What's Your Superpower?

If you could choose a superpower, which one would it be? When asked this question as an icebreaker, I've heard some people say they'd love to fly; others say they would choose mindreading. Some would love to be invisible.

But for the believer in Jesus, the idea of having superpowers isn't a fantasy.

It is the *reality* of being indwelled by God Himself, the source of actual and real supernatural power. And He gives gifts, spiritual gifts, that consist of supernatural enabling. We find the spiritual gifts in four places in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4.

Consider these spiritual gifts—superpowers, if you will—given by the Holy Spirit to allow His people to minister to others:

Teaching – The supernatural ability to explain clearly and apply effectively the truth of the Word of God.

Pastor/Teacher – One who is supernaturally equipped to shepherd and feed the flock of God with the result of their growth and maturity.

Evangelism – The supernatural capacity to present the gospel message with exceptional clarity and an overwhelming burden for those who don't know Christ.

Word of Knowledge – The supernatural ability to receive information and truth directly from God without natural means.

To know without knowing how you know.

Word of Wisdom – The supernatural ability to have insight concerning God's perspective and relay this insight succinctly to others. "Deep insight with handles."

Faith – The supernatural ability to believe God for the impossible.

Exhortation (Encouragement) – The supernatural ability to come alongside and help others by comforting, encouraging, challenging, and rebuking.

Showing Mercy – The supernatural ability to minister compassionately and cheerfully to those who are difficult to minister to.

Giving – The supernatural ability to give of one's material goods to the work of the Lord consistently, generously, sacrificially, with wisdom and cheerfulness.

Leadership/Administration – The supernatural ability to organize and lead projects while handling people tactfully and providing the vision to keep them at the task.

Service – The supernatural ability to serve faithfully and joyfully behind the scenes, in practical ways, in long–term commitments to service.

Helps – The supernatural ability to minister joyfully to God's people in short–term service with flexibility and sensitivity to what needs to be done.

Discernment of Spirits – A supernatural ability to distinguish

between the spirit of truth and spirit of error, between holiness and evil. Can instantly sniff out when someone's a phony or lying.

My husband and I created a list of diagnostic questions to help people find their superpowers, which you can find here: www.probe.org/how-do-you-determine-your-spiritual-gift/

Flying and mind-reading aren't on our list, but you might find your superpower here!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/whats_your_superpower on Apr. 4, 2017.

"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

“How Do You Determine Your Spiritual Gift?”

How do people determine their spiritual gift? Is it through prayer? Or does the Lord reveal it to them in some way?

There are several ways. Praying for guidance about your spiritual gift(s) is the first step, certainly. Also important is educating yourself to find out what the gifts are and what they look like in operation. And ask the people around you what they think your gifts are, if the people around you know anything about spiritual gifts! (They are found in 1 Corinthians 12:7, 11; Romans 12:4-8; Ephesians 4:7; and 1 Peter 4:10.)

I have discovered that when you’re operating in an area of supernatural gifting, it’s like getting on the moving sidewalks at airports—you can get where you’re going twice as fast as the people walking next to you who *aren’t* on the people mover, and there’s energy and power and a spring in your step. It’s FUN! When you’re using your spiritual gifts, you are aware of operating in God’s power and strength instead of your own. . . and the Spirit-led response is humility instead of pride.

After studying spiritual gifts, my husband Ray and I compiled a spiritual gifts inventory that some have found helpful. I hope you do too. (These are limited to the ministry gifts and do not include the foundational gifts of apostleship or prophet, nor the sign gifts of tongues, interpretation of tongues, healings or miracles.)

Spiritual Gifts Evaluation

Teaching – *The supernatural ability to explain clearly and apply effectively the truth of the Word of God.*

- Do you love the Body of Christ and desire that others know more about Scripture and how to apply it?
- Do you love studying the Word of God?
- Do you have a passion for sharing the insights and principles you have learned from the Word?
- Do you find it a challenge to make complicated truths simple and understandable?

Pastor/Teacher – *One who is supernaturally equipped to shepherd and feed the flock of God with the result of their growth and maturity.*

- Do you deeply love the people of God?
- Do you feel a yearning to model the principles of Scripture and mentor others so that they can follow Christ also?
- Do you feel God's calling to shepherd His people, tenderly nurturing and nourishing them?

Evangelism – *The supernatural capacity to present the gospel message with exceptional clarity and an overwhelming burden for those who don't know Christ.*

- Do you find yourself in situations where the topics of Christ and salvation come up?
- Do you gravitate toward relationships with non-Christians?
- When others hear you explain the gospel, do they respond by trusting Christ?
- Do you have a passion for the lost?

Word of Knowledge – *The supernatural ability to receive information and truth directly from God without natural means. To know without knowing how you know.*

- Do you find yourself "knowing" something you did not learn, and unable to explain how you know it?
- If you feel that God has given you a message to give to another Christian, is it confirmed by that person's response as truly coming from God?

Word of Wisdom – *The supernatural ability to have insight concerning God's perspective and relay this insight succinctly to others. "Deep insight with handles."*

- Do you experience flashes of insight on spiritual things, unusual in their clarity?
- Are you able to express this wisdom in ways that minister to people?
- Do you recognize wisdom in others when you hear it?
- Do people consider you unusually wise, and trust your judgment?
- Do you find yourself being quoted, and you recognize the quote as "a God thing"?

Faith – *The supernatural ability to believe God for the impossible.*

- When diverging roads appear before you, are you able to see God's path based on His word, in a way that others miss?
- Do you depend on God's resources and guidance to an unusual degree?
- Are you able to firmly claim God's presence in the midst of chaos?
- When God answers your prayers, is your response one of calm satisfaction rather than wonderment?

Exhortation (Encouragement) – *The supernatural ability to come alongside and help others by comforting, encouraging, challenging, and rebuking.*

- Are you especially sensitive to people?
- When you encourage someone, do they respond with grateful appreciation?
- Is the timing of your encouragings usually "perfect"?
- When you challenge or rebuke another believer, is it well received?

Showing Mercy – *The supernatural ability to minister compassionately and cheerfully to those who are difficult to*

minister to.

- Do you have the ability to sense when a person is in need, even before they tell you?
- Are you drawn to people with emotional or physical pain, and to those society considers “unlovely”?
- Do you have an intuitive sense of when to be quiet and when to speak, or what to say and what not to say?
- Do people seek you out when they’re hurting? Do they enjoy having you around?

Giving – *The supernatural ability to give of one’s material goods to the work of the Lord consistently, generously, sacrificially, with wisdom and cheerfulness.*

- Are you enthusiastic when presented with an opportunity to give money to meet a need?
- Are you constantly looking for ways to give?
- Do you enjoy giving privately or anonymously?
- Do you REALLY think of money as God’s, not yours?

