classical approach (the trivium) to Christian schooling usually note that the middle school years are ideal for introducing the instruction of logic and debating skills (dialectic phase). Materials that help accomplish this instruction often must include opposing viewpoints.

Merely offering students a diverse view of the world does not appear to me to be a legitimate goal of Christian education.

Introducing students to various perspectives in order to evaluate them in light of revealed truth and to become a more effective ambassador for Gods Kingdom might be more appropriate.

Make sure that when you voice your concerns to your childs teacher that you are ready to listen carefully to his or her response. If you have to take up the matter with the schools administration, do so in a manner that will benefit the school in the long run.

I hope this is of some help.

For Him,

Don Closson
Probe Ministries

Helping Your Child in School

Introduction

Over the course of their growing up, our two children have attended private Christian schools, public schools, and have been home schooled. To some, this personal experience makes us experts and is far more valuable than the twelve years I was a teacher and principal in public schools. To others my wife and I were merely confused and couldn’t make up our minds. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle.

I do know that nothing can be more exciting or frustrating than watching your child engage in the learning process and ultimately move towards mature independent adulthood.

Looking back at our twenty years of parenting, I would encourage all new parents to take the long view regarding the mental and moral development of their children. There are times when our little ones amaze us with their insight and precocious behavior. At other times we become desperate for any sign of intelligent life. Fortunately, most of our children will grow up to be capable adults. If we are patient and compassionate, not exasperating our sons and daughters with unreasonable demands (Eph. 6:4), we can not only enjoy a good relationship with them, but often they will follow our steps of faith.

A second axiom is that you are your child's first and most important teacher. This point cannot be emphasized enough. In most cases, no one cares about your child as much as you care nor do they know your child like you do. This means that you must be engaged in the educational process of your child at every step regardless of the setting. Part of this responsibility includes deciding what goals should be accomplished by your children's education. The answer to this question might seem obvious. However, quite a variety of goals have been suggested. Some believe that learning to live in a democracy is the ultimate educational concern. Others emphasize vocation training. Still others seek character development or becoming a global citizen. It would be time well spent to think about the kind of person that should emerge from twelve or sixteen years of schooling.

Next, I would argue that there is no such thing as a perfect school, but there *are* some really bad ones. Unfortunately, this is true about private schools and home schools, as well as public schools. Just because a school has chosen to call itself Christian, it does not automatically follow that the school offers a sound curriculum or that its teachers are capable and motivated. In fact, private schools can fall victim to many of the ills found in public schools.

Finally I would argue that, as parents, we are called to use

discernment when making important educational choices. This demands that we take very little for granted when it comes to our children's education. And one of the important aspects of our children's education is the parent-school connection.

The Parent-School Connection

There is much more freedom today for parents to chose a school that fits their educational philosophy and goals. Rather than being the end of a parent's responsibilities, selecting between a public or private school is really just the beginning. Once a child is placed in a school, the parent's job as chief advocate begins.

Although teachers, counselors, and administrators are usually well intentioned, students slip through the cracks in even the best schools. Students can sometimes find themselves at odds with a teacher or administrator because of an oversight or immature behavior, or they fail to get important information regarding their course selection and requirements for graduation.

Under ideal circumstances, a parent would want to get to know, and be known by school administrators and other personnel before a problem occurs. Volunteering at the school—in the library, on committees, or in the classroom—is not only a positive civic service, but is also a good way to ensure a sympathetic hearing if a problem occurs later.

In order to be an effective advocate, a parent needs to be aware of the school's authority structure and rules. Every school should publish a handbook with all the important rules and regulations, as well as graduation requirements. Students are notorious for not reading or taking these documents seriously. It is often parents who must guide their children through course selection and run-ins with school personnel. Another important source of information is the school's open

house. Schools usually host an open house each semester for the purpose of allowing parents the opportunity to meet their child’s teachers and see the rooms they are assigned to.

Though most parents are hesitant to interfere with their child’s schooling, my experience says that if something feels amiss, it is better to get involved rather than simply hope things will just work out. Teachers and administrators are public servants. Parents who are courteous, yet assertive, often get results when problems occur. Unfortunately, waiting and hoping for a positive resolution to a problem can result in long term difficulties for your child.

One obvious place for parental involvement is in your child’s placement. In grade school this might mean tracking or special education classes. In high school, it might be the choice between vocational college prep, and honors programs. Such decisions should never be considered final. Unfortunately, once a student is placed in one program there is a tendency for school personnel to stick to that decision. But children change. Sometimes an honors class proves too demanding, or a vocational curriculum is not challenging enough. The parent is usually the best person to make these assessments.

The Parent-Teacher Connection

Teachers are often hard working, dedicated, and sacrificial in the amount of time they devote to their profession. However, like most other workplaces, schools also employ many mediocre and some highly incompetent staff. No matter how good a school’s reputation might be, your son’s or daughter’s learning experience will be directly dependent upon the teacher standing in front of him or her. It is often left to the parent to determine the capability of their child’s teachers and then decide whether or not to leave them in the care of a particular teacher. If signs point to an abusive or merely incompetent teacher, do not wait for the administration to act. The impact on your child’s education and well being

can be substantial.

Elementary level teachers who demand too much or too little of students, or who do not understand or manage classroom behavior well, are widespread. High school teachers who are asked to teach outside their area of expertise or who fail to do the work necessary to become minimally competent are also common. Unfortunately, new teachers are sometimes thrown into a classroom with very little support and that can result in problems over discipline or grading policies. Remember faculty difficulties occur in even the highest-rated schools.

When a problem does arise, meet with the teacher as soon as possible. Although one wants to hope for the best, look for signs that the teacher is disorganized or preoccupied with problems outside of the school environment. Talk with other parents to find out if the concern is a new one or if a pattern exists. If a serious problem exists, go to a guidance counselor and request a classroom or schedule change for your child. If this is not allowed, get the principal involved. Often, what appears to be an impossibility from the school's position becomes a reality if a parent is patient and does not give in to the first "No."

Let's hope incompetence is not an issue. Even so, meeting your child's teacher or teachers and letting them know that you are engaged in your son's or daughter's education is important. If a teacher already knows you, he or she will be more likely to contact you if need be. They will also be more inclined to engage your help in motivating your child before more serious problems occur. Most teachers really want students to succeed; if they feel that you are on their side, you will become an important ally in their work.

We should also to remember to pray for our child's instructors. The group "Moms in Touch" does a great job of this. Most of all remember to be gracious; teachers have a remarkably difficult job and will appreciate anyone who

supports them and acknowledges the importance of their work. We are ambassadors for Christ, even in our interactions with school personnel.

The Parent-Student Connection

It never seems to fail that you will hear how great all of your friends' children are doing in school just when your son or daughter is experiencing their most severe classroom difficulties. The pain parents can feel when their child is struggling in school can be profound. Problems can range from relationships with other students to cases of severe underachievement or rebellion. Unsolved, these problems can destroy an academic career and worse, destroy the self-confidence necessary for a child's success in life.