Leadership/Administration – *The supernatural ability to organize and lead projects while handling people tactfully and providing the vision to keep them at the task.*

- Do you enjoy taking a disorganized situation and straightening it out?
- Are you able to motivate others to complete the project? Do people respond when you step in to give leadership?
- Do you enjoy planning and completing projects?
- Do you enjoy sorting out details, or do they frustrate you?

Service – *The supernatural ability to serve faithfully and joyfully behind the scenes, in practical ways, in long-term commitments to service.*

- Do you willingly volunteer to help with details?
- Do you prefer to work behind the scenes?

- Do you gain a sense of satisfaction when others succeed as a result of your behind-the-scenes work?
- Is faithfulness over the long term important to you?

Helps — *The supernatural ability to minister joyfully to God's people in short-term service with flexibility and sensitivity to what needs to be done.*

- Are you sensitive to specific and immediate needs?
- Are you flexible?
- Would you rather meet a one-time need than commit yourself to long-term service?

Discernment of Spirits — *A supernatural ability to distinguish between the spirit of truth and spirit of error, between holiness and evil. Can instantly sniff out when someone's a phony or lying.*

- Do you have an internal alarm that goes off when you encounter something phony or evil?
- Even when you're the only one who senses something wrong, is your "intuition" eventually validated?
- Do you (and others) consider yourself a good judge of character?

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin
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.

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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.

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Education Beyond the Classroom

What comes to mind when you think of education? School buildings? Libraries? Textbooks? Curricula? Teachers? Most of

us probably associate education with at least one of these things, and surely many more could be added. But does education take place outside of such formal settings? Can curricula be found beyond that of the normal course of study? And can teachers be found who are teaching outside of the classroom?

If we simply consider the amount of time students spend outside of class the answer to these questions would surely be a resounding “Yes!” And if we add the strong probability that many of the hours spent outside the class are consumed by various media, for example, we can see another strong reason to answer in the affirmative. Students are virtually suffocated with ideas when they leave the confines of the school building. For many their education has just begun when the last bell rings each day. In fact, many students use whatever mental energy they have to learn only those things that interest them outside of school.

Educational Sources: Parents

What are some of the sources from which students learn? Let’s begin with parents. After years of ministry among youth I am convinced that students want to learn from their parents. In fact, some are desperate for their parents’ wisdom. Thankfully, I have seen the wonderful effects of respect between parents and children. The children are taught the most important truths of life in the home and those truths are accepted because there is a large measure of respect for the parents. Such an atmosphere is patiently developed through the parents’ concentrated, time-consuming dedication to their children. And I hasten to add that I have observed this in single parent as well as blended families. The result is that children who are raised in such a home will usually compare what they are taught outside the home with what they are taught in the home. And the lessons they learn from parents outweigh other lessons.

Unfortunately, though, this situation is much too rare. Many students, including those raised in Christian homes, are left alone to discover what they can without the guidance of parents. When we realize that "true, meaningful communication between parent and child … occupies only about two minutes each day"(1) there should be reason for concern. That amounts to slightly more that 12 hours per year. If that is compared to the amount of time spent in school, for example, what the parents teach in that brief time can be overwhelmed with contrary ideas. Students spend much more time learning at school per week than they do with parents per year! This situation should be seriously considered by Christians when evaluating the current educational climate. If Christian parents are not willing to educate their children there may not be much room for complaining about what is learned outside the home. Children have always needed parental guidance and they always will.

One of the most important directives for the ancient Jews applies to parental responsibility for the education of their children. Deuteronomy 6:4-7, the revered Shema, states that "(5) You shall love the LORD your God will all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (6) And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; (7) 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." This strategic passage was reemphasized by the Lord Jesus (Mark 12:28-30). What a student learns outside of class should begin at home.

Educational Sources: What is Heard, Read, and Seen

Where and by whom is a student educated outside the school and home? Actually the question should use both past and present tenses. Since we are concentrating on education outside the

classroom, it’s important to realize that students are constantly being educated, whether they are aware of it or not. Education does not just apply to some type of formal education; it is very much a part of daily life. The Christian student who is attempting to think God’s thoughts after Him is profoundly aware of this. He lives in a world of ideas, and ideas have consequences. Those ideas are so much a part of life that it’s as if they’re a portion of the air we breathe. Students should be conscious of this, but the same is true for all of us. All of us are students.

So where do we find the teachers? There are at least three other sources: what is heard, what is read, and what is seen.

First, what is heard? One morning as I went to the front yard to get the newspaper I heard a loud, repetitive noise that sounded as if it were a woodpecker hammering on metal. When I located the source I realized to my amazement that indeed it was a woodpecker pecking on a metal light covering near our house. My curiosity was aroused so I pursued an answer to my crazy woodpecker question. It turns out that the bird could have heard his prey inside the covering, but couldn’t distinguish for the moment the difference between wood and metal.

The point of this illustration is that the wondrous nature of nature had provided a teachable moment. God’s creation abounds with such opportunities to observe the variety He has given us. And such moments are part of our daily lives.

But most students hear from more obvious sources: peers, radio, television, movies, music, etc. These sources provide a profusion of ideas. They are teachers. And just as in the formal classroom, the student should be listening carefully to see if the lessons should be considered, discarded, or believed.

The second source focuses on what is read. Some studies

indicate that people are not reading any longer. This is curious in light of the growth of enormous bookstores filled with many obscure and weighty titles. Be that as it may, the printed word still has an impact. Most students give some attention to reading. Words still have meaning, in spite of the efforts of those who would use words to say that words are meaningless. This is especially true for the Christian student. If he doesn't revere the Bible to the point of reading and understanding it as the foundation of his education, he is like a ship without a rudder. The ship is afloat but it's at the mercy of the sea and its currents.

The last of our sources concerns what we see. Since a large percentage of students spend an enormous amount of time viewing television, movies, magazines, and other media, this is a major educational element. Images abound in their lives. This challenges the Christian student to be especially alert to the multitude of ideas that come through her eyes and into her mind.

Educators beyond the classroom are continually vying for the minds of students. Let's do what we can to lead our students through this maze of ideas.

The Curriculum

One of the major elements of a formal education is the curriculum. This curriculum is usually set for students in the primary grades, it contains some flexibility in middle school, more flexibility in high school, and significant flexibility in college. Regardless of the educational level a student attains, his formal education includes variety. The same is true outside the classroom. The education he receives there includes a varied curriculum. And that curriculum can be found in varied places, from conversations with those with whom he works, to his magazine subscriptions, to the movies he rents. Let's consider several ideas that generally are found in the educational curriculum outside the classroom.

Man is the Measure of All Things

First, man is the measure of all things. That is, man is the focus of what is taught. This course is called naturalism. God either doesn't exist, or He may as well not exist because He has nothing to say to us that has meaning. Thus man is left alone to create meaning, value, morality, religion, government, education, and all other aspects of life. This is probably the most influential way of thinking in this country.

Think, for example, of the television programs you may have seen lately. Now consider whether or not those programs included the presence and guidance of a deity, whether the God of the Bible or not. With rare exceptions, the education one receives through such sources doesn't include any concept of God. Instead, man deals with all problems in his own way, through his own ingenuity. Of course the student usually isn't able to see the long term results of such decisions. As wonderful as the resolution may appear at the end of a program, the ultimate consequences may be disastrous.

Pleasure is the Highest Good

The second portion of the curriculum is based upon the idea that pleasure is the highest good. This course is called hedonism. Perhaps one of the more obvious places to find this is in your local grocery store. The "textbooks" that are found in the magazine rack near the checkout island contain this message in abundance. The articles, advertisements, and pictures emphasize the supremacy of pleasure above virtues such as self-control and sacrifice. Take a moment sometime just to scan the articles and emphases that are highlighted on the front covers of these magazines. For example, the contents of a recent teen-oriented publication for girls include: "Look Hot Tonight," "Stud Shopping Tips," "Love Stories: Secrets of Girls Who Snagged Their Crush," "Hunky Holidays: Meet the 50 Most Beautiful Guys in the World," and "The Ultimate Party Guide." All these titles revolve around the idea that pleasure

is the highest good.

True Spirituality Has Many Sources

Third, true spirituality has many sources. This course is called syncretism. Current spiritual emphases have led many students to believe that it doesn't matter what path you take as long as you are on a path. A trip to a large book store will demonstrate this. For example, you can find many books that contain many ideas about angels, but most of them have nothing to do with biblical doctrine. Or you can find a section dedicated to an assortment of metaphysical teachings, none of which align with biblical teaching. When confronted with such variety the student can be tempted to believe that true spirituality can be found in many places. The Christian student must realize this isn't possible if his allegiance is to Christ as Lord of all.

What Works is Good

The fourth idea is that what works is good. This course is called pragmatism. This is a particularly attractive part of the curriculum for Americans. And this certainly includes the American Christian student. But it's a deceptively attractive course. It may lead to results, but at what cost?

I think of a revealing scene in the disturbing Academy Award-winning movie A Clockwork Orange. A young British hoodlum in a futuristic England is programmed to abhor the violence that he continually practiced with his gang. This abhorrence is brought about by forcing him to watch scenes of horrible violence while his eyes are forced open. When he is brought before an audience to demonstrate the change, his programmer tempts him with several opportunities to do violence while the audience watches. He resists the temptations. After the demonstration a clergyman protests by saying that the "boy has no moral choice." He was manipulated. The programmer scoffs at this claim and states that the result of the experiment is good because "the point is that it works." "It has relieved

the ghastly congestion in our prisons."

These first four parts of the curriculum are naively optimistic. They describe either present or future existence positively because of supreme confidence in man and his abilities. Other portions of the curriculum are not so optimistic. In fact, they can be frighteningly pessimistic at times.

There is No Meaning

A fifth aspect of the curriculum denies meaning. This course is called existentialism, and sometimes nihilism. The "big" questions of life are asked, but no answers are found. Then the response is either total denial of hope, which should logically lead to suicide, or living by simply acting in the face of absurdity. These perspectives can be found, for example, in some contemporary music and movies. The songs of Nine Inch Nails, the moniker for a musician named Trent Reznor, sometimes contain ideas that are indicative of this. The movies of Woody Allen often contain characters and scenes that depict a search for meaning with no conclusions other than individual acts.

There is No Truth

The last portion of the curriculum is closely connected to what we have just discussed. This course can be called postmodernism. We are living in a culture that increasingly denies an encompassing paradigm for truth. This can be demonstrated by considering what Francis Schaeffer meant by the phrase "true truth." That is, there is no "big picture" to be seen and understood. We only have individuals and communities who have their own "little truths." And nothing connects those truths to something bigger than themselves and more lasting than what might work at the moment. This can be heard, seen, and read incessantly. There are too few teachers in the culture's curriculum who are sharing ideas that are connected to or guided by "true truth." The ultimate outcome

of such thinking can be devastating. Chaos can reign. Then a sense of desperation can prompt us to accept the "truth" of whoever may claim to be able to lead us out of the confusion. Germany experienced this under the reign of Hitler. We should not be so smug as to think it could not happen to us.

Responding to the Curriculum

Man is the measure of all things! Pleasure is the highest good! True spirituality has many sources! What works is good! There is no meaning! There is no truth! These are the ideas that permeate the education a student receives outside the classroom. How can a Christian deal with such a curriculum? Some suggestions are in order.

First, the student should be encouraged to understand that God is the measure of all things, not man. God is an eternal being who is the guide for our lives, both temporal and eternal. Thus we don't first ask what man thinks, we ask what God thinks. So this means that the student must decide on his primary textbook. Is it the Bible, or some other text?

Second, the student should be led to realize that God's will is the highest good, not pleasure. This is very important for the contemporary Christian to understand in light of the sensuous nature of our culture. A student easily can get the idea that God is a "kill joy" because it may seem that everyone is having a good time, but he can't because of God's restrictions. If he can understand that God's ideas lead to true freedom and joy, the student can more readily deal with this part of the curriculum.

Third, the student should be challenged to realize that true spirituality is found only through a relationship with the risen Jesus. Jesus lives in us through the indwelling of His Spirit. And this indwelling is only true for the reborn Christian. Yes, there are many spiritual concepts alive in this culture. Many people are searching for something that

will give meaning beyond man's ideas. There is a spiritual hunger. But if we try to relieve that hunger through ideas that come from man's perceptions of spirituality, we are back where we started: man is the measure of all things.

Fourth, the student should be taught that what works is not always good. Satan can make evil work for a time, but he is the father of lies, and lies lead to spiritual and moral decay.

Fifth, the student should be led to believe that life has meaning. The Christian can see the world around him with the eye of hope because God is in control. As chaotic as things may appear, there is a purpose, there is a plan. People have meaning, past events have meaning, present events have meaning, and future events will have meaning. Christ has died to give us salvation, and He has risen from the dead to give us hope for the present and the future. A student whose mind is infused with meaning will be able to handle the despair around him, and he can share his secure hope in the midst of such despair.

Sixth, the student should be guided to think in terms of the big picture. Imagine a puzzle with thousands of pieces. Now think of attempting to assemble the puzzle without having seen the picture on the box top. That would surely be a frustrating experience. You would have individual pieces but no guide to fit the pieces together. Many attempt to live this way. But the Christian student has the box top. He can begin to put the puzzle of life together with God's picture in mind.