A strong parent-student connection is fundamental to avoiding major school problems. Contrary to popular belief, the need for this connection grows rather than diminishes as kids get older. High school students still need help in making critical decisions about class selection and extra-curricular activities, as well as occasional help in navigating the maze of modern high school life, and growth into adulthood.

Throughout a child's education one of the most important parental role is to be a good listener. Fortunately, most young children want to talk about school. Make it a practice to have a daily debriefing time. As children get older, particularly during the high school years, parents may need to be more patient and creative in order to stay informed.

Teenagers are much more likely to choose their own time to let you into their life. The most important thing for parents is to be available when that time hits (often very late at night when you are exhausted). Teens, especially boys, seem to enjoy making provocative statements just to shock parents. Don't react to the first words that come out of their mouths; eventually they will learn to trust you and realize that you

really do want to listen, not just preach a sermon they already have memorized.

Parents should be constant encouragers. This doesn’t mean giving praise when it is not deserved, but rather praising real effort and pointing out signs of growing maturity and discipline. Parents should also offer personal support like helping a child to memorize a list of historical events or think through a geometry problem. Let your struggling student know that you are with him for the long haul, that together you can accomplish whatever school requires. If a student will not let you help, find an outside tutor who is acceptable. The money will be well spent.

In the rush for academic excellence, parents and guidance counselors can pile on advanced classes that crush even hard working students. Watch for signs of depression and irritability, and be ready to help your son or daughter out of a workload that may have become overwhelming.

Maintaining an honest and positive relationship with our children is essential if we are going to have much influence on their schoolwork. Compassion, humor, and loving guidance will go a long way towards keeping the door open to their mind and heart.

Summary

We have considered how parents can further their children’s education by developing connections to their school and with their teacher or teachers, by taking the time to know their children’s needs, and by being available to share their educational burdens.

In closing, I would like to spend some time putting academic success into perspective. Parents sometimes blindly accept the notion that academic success is the answer to every problem. Historically, this has been the position of Enlightenment

thinkers from Rousseau to John Dewey. If God is out of the picture, human reason—enhanced by education¾is of paramount importance.

Christianity has always valued education because of the foundational nature of the Bible. Only a literate people could directly benefit from God's revelation. However, the Bible never teaches that education is the solution to humanity's problems. It is evidence of misplaced priorities if Christian parents stress academic achievements over all others. Ephesians 6:4 tells fathers to bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord. This is the only mandated education the Bible speaks about. If we push our children academically to the point where our relationship with them is in danger, we might just miss the opportunity to accomplish the Ephesians mandate successfully.

One extreme is to push talented students to achieve more and more, earlier and earlier. Often, these students find themselves academically burned out by college. I recently met a gifted student who took part in a program that placed her in a nearby college as a high school junior. From there she went on to study engineering at UC-Berkeley. Now as a college senior, she realizes that she doesn't even like engineering and is worn out by the rush to finish. I have met other students who worked very hard in high school only to lose interest in college.

At the other end of the spectrum are those students who are underachievers from elementary school on and seem to need constant attention and encouragement. If we communicate that education is the only thing that is really important, failure in this area of their life can be catastrophic for both the child and the parent. Teenage suicide is one of the main causes of death among high school students and it becomes an option when a student feels trapped by rigid high expectations and sees no way out.

Our children need to know that God cares about school and their daily trials, and we need to pray with them about their schoolwork and the hard choices that they face everyday. However, He is even more concerned about the condition of their heart. As parents, our first priority is to teach our children to love the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their mind.

©2000 Probe Ministries

Education: The Three-Legged Stool

In the late 80's when the Communist walls were coming down in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, columnist Jack Anderson commented: "I don't mean to minimize the Soviet danger, but while spending trillions of dollars on the military, we've completely neglected our economic defenses, while the Japanese have been assaulting our economic citadel . . . Japan is a nation of engineers and producers. We're a nation of lawyers and consumers. Japan sacrifices today for tomorrow. And we sacrifice tomorrow for today."

After the Revolutions, the possibility of armed aggression (time will tell) upon the U. S. seems at present even more remote than Anderson noted. But the second part of his comment focuses upon the present concerns of the Clinton Administration and others with respect to America's flagging educational endeavors. That is, we are told we must upgrade learning at all levels so we might again compete economically with Japan and the European Community and reclaim our

“rightful” place as “Number 1” in the world.

Competition is a healthy thing to a point. But I submit that whatever Herculean measures undertaken by educational agencies might actually produce the mathematicians, engineers, and scientists needed to bring us back up to global “par,” we would still be woefully short of proper educational goals for the nation. The educational crisis of the 90’s has shown to be a supreme failure, as it is driven mostly by economic concerns, ignoring Jesus’ reminder that man simply cannot live by bread alone. We must therefore insist that the educational establishment do something beyond cranking out human “hardware”—graduates who perform acceptably in the market place in the production of competitive goods and services, but have chests with no hearts.

It is one thing to teach young Americans how to make a living; it is quite another to teach them how to live. This is the “software” part of the educational process. The tension between intellectual and moral development in educating the young is as old as civilization. Aristotle spoke keenly to this point in the fourth century B.C. when he said,

> *“Intellectual virtue is for the most part produced and increased by instruction, and therefore requires experience and time; whereas moral or ethical virtue is the product of habit . . . . The virtues we acquire by first having practiced them, just as we do the arts. It is therefore not of small moment whether we are trained from childhood in one set of habits, or another; on the contrary it is of very great, or rather of supreme, importance.”*

The real question educationists must answer was posed by Jack Fraenkel: “It appears important to consider, therefore, whether we want values to develop in students accidentally or whether we intend to deliberately influence their value development in directions we consider desirable.” It goes

without saying that the “values clarification” approach of today never intends to accomplish the latter, and there is no guarantee that even the former is being achieved among today’s young!

Our Founding Fathers faced clearly the necessity of providing an educational experience that encompassed both the cognitive and moral spheres. As early as 1787, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, setting aside land for educational purposes with these words: “Religion, morality, and knowledge being essential to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

This three-legged stool upon which children could learn and a vibrant, strong society could be built encompassed the inter-relatedness and necessary cooperation of the church, the home, and the school. Sadly, today the “stool” is largely missing a couple of legs. And the third (public education) has assigned to itself (with our increasing encouragement) the task of providing all three! This is neither possible, nor is it desirable. By its very nature, pluralistic public education dictates a methodological approach that of necessity dilutes religious and moral teaching to abstract speculation with no direction or call for personal commitment to a point of view. Rather, the goal is simply that everyone should *have* a point of view! The paralysis of this approach with respect to religion and moral values spills over to the knowledge “leg” as well. Deprived of metaphysical and moral certitude, information proliferates and expands like so much pizza dough; it is swung wildly around classrooms, but it won’t stick to anything!