So, does education take place beyond the classroom? Certainly! May God guide us to help students learn the proper lessons.

Notes

1. J. Kerby Anderson, *Signs of Warning, Signs of Hope* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), p. 136.

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Evaluating Education Reform

Changes in Education

It's the end of your child's first semester of high school and you are expecting the usual report card. Instead, he brings home a portfolio of work which exemplifies his progress towards achieving a series of educational goals established by the district. What's a parent to think?

Or perhaps you have just found out that your first grader will be attending a multi-aged classroom next year which utilizes a cooperative education format and a whole language, interdisciplinary curriculum. What should a parent do?

How about finding out that your fifth-grade daughter attends a school that endorses mastery learning, site-based management, and an effective schools administrative plan? Is it time to panic?

In such circumstances, what is the proper course of action? Should you pull your children out and home school them? Or, should you enroll them in a private school?

Educational reform, which seems to be never ending, often places Christians in a difficult position. Frequently it's hard to know which reforms are hostile to Christian truth, which are merely poorly conceived ideas, and which are actually worthwhile changes in the way we educate children? Many Americans, Christian or otherwise, are becoming cynical

regarding educational reform. Every new innovation promises to revolutionize the classroom, and yet things seem to get progressively worse. The last decade has brought more sweeping reform to our schools than ever before, yet few seem to be convinced that our elementary and secondary schools are performing as we would like them to.

In this essay we will evaluate the notion of educational reform in America's public schools. First, we will consider how one might evaluate reforms in general and then look at specific reforms that are currently being debated. These debates often center on five concerns, or what some call crises, in our schools. They are the crisis of authority, the crisis of content, the crisis of methodology, the crisis of values, and the crisis of funding. The term *crisis* is used here to connotate "a turning point" rather than "collapse or abandonment." Although your local school district may not be embroiled in all five of these concerns, each are widespread throughout the country.

Never have so many Americans been so unsure of their public schools, and many of these people are looking for answers, any answers that will solve the problems that they feel are destroying the effectiveness of education in America. This time of crisis coincides with a split in our society over some very basic notions of what America should be and on what intellectual and moral foundations its institutions should rest. This makes our response to these crises as Christians even more significant. It is also a time of opportunity to have considerable impact on the way our schools operate.

Although the terminology surrounding these crises can be esoteric, they are anything but ivory tower issues. Not only is a great deal of money involved, literally billions of tax dollars, but how our children or perhaps our neighbor's children will be educated will be determined by the resolution of these issues.

Each crisis also represents an opportunity for the Christian community to be salt and light. In order to act as a preservative we must be a discerning people. Too often the Christian community responds to societal change with anger or passivity, when neither are appropriate. Once we gain an understanding of what is happening to our schools we need to respond in a biblically informed manner that seeks the best for both our children and those of our community.

How to Evaluate Reform

Your local school district has just announced that it is installing a new grade school curriculum based on the most recent innovations from brain research. The staff touts the program as widely implemented and research based. As a parent you have yet to take a position on the program, waiting until you have more information, but you feel at a loss as to what type of questions might be appropriate to ask in order to begin your evaluation.

The first step is to understand what is meant by a research-based innovation. For a school program to be truly research-based, an incredible amount of effort must be invested. Unfortunately, few educational reforms are based on such foundations. Two professors of education, Arthur Ellis and Jeffrey Fouts at Seattle Pacific University, have written a book titled *Research on Educational Innovations* that offers some realistic guidelines for evaluation. The first step in evaluating any reform is to realize that "Theories of human behavior have real, lasting consequences when we try them out on human beings." For that reason alone we should be careful when applying theory to our classrooms.

There are actually three levels of research that need to be finished before proponents of a theory can claim that their curriculum or innovation is truly "research-based." The first level is what might be called "pure research." This often consists of medical or psychological discoveries from clinical

experimentation. This kind of research is most effective when specific in focus and highly controlled in methodology, but it might be also be the result of philosophical inquiry. The thinking and writing of Jean Piaget on the development of the intellect is an example of a theoretical source for educational reform that was derived from both observation and philosophical speculation. Unfortunately, this is where the research support of many programs ends, but in order to be called research-based much more needs to be done.

The second level of research involves testing and measuring a theory's implications for actual learning. Here, the theory discovered in the laboratory or minds of philosophers must be implemented in a classroom setting. With the help of carefully controlled groups, researchers can determine whether or not the innovation actually aids in achieving stated educational goals– that kids really do learn more. A third level of research requires educators to discern if this innovation can be applied successfully school-wide and in diverse settings.

To complete research on an innovation at these three levels takes time, money, and tenacity, three things that are often found lacking in our schools. With the incredible political and social pressures to fix our system, educators often turn to programs that make dramatic promises yet lack the necessary testing and trial periods to substantiate the claims of their promoters.

For the Christian parent, establishing whether or not an educational reform is adequately researched is just the beginning of the evaluation process. Even if a program works in the sense that it achieves its stated goals, not all goals are equally desirable. Every reform must be weighed against biblical truth, because they often make assumptions about human nature, about morality, and the way we should answer some of the other big questions of life. Christian parents can never sit idly on the sidelines regarding their children's educational experiences, because education, in all its many

facets, helps to shape our children's view of what is real and important in life.

Current Reforms

Outcome-based educational reform is causing some very heated debates throughout the country. At its core OBE is a fairly simple framework around which a curriculum may be organized. It shifts schools away from the current focus on inputs to outcomes, from time units to measured abilities. It assumes all kids can learn, but not at the same speed. Instead of having all students take U.S. history for two semesters of sixteen weeks each, students would be given credit when they master a list of expected behavioral and cognitive outcomes. Not all students will complete the objectives at the same time. The focus is on the tasks to be accomplished, not the time it takes to accomplish them.

OBE would not qualify as a research-based innovation. It claims little or no research at the basic or primary level. At the classroom level, much of the associated research has been done on the concept of mastery learning. There has been considerable amount of work done on this teaching method, and many think that it is a good thing. Others, like Robert Slavin, argue that mastery learning produces short-term or limited results. This still leaves much of the OBE system without a research base. Level three research which seeks to determine if a reform innovation actually works at the district or school level is mostly anecdotal. Stories of how districts have been turned around by OBE are rarely published in journals for critical review.

This doesn't mean that OBE is without merit; the point is, we really don't know. What most people get upset about is how many in the educational bureaucracy have used OBE to establish a somewhat politically correct agenda as educational outcomes, often dealing more with feelings and attitudes than with knowledge and skills.

Another reform which creates conflict is the implementation of thinking skills programs. The idea is to formulate content neutral classroom exercises that will enhance thinking skills across the curriculum. This assumes that there are skills that can be isolated from content and be taught to students. Unfortunately, there isn't an agreed upon list of skills that should be included. Brain research, cognitive science, and information processing theories are possible sources for such a list, but according to Ellis and Fouts in their book *Research on Educational Innovations*, these have not been tied to basic research programs yet. Since there are ambiguities at the basic level, little level two research has been done to decide if learning can indeed be effected. One study done in 1985 (Norris) concluded that we don't know much about critical thinking and that what we do know suggests that it tends to be context sensitive which strongly argues against the entire notion of thinking skills courses.

School or district wide analysis of these programs tends to consist of "success stories" with little analysis. Again, at this point there is very little evidence that thinking skills can be taught independently of content.

Both outcome-based reform and higher reasoning skills programs are examples of ideas that have found great favor among educators, but little support among Christian parents. This often reflects the imposition of naturalistic or pantheistic assumptions via these reforms by some educators, rather than a critical evaluation of the reforms methods themselves. Unfortunately, some Christians have resorted to personal attacks on the reformers motives, rather than a careful study of the innovation or methodology itself.

Some school reforms are questionable from the beginning—comprehensive sex education being one that comes to mind. But others may contain helpful attributes and yet be poorly implemented or grow into a dogma that drives out other good or necessary parts of the curriculum. Cooperative education and

whole language programs can often fit this description.

The two methodologies are different in that cooperative education has a well established research base supporting it, while whole language lacks much beyond the level one or basic research. Christians have generally been against both concepts, but for different reasons. Let's first describe the innovations themselves.

Cooperative education grew out of Kurt Lewin's research in the 1930s on group dynamics and social interaction. One description, offered by an advocate states, "cooperative learning methods share the idea that students work together to learn and are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own." The idea is to use group motivation to get individuals to excel and grow. Most models of cooperative learning programs stress:

- *interdependence of learners*
- *student interaction and communication*
- *individual accountability*
- *instruction on social skills*
- *group processing of goal achievement.*

Advocates of cooperative learning have been charged by some Christians with wanting to do away with personal excellence and using group pressure to get children to conform to secular moral norms. I am sure that both of these complaints have justification, but this doesn't have to be the case. In fact, many advocates of cooperative learning don't want to do away with the competitive aspect of schooling, they just want to moderate it and to help students to develop the skill of working in groups. Working in groups does not conflict with Christian thinking. In fact, Christian schools and seminaries make use of similar techniques all the time.

A problem occurs when over-zealous promoters of cooperative

learning declare all competitive learning to be dangerous, or offer cooperative learning as a schooling panacea equivalent to a cure for cancer. Some teachers fail to hold students accountable for their work which can lead to unequal effort and unjust rewards for individuals. This lesson damages student motivation and the integrity of the teacher.

Whole language has much less research to support its claims, most of which is at the theoretical or basic level. Whole language theorists argue that language is acquired by actually using it rather than by learning its parts. It rejects a technical approach to language which encouraged learning phonics and grammar rules rather than the simple joy of reading and writing. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that this approach teaches students to read and write well. A large study done in 1989 by Stahl and Miller concluded (1) that there is no evidence whole language instruction produces positive effects, and (2) that it may well produce negative ones.

This is not to say that some whole language ideas might not be implemented beneficially with the more traditional phonics, spelling, and grammar instruction. Its emphasis on reading actual literature, not basal readers, is a positive step, as is encouraging students to write often on diverse topics.

There are a number of problems from a theoretical viewpoint that I have with what is promoted as whole language theory, but my response as a Christian should be to work with the teacher and school my child attends, or to find a setting that teaches in a manner that satisfies my expectations. In any case, a Christlike humility should pervade my contact with the teacher and school.

Educators vs. The Public

In spite of the fact that most Americans see the need for improving our public schools, there has been tremendous

resistance to reform, both from parents and many teachers. Information found in a recent study titled *First Things First: What Americans Expect From the Public Schools*, published by the Public Agenda Foundation might give us some reasons why.

Focusing on parents of public school children, and particularly on Christian and African-American families, the report found that these groups support most of the same solutions to our school's problems. Both groups want higher educational standards and clear guidelines for what students should know and what teachers should teach. They reject social promotions and overwhelmingly feel that high school students should not graduate without writing and speaking English well. African-American parents were even more dissatisfied with their schools than others, and more concerned with low expectations on the part of educators.

A second finding was that school reform was viewed in fundamentally different ways by educators and the public. Most educators believe that schools are doing relatively well while the public feels that much improvement is needed. In Connecticut, 68% of educators felt the schools are better now than when they were in school. Only 16% of the public agreed. Educators and parents differ radically in their explanations for our school's problems. Educators blame public complacency, taxpayer selfishness and racism. Although the public supports integration and equal opportunity, it rejects the notion that more money will automatically fix our schools.

Parents' chief concerns are safe, orderly, and focused schools. Nine of ten Americans believe that dependability and discipline will help our students learn better than reforms in test taking or assessments in general. Three out of four parents support permanently removing students caught with guns or drugs from our schools and temporarily removing those who misbehave. Unfortunately, educators rarely make these issues the center of reform proposals. Other findings include the belief that stable families are a more decisive factor for

determining student success than a particular school setting is and a perception that educators are often pushing untested experimental methods at the expense of the basics.

Educators and parents were far apart on a number of classroom methods as well. Parents find nothing wrong with having kids memorize the 50 state capitals and where they are located, or to learn to perform math functions without the aid of a calculator. Educators are much more likely to stress higher-order reasoning skills and early use of calculators. Parents in general are less preoccupied with the need for sex ed, AIDS education, multicultural experiences, and even school prayer. They tend to want schools to be safe, orderly, and academically sound.

There seems to be much common ground that the vast majority of parents, and other taxpayers, agree on. As Christians, we probably would be much happier with our schools if they were safe, orderly, and academically sound. Most Christian parents understand and accept the fact that their public schools will not be overtly Christian. On the other hand, they feel that the Christian faith and its presuppositions should receive fair treatment when reforms are instituted. In recent years many Christian parents have seen their schools initiate programs that both challenge and ridicule their beliefs. This isn’t necessary, and it has alienated the very people who must fund and support the schools if they are to be successful.

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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.

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Outcome Based Education

Outcome Based Education

Times are changing. The pressure on our public schools to improve, and change, has become intense. Since 1960 our population has increased by 41%, spending on education has increased by 225% (in constant 1990 dollars), but SAT scores have fallen by 8% (or 80 points). Although few would argue that the schools are solely to blame for our children's declining academic performance, many are hoping that schools can turn this trend around.