No wonder learning is such a chore, such uninteresting, laborious work for our sons and daughters. Bombarded with information, many youngsters face life on “perpetual overload,” stunted and numbed in the process because they lack the intellectual, skeletal framework upon which they can

separate and arrange the truly important from the trivial.

We who have children must increasingly look to ourselves to remedy this situation. And we are in good company. Most of the best education throughout history has not occurred in public educational arenas. Its has emerged from the hearts of caring parents who refuse to sacrifice their children upon the altars of popular educational notions and experiments. Dr. Ronald Nash's penetrating analysis of this struggle in *The Closing of the American Heart* charts a path that you and I can follow in identifying the real roots of the American educational crisis and what to do about it.

> *"And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; And you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. . . . And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Deuteronomy 6:6-9*

©2000 Probe Ministries.

Rousseau: An Interesting Madman

Popular song lyrics often have a way of reflecting what many people think, but rarely articulate. Recently, a song with a catchy tune and lots of airtime verbalized a way of thinking about God that is quite popular. The song, *What God Said* by a group called the Uninvited begins with the lyrics, "I talked

to God and God said ‘Hey! I’ve got a lot of things to say; write it down this very day and spread the word in every way.'” This is a remarkably evangelistic idea in this day of absolute tolerance for other people’s beliefs. However, this god who has revealed himself to the songwriter doesn’t expect much from the listener. According to the first verse we are to floss between each meal, drive with both hands on the wheel, and not be too sexually aggressive on the first date. In the second verse god wants us to ride bikes more, feed the birds, and clean up after our pets.

The third verse gets a little more interesting. God supposedly reveals that humans killed his only son and that his creation is undone, but that he can’t help everyone. These obvious references to the incarnation of Christ and the Fall of Adam set up the listener for the solution to mankind’s situation which, according to the song, is to “start with the basics—just be nice and see if that makes things all right.” The chorus drives home this theology by repeating often that “I talked to God and God said nothing special, I talked to God and God said nothing that we shouldn’t already know, shouldn’t already know.”

This idea, namely that any revelation from God would consist primarily of common sense notions, is a product of the Enlightenment and found an extraordinary voice in the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau argued that all one needs to know about God has been revealed in nature or in one’s own conscience. Rousseau is often called the father of the French revolution, a movement that exalted the worship of reason and attempted to purge the clergy and Christianity from French culture. Although Rousseau wasn’t around for the bloodshed of the revolution itself, his idea of a natural theology helped to provide a framework for rejecting special revelation and the organized church.

Few people in history have caused such a wide spectrum of responses to their ideas. At his death, Rousseau’s burial site

became a place of pilgrimage. George Sand referred to him as "Saint Rousseau," Shelly called him a "sublime genius," and Schiller, a "Christ-like soul for whom only Heaven's angels are fit company."{1} However, others had a different perspective. His one and only true love, Sophie d'Houdetot, referred to him as an "interesting madman." Diderot, a long time acquaintance, summed him up as "deceitful, vain as Satan, ungrateful, cruel, hypocritical and full of malice."{2} In addition to anything else that might be said about Rousseau, he was at least an expert at being a celebrity. He was a masterful self-promoter who knew how to violate public norms just enough to stay in the public eye.

Interestingly enough, Rousseau's ideas have actually had greater and longer impact outside of France. Two centuries later, his natural theology plays a significant role in determining our society's view of human nature as well as how we educate our children. Thus it is important to consider the thoughts of Rousseau and see how they impact our culture today, especially in the realm of education.

Rousseau's Natural Theology

To begin our examination of the thoughts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his impact on our view of human nature and education, we will turn our attention to the foundational thoughts of his natural theology.

Rousseau often claims in his writings that all he seeks is the truth, and he is very confident that he knows it when he sees it. Being a child of the Enlightenment, Rousseau begins with the Cartesian assumption that he exists and that the universe is real. He then decides that the first cause of all activity is a will, rather than matter itself. He states, "I believe therefore that a will moves the universe and animates nature. This is my first dogma, or my first article of faith."{3} He then argues that this "will" that moves matter is also

intelligent. Finally, Rousseau writes that "This 'being' which wills and is powerful, this being active in itself, this being, whatever it may be, which moves the universe and orders all things, I call *God*."{4} So far, so good, but according to Rousseau, to guess the purpose of this being or to ask questions beyond immediate necessity would be foolish and harmful. Rousseau writes "But as soon as I want to contemplate Him in Himself, as soon as I want to find out where He is, what He is, what His substance is, He escapes me, and my clouded mind no longer perceives anything."{5}

The problem with Rousseau's view of God is that we can know so little of Him. Rousseau rejects special revelation and argues that it is only by observing nature and looking inward that we can perceive anything at all about the Creator. Rousseau perceives from nature that the earth was made for humans and that humanity is to have dominion over it. He also argues that humanity will naturally worship the Creator, stating, "I do not need to be taught this worship; it is dictated to me by nature itself."{6} In Rousseau's opinion, to seek any other source than nature for how to worship God would be to seek man's opinion and authority, both of which are rejected as destructive.

Rousseau believes that humans are autonomous creatures, and that humanity is free to do evil, but that doing evil detracts from satisfaction with oneself. Rousseau thanks God for making him in His image so that he can be free, good, and happy like God.{7} Death is merely the remedy of the evils that we do. As he puts it, "nature did not want you to suffer forever."{8}

Rousseau is clear about the source of evil. He writes, "Man, seek the author of evil no longer. It is yourself. No evil exists other than that which you do or suffer, and both come to you from yourself. . . .Take away the work of man, and everything is good."{9} It is reason that will lead us to the "good." A divine instinct has been placed in our conscience that allows us to judge what is good and bad. The question

remains that if each person possesses this divine instinct to know the good, why do so many not follow it? Rousseau's answer is that our conscience speaks to us in "nature's voice" and that our education in civil man's prejudices causes us to forget how to hear it.{10} So the battle against evil is not a spiritual one, but one of educational methods and content.

Although Rousseau thought he was saving God from the rationalists, mankind is left to discern good and evil with only nature as its measuring rod, and education as its savior.

A Philosophy of Education

Whether you agree with his ideas or not, Rousseau was an intellectual force of such magnitude that his ideas still impact our thinking about human nature and the educational process two centuries later. His work *Emile* compares to Plato's *Republic* in its remarkable breadth. Not only does the book describe a pedagogical method for training children to become practically perfect adults, but he also builds in it an impressive philosophical foundation for his educational goals. *Emile* is a very detailed account of how Rousseau would raise a young lad (Emile) to adulthood, as well as a description of the perfect wife for his charge. Along the way, Rousseau proposes his natural theology which finds ardent followers all over the world today.

Although *Emile* was written in the suburbs of Paris, Rousseau's greatest impact on educational practice has actually been outside of France.{11} French educators have been decidedly non-Romantic when it comes to early childhood education. Rousseau had a great deal of influence on the inventor of the Kindergarten, Friedrich Froebel, as well as the educational Romantics Johann Pestalozzi and Johann Herbart. These three educators' names are engraved on the Horace Mann building on the campus of Teachers College, Columbia University. Columbia has been, and continues to be, at the center of educational

reform in America, and happens to have been the home of John Dewey, America's premier progressive thinker and educational philosopher. Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick further secularized and applied the thinking of Froebel, Pestalozzi, and Herbart, and thus Rousseau.

The common bond that connects these educators is a Romantic view of human nature. Besides a general faith in the goodness of all humanity, there are two other Romantic fallacies that are particularly dangerous when carried to extremes. The first is what is called the doctrine of developmentalism, or natural tempo, which states that bookish knowledge should not be introduced at an early age.{12} Second is the notion of holistic learning, which holds that natural or lifelike, thematic methods of instruction are always superior.{13} Both ideas tend to be anti-fact oriented and regard the systematic instruction of any material at an early age harmful. This has had a profound effect on how we teach reading in this country. The ongoing battle between whole- language methods and the use of systematic phonics centers on this issue. When the Romantic view prevails, which it often does in our elementary schools, systematic phonics disappears.

Rousseau's theology and educational methods are tightly bound together. He argues against the biblical view that humanity is fallen and needs a redeemer. He believes that our reason and intellect are fully capable of discerning what is right and wrong without the need of special revelation or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As a result, Rousseau argues that a proper education is man's only hope for knowing what limited truth is available.

Rousseau and Childhood Education

An interesting aspect of Rousseau's child-raising techniques is his reliance on *things* to constrain and train a child rather than people. Rousseau rightfully asserts that education

begins at birth, a very modern concept. However, in his mind early education should consist mainly of allowing as much freedom as possible for the child. Rebellion against people is to be avoided at all costs because it could cause an early end to a student's education and result in a wicked child. He puts it this way: "As long as children find resistance only in things and never in wills, they will become neither rebellious nor irascible and will preserve their health better."{14} Rousseau believed that a teacher or parent should never lecture or sermonize. Experience, interaction with things, is a far more effective teacher. This dependence on experience is at the core of modern progressive education as well.

As a result, Rousseau was remarkably hostile towards books and traditional education's dependency on them. From the very beginning of *Emile,* he is adamant that books should play little or no part in the young man's education. He claims that, "I take away the instruments of their greatest misery—that is books. Reading is the plague of childhood and almost the only occupation we know how to give it. At twelve, Emile will hardly know what a book is."{15} At one point Rousseau simply says, "I hate books. They only teach one to talk about what one does not know."{16}

A corollary aspect of this negative view of books is Rousseau's belief that children should never be forced to memorize anything. He even suggests that an effort be made to keep their vocabulary simple prior to their ability to read. This antagonism towards books and facts fits well with Rousseau's notion that people "always try to teach children what they would learn much better by themselves."{17}

He also believed that children should never memorize what they can not put to immediate use. Rousseau acknowledged that children memorize easily, but felt that they are incapable of judgment and do not have what he calls true memory. He argued that children are unable to learn two languages prior to the age of twelve, a belief that has been refuted by recent

research.

Prior to that age, Emile is allowed to read only one book, *Robinson Crusoe*. Why *Crusoe*? Because Rousseau wants Emile to see himself as Crusoe, totally dependent upon himself for all of his needs. Emile is to imitate Crusoe's experience, allowing necessity to determine what needs to be learned and accomplished. Rousseau's hostility towards books and facts continues to impact educational theory today. There is a strong and growing sentiment in our elementary schools to remove the shackles of book knowledge and memorization and to replace them with something called the "tool" model of learning.

Rousseau's Philosophy and Modern "Tools"

Rousseau argued against too much bookish knowledge and for natural experiences to inform young minds. Today, something called the "tool" model carries on this tradition. It is argued that knowledge is increasing so rapidly that spending time to stockpile it or to study it in books results in information that is soon outdated. We need to give our students the "tools" of learning, and then they can find the requisite facts, as they become necessary to their experience.

Two important assumptions are foundational to this argument. First, that the "tools" of learning can be acquired in a content neutral environment without referring to specific information or facts. And secondly, that an extremely child-centered, experience driven curriculum is always superior to a direct instruction, content oriented approach.

The "tool" model argues that "love of learning" and "critical thinking skills" are more important to understanding, let's say chemistry, than are the facts about chemistry itself. Some argue that facts would only slow them down. Unfortunately, research in the real world does not support this view of

learning. Citing numerous studies, E.D. Hirsch contends that learning new ideas is built upon previously acquired knowledge. He calls this database of information "intellectual capital" and just as it takes money to make money, a knowledge framework is necessary to incorporate new knowledge. To stress "critical thinking" prior to the acquisition of knowledge actually reduces a child's capacity to think critically.{18} Students who lack intellectual capital must go through a strenuous process just to catch up with what well-educated children already know. If children attempt to do algebra without knowing their multiplication tables, they spend a large amount of time and energy doing simple calculations. This distracts and frustrates children and makes learning higher math much more difficult. The same could be said for history students who never learn names and dates.

The second idea is that students should learn via natural experience within a distinctly passive curriculum. While there is wisdom in letting nature set as many of the limits as possible for a child—experience is probably the most powerful teaching method—Rousseau and progressive educational theory go too far in asserting that a teacher should never preach or sermonize to a child. At an early age, children can learn from verbal instruction, especially if it occurs along with significant learning experiences. In fact, certain kinds of learning often contradict one's experience. The teaching of morality and democratic behavior involves teaching principles that cannot be experienced immediately, and virtually everything that parents or teachers tell children about sexual behavior has religious foundations based on assumptions about human nature.

The bottom line seems to be that if higher math, morality, and civilized behavior could be learned from simply interacting with nature, Rousseau's system would be more appealing. However, his version of the naturalistic fallacy—assuming that everything that is natural is right—would not serve our

students well. Rousseau's observations about the student-teacher relationship fall short first because of his overly optimistic view of human nature and because we believe that there is truth to convey to the next generation that cannot be experienced within nature alone.

Notes

1. Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 27.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 273.
4. Ibid., 277.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 278.
7. Ibid., 281.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 282.
10. Ibid., 291.
11. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need & Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 81.
12. Ibid., 84.
13. Ibid.
14. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Alan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979), 66.
15. Ibid., 116.
16. Ibid., 184.
17. Ibid., 78.
18. Hirsch, 66.