The decade of the 80s brought numerous education reforms, but few of them were a dramatic shift from what has gone on

before. Outcome-based education (OBE) is one of those that is new, even revolutionary, and is now being promoted as the panacea for America's educational woes. This reform has been driven by educators in response to demands for greater accountability by taxpayers and as a vehicle for breaking with traditional ideas about how we teach our children. If implemented, this approach to curriculum development could change our schools more than any other reform proposal in the last thirty years.

The focus of past and present curriculum has been on content, on the knowledge to be acquired by each student. Our language, literature, history, customs, traditions, and morals, often called Western civilization, dominated the learning process through secondary school. If students learned the information and performed well on tests and assignments, they received credit for the course and moved on to the next class. The point here is that the curriculum centered on the content to be learned; its purpose was to produce academically competent students. The daily schedule in a school was organized around the content. Each hour was devoted to a given topic; some students responded well to the instruction, and some did not.

Outcome-based education will change the focus of schools from the content to the student. According to William Spady, a major advocate of this type of reform, three goals drive this new approach to creating school curricula. First, all students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day or in the same way. Second, each success by a student breeds more success. Third, schools control the conditions of success. In other words, students are seen as totally malleable creatures. If we create the right environment, any student can be prepared for any academic or vocational career. The key is to custom fit the schools to each student's learning style and abilities.

The resulting schools will be vastly different from the ones recent generations attended. Yearly and daily schedules will change, teaching responsibilities will change, classroom

activities will change, the evaluation of student performance will change, and most importantly, our perception of what it means to be an educated person will change.

What is OBE?

Education is a political and emotional process. Just ask Pennsylvania's legislators. That state, along with Florida, North Carolina, and Kansas, has been rocked by political battles over the implementation of outcome-based educational reforms. The governor, the state board of education, legislators, and parents have been wrestling over how, and if, this reform should reshape the state's schools. Twenty-six other states claim to have generated outcome- based programs, and at least another nine are moving in that direction.

Before considering the details of this controversy, let's review the major differences between the traditional approach to schooling in America and an outcome-based approach.

Whereas previously the school calendar determined what a child might do at any moment of any school day, now progress toward specific outcomes will control activity. Time, content, and teaching technique will be altered to fit the needs of *each* student. Credit will be given for accomplishing stated outcomes, not for time spent in a given class.

The teacher's role in the classroom will become that of a coach. The instructor's goal is to move each child towards pre-determined outcomes rather than attempting to transmit the content of Western civilization to the next generation in a scholarly fashion. This dramatic change in the role of the teacher will occur because the focus is no longer on content. Feelings, attitudes, and skills such as learning to work together in groups will become just as important as learning information—some reformers would argue more important. Where traditional curricula focused on the past, reformers argue that outcome-based methods prepare students for the future and

for the constant change which is inevitable in our society.

Many advocates of outcome-based education feel that evaluation methods must change as well since outcomes are now central to curriculum development. We can no longer rely on simple cognitive tests to determine complex outcomes. Vermont is testing a portfolio approach to evaluation, in which art work, literary works, and the results of group projects are added to traditional tests in order to evaluate a student’s progress. Where traditional testing tended to compare the abilities of students with each other, outcome-based reform will be criterion based. This means that all students must master information and skills at a predetermined level in order to move on to the next unit of material.

Implementing OBE Reform

Reformers advocating an outcome-based approach to curriculum development point to the logical simplicity of its technique. First, a list of desired outcomes in the form of student behaviors, skills, attitudes, and abilities is created. Second, learning experiences are designed that will allow teachers to coach the students to a mastery level in each outcome. Third, students are tested. Those who fail to achieve mastery receive remediation or retraining until mastery is achieved. Fourth, upon completion of learner outcomes a student graduates.

On the surface, this seems to be a reasonable approach to learning. In fact, the business world has made extensive use of this method for years, specifically for skills that were easily broken down into distinct units of information or specific behaviors. But as a comprehensive system for educating young minds, a few important questions have been raised. The most obvious question is who will determine the specific outcomes or learner objectives? This is also the area creating the most controversy across the country.

Transitional vs. Transformational OBE

According to William Spady, a reform advocate, outcomes can be written with traditional, transitional, or transformational goals in mind. Spady advocates transformation goals.

Traditional outcome-based programs would use the new methodology to teach traditional content areas like math, history, and science. The state of Illinois is an example of this approach. Although outcomes drive the schooling of these children, the outcomes themselves reflect the traditional content of public schools in the past.

Many teachers find this a positive option for challenging the minimal achiever. For example, a considerable number of students currently find their way through our schools, accumulating enough credits to graduate, while picking up little in the way of content knowledge or skills. Their knowledge base reflects little actual learning, but they have become skilled in working the system. An outcome-based program would prevent such students from graduating or passing to the next grade without reaching a pre-set mastery level of competency.

The idea of transformational reform is causing much turmoil. Transformational OBE subordinates course content to key issues, concepts, and processes. Indeed, Spady calls this the "highest evolution of the OBE concept." Central to the idea of transformational reform is the notion of outcomes of significance. Examples of such outcomes from Colorado and Wyoming school systems refer to collaborative workers, quality producers, involved citizens, self-directed achievers, and adaptable problem solvers. Spady supports transformational outcomes because they are future oriented, based on descriptions of future conditions that he feels should serve as starting points for OBE designs.

True to the spirit of the reform philosophy, little mention is

made about specific things that students should know as a result of being in school. The focus is on attitudes and feelings, personal goals, initiative, and vision—in their words, the whole student.

It is in devising learner outcomes that one's worldview comes into play. Those who see the world in terms of constant change, politically and morally, find a transformation model useful. They view human nature as evolving, changing rather than fixed.

Christians see human nature as fixed and unchanging. We were created in God's image yet are now fallen and sinful. We also hold to moral absolutes based on the character of God. The learner outcomes that have been proposed are controversial because they often accept a transformational, changing view of human nature. Advocates of outcome-based education point with pride to its focus on the student rather than course content. They feel that the key to educational reform is to be found in having students master stated learner outcomes. Critics fear that this is exactly what will happen. Their fear is based on the desire of reformers to educate the whole child. What will happen, they ask, when stated learner outcomes violate the moral or religious views of parents?

For example, most sex-education courses used in our schools claim to take a value-neutral approach to human sexuality. Following the example of the Kinsey studies and materials from the Sex Education and Information Council of the United States, most curricula make few distinctions between various sex acts. Sex within marriage between those of the opposite sex is not morally different from sex outside of marriage between those of the same sex. The goal of such programs is self-actualization and making people comfortable with their sexual preferences.