© 1999 Probe Ministries International

Intellectual Capital

The Learning Gap

A recurring truth of education in America is that children from high income homes who have highly educated parents tend to do well in school. Likewise, those from low income households who have relatively uneducated parents tend to do poorly. In this country, no other factor comes close to explaining the success of some students and the failure of others.(1) What is worse, recent studies are beginning to show that the gap between low socio- economic students and their fellow classmates is beginning to grow again after a period of narrowing.(2) Because of this, a major goal of education reform is the eradication of this learning gap which is arguably the primary cause of continued poverty, high crime rates, and general distrust between those who participate in the American dream and those on its margins. Unfortunately, there is considerable disagreement as to how American public education should be reformed.

Professional educators have tended to endorse a package of reforms that have been around since the 1920s and 30s. These reforms are associated with the Progressive Education Movement which emphasized “naturalistic,” “project-oriented,” “hands-on,” and “critical- thinking” curricula and “democratic” education policies.(3) Beginning in 1918 with the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, published by the Bureau of Education, educators have challenged the emphasis on subject matter and have attempted to replace it with what might be called the “tool” metaphor.

The “tool” metaphor maintains that students should not be filled with a lot of useless knowledge, but instead, should be taught how to learn. Although various arguments are used to promote this view, the one most often heard goes something

like this: “Since knowledge is growing so quickly, in fact it is exploding, we need to teach kids how to learn, not a bunch of facts that will quickly become outdated.” It has been shown by historian Lawrence Cremin that our elementary schools have been dominated by this metaphor since the 1960s, and that our secondary schools are not far behind.(4) The result of this monopoly has been a reduction of what might be called “Intellectual Capital.” The loss of this “Capital” is the focus of an important book titled *The Schools We Need*, by E. D. Hirsch. Hirsch is an advocate for what has been called “cultural literacy,” the notion that all children need to be taught the core knowledge of our society in order to function within it successfully. Implementing his arguments may provide our only chance for equal opportunity for all Americans, regardless of class, race, or ethnicity.

For Christians, this is an issue of justice and mercy. Unless we are comfortable with the growing number of people unable to clothe, house, and feed themselves and their families, we need to think seriously about why our educational system fails so many children. Teachers are more educated than ever before, class-sizes have continued to decline, and teachers have made great gains in personal income. But while America continues to spend much more to educate its children than do most countries of the world, it also continues to fall behind in student performance. Could it be that the problem lies in the philosophy which drives what teachers teach and how they teach it? Our argument is exactly that—that educators, particularly at the elementary school level, have adopted a view of education that places an extra burden on those who can least afford it, our least affluent children.

Defining Intellectual Capital

Earlier we stated that poverty and suffering in America can be partially blamed on an education system that fails to prepare children from lower socio-economic backgrounds with a

foundation that will allow them to compete with children from middle and upper-class homes. Central to this argument is a notion called intellectual capital. Let's begin this discussion by defining the term and explaining its importance. In his book, *The Schools We Need*, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., argues that "just as it takes money to make money, it takes knowledge to make knowledge."(5) He contends that those children who begin school with an adequate level of intellectual capital have a framework upon which further learning may be built. Those who lack the necessary educational experiences and sufficient vocabulary tend to fall further and further behind.

Not just any information serves as intellectual capital. According to Hirsch the knowledge taught and learned must be of a type that "constitutes the shared intellectual currency of the society," or put another way, "intellectual capital has to be the widely useful and negotiable coin of the realm."(6) Just as play money doesn't purchase much in the real world, neither does knowledge that falls outside of this "shared intellectual currency." The current controversy surrounding Ebonics is an example. I doubt that Hirsch would agree that time spent either teaching or affirming a supposedly African-based language system is helpful to young people who need to compete in the American economic system.

Understanding Hirsch's point about intellectual capital would interesting, but not very useful, if not for the fact that research has shown that initial deficits in specific children can be overcome if done so at an early age. Other nations, with equally diverse populations, have shown that early disparities in learning can be remediated if this notion of a shared knowledge base is taken seriously. France is an example of such a nation. Its "knowledge intensive" early childhood education programs have performed an amazing feat. "Remarkably, in France, the initial gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, instead of widening steadily as in the United States, decreases with each school grade. By the end of

seventh grade, the child of a North African immigrant who has attended two years of French preschool will on average have narrowed the socially induced learning gap."(7)

One might ask what American schools are teaching if not a knowledge intensive "core curriculum" like the one found in the French model. This question is difficult to answer because there is no agreed- upon curriculum for elementary students in this country. Our desire to treat teachers as autonomous teaching professionals often means that little or no supervision of what is taught occurs. There are a number of good arguments for local control of our schools, but when it comes to the curriculum, it has resulted in little consistency from one school to another, and even from one classroom to another in the same building.

Can't we all agree that by the end of the first grade students ought to be able to do and know certain things? Unfortunately, it's not that simple. At this point, we will look at some of the philosophical reasons for the vast difference in teaching methods and goals that are being advocated by different education experts.

Romantics and Traditionalists

In his book *The Schools We Need*, E. D. Hirsch argues that there are two distinct camps of education reformers in our country today. One group, virtually in control of the elementary and much of the secondary school curriculum, consists of what Hirsch calls the anti-knowledge progressives. This group emphasizes critical thinking skills over mere facts, the "unquestionable" value of self-esteem as a curricular end, and teaching "to the child" rather than from a curriculum focused on the content of the subject matter. They also argue against forcing a child to learn what they believe to be developmentally inappropriate schoolwork. This thinking reflects the eighteenth century Romantic era view that all children possess a spark of divinity, a notion that coincides

with the pantheistic philosophies of eighteenth-century thinkers like Rousseau, Hegel, and Schelling. In 1775, Schelling wrote that "the God-infused natural world and human nature were both emanations of the same divine substance."(8) All things natural are good. Evil lies in separation from nature, such as seating children in rows and requiring intense study from books for several years.

Rather than allowing for a mystical view of child development, traditionalists support a "core curriculum." Hirsch points to four errors made by progressive reforms. He argues that: "(1) To stress critical thinking while de-emphasizing knowledge actually reduces a student's capacity to think critically.(2) Giving a child constant praise to bolster self-esteem regardless of academic achievement breeds complacency, or skepticism, or both, and ultimately, a decline in self-esteem.(3) For a teacher to pay significant attention to each individual child in a class of twenty to forty students means individual neglect for most children most of the time. (4) Schoolwork that has been called 'developmentally inappropriate' [by progressives] has proved to be highly appropriate to millions of students the world over, while the infantile pabulum now fed to American children is developmentally inappropriate (in a downward direction) and often bores them."(9)

As parents and taxpayers, the most vital question we want answered is, "Who is right?" Is there research that supports one side of this debate over the other? Hirsch contends that there is much evidence, from various perspectives, that supports the traditional view. However, because of the current monopoly of the progressive mindset in public education today, the traditional view is rarely even considered. Hirsch goes as far as to say that for most public school officials there is no **thinkable** alternative to the progressive view. "No professor at an American education school is going to advocate *pro*-rote-learning, *pro*-fact, or *pro*-verbal pedagogy."(10)

Education leaders usually respond in one of four ways to criticism: 1) They deny that our schools are ineffective. 2) They deny the dominance of progressivism itself. 3) They deny that where progressivism has been followed, that it has been authentically followed. 4) They blame insurmountable social problems on poor performance rather than the prevailing educational philosophy.

Remember, this discussion is about more than which group of experts wins and which loses! If Hirsch is right, our current form of schooling is inflicting a great injustice on all students, but even more so on those from our poorest homes and neighborhoods. Now, we will look at some of the evidence that argues against the progressive approach to education and for a more traditional curriculum.

Looking at the Research

Research has confirmed the superiority of the traditional, direct instruction method which focuses on the content to be learned rather than on the child. E. D. Hirsch, in his book *The Schools We Need*, has a chapter titled “Reality’s Revenge” which lends considerable detail to his argument that progressive educational theory lacks a real world foundation.

Hirsch uses evidence from three different sources to support his rejection of the progressive model for instruction. Classroom studies, research in cognitive psychology, and international comparisons all point to a common set of practices that promote the greatest amount of measurable learning by the largest number of students. This list of common practices are remarkable in that they are exactly what progressive educators in this country are arguing that we should do **less** of.

First, let’s consider the finding of two examples of classroom studies. Jane Stallings studied 108 first grade and 58 third grade classes taught by different methods and found that a

strong academic focus rather than the project-method approach produced the highest gains in math and reading. The Brophy-Evertson studies on elementary students in the 70s found that classroom teaching was most effective:

• When it focused on content
• When it involved all students
• When it maintained a brisk pace
• When it required students to read aloud often
• When decoding skills were mastered to the point of over-learning
• When each child was asked to perform tasks resulting in immediate nonjudgmental feedback.

Summarizing the results of numerous classroom studies, Hirsch states, “The only truly general principle that seems to emerge from process-outcome research on pedagogy is that focused and guided instruction is far more effective than naturalistic, discovery, learn-at-your-own-pace instruction.”(11)

Cognitive psychology confirms, from another viewpoint, what classroom research has already told us. Research into short term memory has uncovered important reasons to have children in the early elementary years spend considerable effort memorizing language and mathematics basics. The argument goes something like this: Individuals have only so much room, or short-term memory, in which to juggle a number of ideas at once, and this memory space is particularly restricted for young children. In reading, children end up having to focus on both the basics of decoding and word recognition as well as on high level comprehension strategies. This gives those who have memorized phonics and who have a larger vocabulary a significant advantage over those who don’t. Children who over-learn decoding and word skills, have more time, memory- wise, to focus on higher-level kinds of thinking. In other words, rote memorization of the basics leads to higher order thinking, which is exactly the opposite of what is being stressed by progressives.

If Christians want to see our public schools become tools for social justice, to educate all children regardless of background, a content-oriented curriculum is essential. An early emphasis on higher-level thinking skills is not only a poor use of time in the classroom, but can actually slow down students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is particularly true of early elementary years when decoding skills and a large vocabulary are being acquired.

Next, we will see how international studies add more evidence to this argument for a content-focused curriculum.

International and Domestic Examples

In the discussion thus far we have been trying to discern why much of what happens in many of our classrooms fails to provide the intellectual capital elementary school children need. At this point, it should be noted and emphasized that we are not questioning the desire of our classroom teachers, or those who write curricula for the classroom, to benefit our children. We do argue that the philosophical foundations for today's educational theories are often not supported by research, nor by a biblical view of human nature.

Earlier we noted classroom studies and findings from cognitive psychology that refute progressive educational practices. Now we will turn our attention to large-scale international comparative studies. These examples can be found in E. D. Hirsch's book, *The Schools We Need.*

Just as it was found that the best American classrooms were businesslike and focused on the job at hand, international studies found that Chinese and Japanese teachers have a low tolerance for errors and rarely let self-esteem issues get in the way of correcting them. In fact, these errors are used by the teachers for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of various tactics for solving a problem. Asian classrooms begin a period with reciprocal bows and a description of what will

be accomplished during the lesson. The period ends with a summary of the work. The pace tends to be slower than American classrooms, but skills are taught with greater thoroughness. Fewer problems are covered with the focus on mastering them rather than simply getting them done.

Asian teachers tend to use whole-class instruction, utilizing students' responses to generate dialogue that moves the class towards the desired knowledge or skill. Students know that they may be called upon at any moment to provide a solution to the problem at hand. They are engaged and focused on the material. During the period students might work together in groups on a problem, but only for a short time. Asian teachers assign less seatwork to their students and embed it throughout a lesson rather than at the end of class. The American practice of giving students a long block of time at the end of class to do homework usually causes students to lose focus and become bored with the repetitive tasks.

To achieve the greatest results, the classroom must be content oriented and the teacher must be working hard to keep all students engaged in the work. Too often, American classrooms lack one of these two essential ingredients.

Hirsch's proposals, although revolutionary to many of today's teachers, would seem obvious to most teachers of a generation ago. They are also obvious to many Christian educators. A good example is the classical Christian education model advocated by Douglas Wilson and his Logos Schools organization.(12) Wilson endorses the Trivium curriculum model which focuses on grammar in the early grades, dialectic or logic in the middle school, and rhetoric in high school. Grammar is the memorization of the basic rules and facts of any subject matter, whether it be language or mathematics. The dialectic stage teaches students how the rules of logic apply to a subject area, and rhetoric teaches students how to communicate what they have learned. All of this can be done in a way to make it both challenging and meaningful to the vast majority

of public and private school students. However, failing to accomplish this soon, we will continue to see a widening gap between those who have been vested with intellectual capital and those who have not.

Notes

1. “Quality Counts,” A special supplement to *Education Week*, Vol. XVI (22 Jan. 1997), p. 19. The text notes that a major study concluded that 75% of students’ achievement is the result of home and family.

2. “Achievement Gap Widening, Study Reports,” *Education Week*, Vol. XVI, No. 14 (4 Dec. 1997), p. 1

3. Hirsch, E.D., Jr. *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don’t Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 7.

4. Ibid., p. 49.

5. Ibid., p. 20.

6. Ibid., p. 21.

7. Ibid., p. 42.

8. Ibid., p. 74.

9. Ibid., p. 66.

10. Ibid., p. 69.

11. Ibid., p. 184.

12. Wilson, Douglas. *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning: An Approach to Distinctively Christian Education* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1991), p. 91.

©1997 Probe Ministries

Self-Esteem Curricula

Controversy Over Self-Esteem Curricula

In the last several years a controversy has been building over the use of self-esteem curricula in our schools. Educators claim that these programs encourage creativity, increase concentration, decrease drug use, and delay sexual activity. These so-called life skills programs are being used in gifted, sex-ed, drug-ed, and regular classrooms, in public and private schools.