Under the traditional system of course credits a student could take a sex-ed course, totally disagree with the instruction

and yet pass the course by doing acceptable work on the tests presented. Occasion-ally, an instructor might make life difficult for a student who fails to conform, but if the student learns the material that would qualify him or her for a passing grade and credit towards graduation.

If transformational outcome-based reformers have their way, this student would not get credit for the course until his or her attitudes, feelings, and behaviors matched the desired goals of the learner outcomes. For instance, in Pennsylvania the state board had recommended learner outcomes that would evaluate a student based on his or her ability to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of families. Many feel that this is part of the effort to widen the definition of families to include homosexual couples. Another goal requires students to know about and *use* community health resources. Notice that just knowing that Planned Parenthood has an office in town isn't enough, one must use it.

Parents vs. the State

The point of all this is to say that transformational outcome-based reform would be a much more efficient mechanism for changing our children's values and attitudes about issues facing our society. Unfortunately, the direction these changes often take is in conflict with our Christian faith. At the core of this debate is this question, "Who has authority over our children?" Public officials assume they do. Governor Casey of Pennsylvania, calling for reform, told his legislature, "We must never forget that you and I—the elected representatives of the people—and not anyone else—have the ultimate responsibility to assure the future of our children." I hope this is merely political hyperbole. I would argue that parents of children in the state of Pennsylvania are ultimately responsible for their children's future. The state has rarely proved itself a trustworthy parent.

Outcome-based education is an ideologically neutral tool for

curricular construction; whether it is more effective than traditional approaches remains to be seen. Unfortunately, because of its student-centered approach, its ability to influence individuals with a politically correct set of doctrines seems to be great. Parents (and all other taxpayers) need to weigh the possible benefits of outcome-based reform with the potential negatives.

Other Concerns About OBE

Many parents are concerned about who will determine the learner outcomes for their schools. One criticism already being heard is that many states have adopted very similar outcomes regardless of the process put in place to get community input. Many wonder if there will be real consideration of what learner outcomes the public wants rather than assuming that educators know what's best for our children. Who will decide what it means to be an educated person, the taxpaying consumer or the providers of education?

If students are going to be allowed to proceed through the material at their own rate, what happens to the brighter children? Eventually students will be at many levels, what then? Will added teachers be necessary? Will computer-assisted instruction allow for individual learning speeds? Either option will cost more money. Some reformers offer a scenario where brighter students help tutor slower ones thereby encouraging group responsibility rather than promoting an elite group of learners. Critics feel that a mastery- learning approach will inevitably hold back brighter students.

With outcome-based reform, many educators are calling for a broader set of evaluation techniques. But early attempts at grading students based on portfolios of various kinds of works has proved difficult. The Rand Corporation studied Vermont's attempt and found that "rater reliability—the extent to which raters agreed on the quality of a student's work—was low." There is a general dislike of standardized tests among the

reformers because it focuses on what the child knows rather than the whole child, but is there a viable substitute? Will students find that it is more important to be politically correct than to know specific facts?

Another question to be answered by reformers is whether or not school bureaucracies will allow for such dramatic change? How will the unions respond? Will legislative mandates that are already on the books be removed, or will this new approach simply be laid over the rest, creating a jungle of regulations and red tape? Reformers supporting outcome-based education claim that local schools will actually have more control over their programs. Once learner outcomes are established, schools will be given the freedom to create programs that accomplish these goals. But critics respond by noting that although districts may be given input as to how these outcomes are achieved, local control of the outcomes themselves may be lost.

Finally, there are many who feel that focusing on transformational learner outcomes will allow for hidden agendas to be promoted in the schools. Many parents feel that there is already too much emphasis on global citizenship, radical environmentalism, humanistic views of self-esteem, and human sexuality at the expense of reading, writing, math, and science. They feel that education may become more propagandistic rather than academic in nature. Parents need to find out where their state is in regards to this movement. If an outcome-based program is being pursued, will it focus on traditional or transformational outcomes? If the outcomes are already written and adopted, can a copy be acquired? If they are not written yet, how can parents get involved?

If the state is considering a transformational OBE program, parental concerns should be brought before the legislature. If the reform is local, parents should contact their school board. Parents have an obligation to know what is being taught to their children and if it works. Recently, parental

resistance halted the OBE movement in Pennsylvania when it was pointed out to the legislature that there is no solid evidence that the radical changes pro-posed will actually cause kids to learn more. While we still can, let’s make our voices heard on this issue.

Notes

1. “Beyond Traditional Outcome-Based Education,” *Educational Leadership* (October 1991), p. 67.
2. “Taking Account,” *Education Week* (17 March 1993), p. 10.
3. “Beyond Traditional,” p. 70.
4. “Amid Controversy, Pa. Board Adopts ‘Learner Outcomes,'” *Education Week* (20 January 1993), p. 14.
5. “Casey Seeks Legislative Changes in Pa. Learning Goals,” *Education Week* (3 February 1993), p. 19.
6. “Taking Account,” p. 12.

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Schooling Choices

Difficult Choices

Americans seem to be consumed by the idea of choice. But choice can be a burden as well as a blessing. Many Christian parents are confronted today with the complicated choice of how best to educate their children. As the moral standards in our society move further and further from biblical ones, the importance of choice looms ever larger.

In a recent conversation with a friend, this dilemma became

even more evident to me. His daughter is about to enter high school. She's bright and concerned about living Christianly. But her parents are afraid that her desire to be part of the "in" group, to be accepted, could cause her to be negatively influenced by her peers.

The public high school in town is very good. It could be considered above average in many ways. It offers a good academic program and a wide variety of activities. But these parents have some important reservations about sending their daughter there. Like most Christians, they are aware that public schools, by law, are supposed to maintain a strict neutrality concerning religious topics. This has, in recent years, been interpreted by many school administrators to mean that Christian views are to be removed from the classroom.

My friends are also aware that the ethical standards they believe are central to the upbringing of their children are considered quite unusual by most of the students, teachers, and other parents in the community, and that this would place an added burden on their daughter.

They don't feel capable of home schooling, although they are sympathetic with the philosophy of that movement. A Christian school is available, but it is an hour's drive away and represents a substantial financial commitment.

These friends, like many other people, are trying to sort through one of the more perplexing dilemmas facing our nation's parents. By what criteria should parents choose their children's schools?

Education is a fairly emotional topic: we all tend to return to our own mental images of what it means to be schooled. Some remember public schooling as a joyous time with Christian teachers and a peer group that resulted in lifelong friendships. Others may remember a private school setting that was overly restrictive, resulting in a negative experience.

But should we make the decision of how to educate our children today based on how things were twenty or thirty years ago, even in the same school system?