Opponents of the programs argue that the current focus on self-esteem is a direct result of a change in the way we view human nature. This change has been towards a relativistic view of morality, which discourages belief in transcendent moral values. Students are prompted to seek truth within and to see moral values, or ethics, as emanating from that process. Truth is seen as tied to a particular person; it becomes biographical. What is true for you may not be true for me.

Hundreds of self-esteem-oriented programs are now used in schools. “Quest,” one of the most popular programs, is used in 20,000 schools throughout the world. “DUSO” and “Pumsy” have caused controversy in hundreds of elementary schools across the country.

Although the philosophical foundation for these programs goes back a number of decades, a turning point occurred in 1986 when California sponsored a study on self-esteem called the “California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. The driving force behind the legislation was California State Assembly member John Vasconcellos. His personal search for self-esteem sheds light

on the nature of this movement. Vasconcellos was raised in a strict Catholic home. He writes, “I had been conditioned to know myself basically as a sinner, guilt- ridden and ashamed, constantly beating my breast and professing my unworthiness.”(1) But in the 1960s he went through a period of Rogerian person-centered therapy with a priest-psychologist and claims that he became more fully integrated and more whole. Thus he turned his life work toward this issue of self-esteem.

Vasconcellos sees two possible models for defining human nature. The first he labels a constrained vision, supported by the writings of Adam Smith, Thomas Hobbes, and Frederick Hayek. The second is an unconstrained vision, associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke. The constrained vision sees man as basically evil, needing to be governed and controlled. The unconstrained vision sees man as “basically good, even perfectible.” Vasconcellos chose the second view after hearing Carl Rogers speak on the subject. Vasconcellos argues that the self-esteem movement is built upon the “faith that people are basically good and that a relationship exists between self-esteem and healthy human behavior. He adds that self-esteem is a “deeply felt appreciation of ‘oneself and one’s natural being,’ a trust of one’s instincts and abilities.”(2) This information about Vasconcellos is important for understanding why this controversy is so heated and significant. It is not just about what curricula will be used to teach our children, but about how we view human nature itself. Our view of human nature will determine the kind of education we design for our children and the goals towards which that education will aspire.

Visualization and Self-Esteem

Vasconcellos believes that self-esteem results from developing a deeply felt appreciation of oneself and one’s natural being. But what is our natural being? Some who hold an Eastern view

of human nature have argued that our natural being is spiritual and ultimately one with the rest of the universe.

A subtle example of this is a curriculum called “Flights of Fantasy” by Lorraine Plum. The manual says that

> *Flights of Fantasy is designed to enhance and refine children’s natural inclination to image and fantasize—to use this special ability as a powerful vehicle for developing language, creativity, relaxation and a positive self-concept.*

It adds that

> *…only when we consciously and consistently provide experiences that acknowledge the body, the feelings, and the spirit, and honor both hemispheric functions of the brain, can we say with any sense of integrity that we are striving to develop the whole person.(3)*

Just what is meant by providing experiences that acknowledge a person’s spirit?

The author argues that two types of seeing are available to us. The first is “external seeing,” a combination of optical sensory abilities and the interpreting ability of the brain. The other type is “internal seeing,” which utilizes the brain’s ability to visualize or fantasize. Plum believes that both are real experiences in the sense that our bodies respond equally to both. Finally, here’s the pitch for an Eastern view of human nature: Plum asserts that, with its visualization and fantasy experiences, “Flights of Fantasy” will help students feel connected to nature and the entire universe, be more open to risk-taking, develop a sense of wonder, and become aware of personal power. All of these notions fit well into an Eastern, New Age perspective.

A monistic, Eastern worldview believes that all is one. Distinctions in the physical realm are mere illusions. When we

get in touch with this oneness, we will have inner powers similar to Christ and other so-called risen masters. In a sense, humans are gods, limited gods who suffer from amnesia. A consciousness-raising experience is necessary to reconnect with this oneness. Various meditative states, visualization techniques and Yoga are used to experience oneness with the universe.

Not every instructor using these materials buys into this religious view. Many use them innocently, hoping to bring experiences into their classroom that might somehow benefit troubled students. But authors such as Jack Canfield, a friend of John Vasconcellos, have a definite purpose in mind. In his article "Education in the New Age," Canfield promotes activities that put children in contact with wisdom that he believes lies deep within each of us. He sees himself as a bridge between Eastern and Western thought, particularly in our schools.(4)

At minimum, "Flights of Fantasy" gives the impression that people can change their psychological state by sheer self-will. The manual states that if our mental images are

> *…portraits of self-doubt and failure, we have the power to replace them with self-confident, successful images. If we are unable to get into the image mentally, we will not get into the behavior physically.*

This view of human nature leaves out any notion of sin or an obligation to a transcendent moral order. In its view we are perfectible, self-correcting, autonomous beings.

The curriculum may also be laying the ground-work for an Eastern view of human nature, one that conflicts dramatically with the biblical view that we are the creation of a personal, all-powerful, loving God.

Pumsy

A very popular theme of modern culture is the concept of "wisdom within": the heroes in George Lucas's Star Wars trilogy used the power of "The Force," and Shirley MacClaine's New Age gospel teaches that we must turn inward to find truth. Pumsy, a self- esteem curriculum used in primary schools across the country, focuses on this "wisdom within" theme. Although Pumsy teaches behavior that Christians can wholeheartedly endorse and attempts to help children be independent from peer influence, it also teaches in a subtle way that children have an autonomous source of wisdom within themselves.

Advocates of self-esteem curricula argue that these programs are needed to help those children who are overwhelmed by the negative aspects of culture or home environment, but they also claim that all children can benefit from class time spent focusing within themselves and being told how naturally good they are. Again we find the idea that by getting in touch with our natural goodness we will automatically behave in a manner that is personally rewarding. An example of this belief in our natural goodness is found in the Pumsy student storybook:

> *Your clear mind is the best friend you'll ever have. It will always be there when you need it. It is always close to you and it will never leave you. You may think you have lost your clear mind, but it will never lose you.*

Attributes of this clear mind are worth noting. According to the workbook, "It always finds a way to get you to the other side of the wall, if you just listen to it . . . trust and let it do good things for you." According to the manual, clear minds are also a source of peacefulness and strength.

When Pumsy, an imaginary dragon, is in her clear mind, she feels good about herself; when she is in her mud mind, nothing

goes right—she doesn't like herself or anything else. Students are told that they can leave behind their mud minds and put on a clear mind whenever they choose to. In other words, bad feelings can be overcome merely by choosing to ignore them, by positing a clear mind.

Songs sung by the children focus on the same theme. Lyrics to one say, "I am special. So are you. I am enough. You are, too." Another says, "When I am responsible for my day, many, many things seem to go my way. Good consequences. Good consequences. That's the life for me!" The message of this curriculum is not very subtle: Humans have the power to perfect themselves emotionally and psychologically, they only need to choose to do so. The only sin that exists is not choosing a clear mind.

This curricula prompts some important questions. Are all negative feelings bad? Is it necessarily a good thing to be able to shut off mourning for a lost loved one? Can a person really alter his or her situation merely by thinking positively? We all recognize the importance of self-confidence, but how closely does the self-esteem taught by this program match reality? Does it really benefit our students? When we read that American students perform poorly on international math tests, yet feel good about their ability to do math, something is wrong. Could we be causing students to develop a false security based on feelings that may not match reality? From a Christian viewpoint, our children need to know that they bear God's image, which bestows great dignity and purpose to life. They must be aware that they are fallen creatures in need of redemption and transformation and a renewal of their minds in order to be more like Christ.

Quest

Quest is one of the most used drug-education programs in America. It includes high-school, junior-high, and some grade-school components. What makes discussion of this curriculum

difficult is that its founder, Rick Little, is a Christian who used input from other Christians in its development. In its original form, the program used values clarification and other non-directive techniques, visualization exercises, and moral decision-making models. These methods have not proven successful in reducing drug use and have been accused of promoting a value-relative worldview. Howard Kirschenbaum, who is closely associated with the values- clarification movement of the 1970s, was hired to write the original curriculum and directed the program towards this approach. Quest makes some of the same assumptions about human nature as Pumsy. If students get in touch with their true selves, which are by nature good, they will not do drugs or be sexually active at an early age. If they see their true value, they will choose only healthy options. The key, according to Quest authors, is not to preach or be highly directive to the kids. Teachers are to be facilitators of discussion, not builders of character. The students naturally determine what is right for them via the decision-making model presented in class. Once they arrive at the right values, Quest assumes they will live consistently with them. The presumptions are that humans desire to do what is right once the right is determined and that they can do so using their own moral convictions.

To be fair, some of the more blatant values-clarification and visualization techniques have been removed, and Kirschenbaum is no longer part of the program. But many still find the overall emphasis to be non-directive and morally relativistic. Ken Greene, an executive director who left the company in 1982, has said,

> *We thought we were doing God's will and had invested tremendous amounts of energy and time. . . . It still leaves me a little confused. I sometimes say "Lord, did we forsake the cross?(5)*

Dr. James Dobson, a contributor to the original Quest

textbook, has recently voiced his concerns about parts of the program. Although he notes that the curriculum has positive aspects, he adds that the authors have incorporated the work of secular humanists into the curriculum and have prescribed group exercises and techniques closely resembling those employed in psychotherapy. This, he argues, is a "risky practice in the absence of professionally trained leadership."(6) According to William Kilpatrick,

> *Despite its attempts to distance itself from its past . . . Quest remains a feelings-based program. It still operates on the dubious assumption that morality is a by-product of feeling good about yourself, and it still advertises itself as a child- centered approach.(7)*

In spite of the fact that non-directive, values-clarification-based curricula have been used for decades, there is little evidence that they actually reduce the use of drugs or other harmful behaviors. In 1976, researcher Richard Blum found that an "affective drug program" called "Decide" had little positive effect on drug use. Those who sat in the class actually used more drugs than a control group. He found similar results in a repeat of the study in 1978. Research was done on other affective programs in the 1980s. "Smart," "Here's Looking at You," and Quest all were found to increase drug use rather than reduce it.(8 Some states have removed Quest from their approved drug education list because it fails to comply with federal mandates that these programs clearly state that drugs are harmful and against the law.

Criticism and an Alternative

Although an early advocate of non-directive, self-esteem-oriented therapy, humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow began to question the use of this approach for children later in his life. He argued that

> *…self actualization does not occur in young people . . . they have not learned how to be patient; nor have they learned enough about evil in themselves and others . . . nor have they generally become knowledgeable and educated enough to open the possibility of becoming wise.They have not acquired enough courage to be unpopular, to be unashamed about being openly virtuous."(9)*

Nondirective therapeutic approaches used by Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and William Coulson produced a pattern of failure in schools even in the hands of these founding experts. Coulson now says, "We owe the American public an apology. Can we expect relatively untrained teachers to achieve better results?"

One specific objection to these programs is their use of hypnotic trance induction and suggestion techniques. Psychologists feel that the constant use of trance-induced altered states of consciousness may cause difficulty for some students in differentiating reality and fantasy. An altered mental state is the mind's defense mechanism, particularly in children, for enduring extremely stressful situations. If these self-protective mechanisms are taught when a child is not under life-threatening stress, the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy in the future may be impaired.

Some feel that affective educational programs undermine authority as well. Along with an emphasis on moral tolerance, these programs often state that there are no right or wrong answers to moral questions. This leaves students open to the considerable power of peer pressure and group conformity and reduces the validity of parental or church influence. Although this approach may leave students with an uncritically good feeling about themselves, there is little evidence that this feeling correlates to academic success or healthy, moral decisions.

Many wonder whether schools can deal with values in a manner that isn't offensive to Christians and still be constitutional. Dr. William Kilpatrick, an education professor at the University of Boston, thinks they can. He advocates "character education, an approach that fell out of favor in the 1960s.

Character education is not a method. It is a comprehensive initiation into life rather than a debate on the difficult intricacies of moral dilemmas. It assumes that most of the time we know the right thing to do; the hard part is summoning the moral will to do it. Thus its emphasis is on moral training; the process of developing good habits. Honesty, helpfulness, and self-control need to become second nature, or instinctive responses, to life's daily temptations and difficulties.

In reality, one cannot choose to do the right thing unless he or she has the capacity to do so. Selfless behavior is only possible for those who have been trained, via modeling and correction, not to be self-centered. Until we recognize that the virtuous path is the more difficult one, we rob our children even of the possibility of moral discipline. Values-clarification methods, on the other hand, are easy to teach and are fun for the kids. They require little commitment or moral persuasion.

The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi,

> *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.*

This maxim transfers well into the secular realm. Children who are exposed to noble,virtuous behavior, who are given heroes that exhibit selfless sacrifice, are much more likely to do the same when confronted with moral choices.

Notes

1. Andrew M. Mecca, ed., *The Social Importance of Self- Esteem* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), xv.
2. Ibid., xii
3. Lorraine Plum, *Flights of Fantasy*, (Carthage, Ill.: Good Apple, 1980) 2. Emphasis added.
4. William Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 216.
5. Michael Ebert, *Quest's Founder Listens to Kids* Citizen (20 July 1992), 15.
6. Ibid., 2.
7. Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong,* 47.
8. Ibid., 32.
9. Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong,* , 33.

©1993 Probe Ministries