A helpful book titled *Schooling Choices: An Examination of Private, Public, & Home Education*, edited by Dr. Wayne House, allows three advocates to argue for their favorite schooling environment. Dr. David Smith, a superintendent of schools in Indiana, argues for parents making use of our public schools. Dr. Kenneth Gangel, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, defends the Christian school, and Greg Harris, the director of Christian Life Workshops, promotes home schooling. No conclusions are offered by the book; instead, the issues are developed by the proponents themselves, and then critiqued by the other two writers.

If we assume that Christian parents have a God-given responsibility to raise and educate their children in a manner that glorifies God, this discussion of educational choices becomes central to our parenting task. My own children have experienced all three forms of educational institutions. But rather than simplifying the dilemma, this experience has taught me to be hesitant to tell a parent that there is one best educational environment for every child in all circumstances.

Biblical Evidence

In support of a Christian school setting, Dr. Kenneth Gangel argues that all of a child's education should be Bible-centered. Ephesians 6:4 states, "Parents, do not exasperate your children, instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." If we tell our children to live biblically but train them in a secular setting, we may indeed exasperate them. The question goes beyond sheltering our children from a classroom that is openly hostile to Christianity. Even a neutral approach, if that were possible, would be insufficient. The whole teaching environment must be

centered around a Christian worldview.

Public school superintendent Dr. David Smith feels that this is not necessarily true. Quoting Luke 8:16 and Matthew 28:19-20, he prompts Christians to be salt and light and to fulfil the Great Commission in the public schools. Dr. Smith sees public schooling as an experience that will strengthen our children, preparing them for the real world.

Dr. Gangel replies that nowhere does the Bible say, “Give a child twelve years of training in the way he should not go, and he will be made strong by it.” Instead, God tells us, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.”

Both Kenneth Gangel and Greg Harris emphasize the importance of peer influence or companionship. Both of them quote Proverbs 13:20, “He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm,” and 1 Corinthians 15:33, “Do not be deceived, bad company ruins good morals.” It seems clear that our children’s closest companions are to view morality biblically.

Luke 6:40 states, “Every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher.” Although David Smith feels that public school teachers are a conservative group and that many are Christians, both Gangel and Harris feel that having a Christian teacher is a requirement that should not be left to chance. Greg Harris goes one step further, arguing that parents are in the best position to teach and be companions to their children.

Another major concern is the nature of knowledge and true wisdom. If we believe that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 9:10) and that “in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3), then the ability of a public school to give our children a true perspective on the way things really are is placed in

question. Perhaps public schools could function as vocational education centers, but even then moral questions would be involved.

Although we can see how Christian public school teachers might influence their students, they will be in constant conflict with textbooks that assume a naturalistic viewpoint and a curriculum that steers clear of controversy. Greg Harris argues that nothing will kill the zeal of a Christian teacher quicker than a public school setting. He feels that many Christians imagine they are having a quiet impact and rationalize that someday the fruit will be more visible, when in fact they are promoting a non-Christian worldview by dividing their professional life from their Christian faith.

Both Harris and Gangel would argue that Christians need to integrate their beliefs with all of their activities. This is becoming more and more difficult in the public school setting, where textbooks, self-esteem programs, drug- and sex-ed curricula, and even the teacher's unions have adopted a view of humanity and morality that portrays mankind as autonomous from God.

Spiritual Benefits

As Christian parents, we want our children to become spiritually mature more than anything else. While recognizing that their own free will is the greatest factor in their future growth, the Bible does give us hope that training in righteousness now will pay off later.

While admitting that one environment is not necessarily the best for all students, Dr. Smith feels that young people can develop a mature Christian walk in our public schools. In fact, he states that some Christian schools and home schoolers may be doing more harm than good. Because of their narrow, authoritarian, and defensive view towards society, some Christian parents may retard their children's spiritual and

educational development. He feels that these parents are building high emotional walls between themselves and the rest of the evangelical community. Two authors he spotlights for having encouraged such a view are Phyllis Schlafly and Tim LaHaye.

Mr. Harris, on the other hand, sees the home school as a vehicle for restoring the home as the center of life and faith. Our children can be nurtured in the warmth and security of the home while they are still developing spiritually and emotionally. Once their confidence has been built concerning who they are and what they believe, then they are better prepared for the cruel elements of life. Mr. Harris also argues that by not placing our children in an age-segregated setting, they will be less peer-oriented.

Dr. Gangel believes that Christian schools will teach our children that God's program of joy in Christ supersedes the world's program of pleasure. He points to Romans 12:2 and the admonition that we are not to be conformed to this world but transformed by the renewing of our mind. This transformation of our minds should take place in all areas of life, including morality and our personal concept of truth. Christian schools afford moments where biblical discussions on these topics are encouraged, not ridiculed.

Although some may feel that a Christian school shelters its students from the real world, Dr. Gangel feels that just the opposite is true. Sheltering occurs when one is taught that man is basically good and that sin is not his most pressing problem. The fact that parents want to remove their children from a setting where 282,000 of them are attacked each month and 112,000 are robbed is not sheltering—it's common sense.

The question posed by these writers seems to be a simple one: Is it better to educate our children in an environment potentially hostile to the Christian faith or to train them in one that holds exclusively to that view? I do not feel that

any of the writers would argue that we should not see the public schools as a potential mission field. The difference is that Mr. Smith wants our children to be the missionaries, where the others feel that only well-grounded adults (and occasionally a rare student) are capable of making an impact without compromising their faith.

Will a child mature more in an exclusively Christian setting or in one governed by secular standards? My personal belief is that it depends greatly on the spiritual maturity of the child. If a student understands the nature of the spiritual battle occurring in our society, and is being equipped at home and at church with the ammunition needed to withstand the inevitable onslaught, then his faith will probably grow. But how many of our young children fit this description? And how many parents are willing to risk their children becoming casualties before they have had the benefit of as much Christian training as possible?

Educational Advantages

Dr. Smith believes that the key to understanding public schools and their ability to educate is tied to the task that public schools have been given. All children are admitted to public schools, regardless of ability or background. In fact, in the last fifteen years alone, 15 million immigrants have been assimilated into our society largely through public schools. Dr. Smith argues that while we are graduating a higher percentage of our young people today than ever before, the average student is more proficient today in both reading and computing than in the past. He claims that the literacy rate today is much higher today than in earlier years.

In response to the accusations that other industrialized countries score higher on similar tests, Dr. Smith refers to work done by Dr. Torstein Husen, chairman of the International Association for the Evaluation of Achievement, who concludes that these tests are often not valid comparisons. As for the

Japanese, Mr. Smith would argue that it is the cultural differences in regard to the work ethic, not the educational systems themselves, that produce better results.

Finally, Dr. Smith states that "for the overwhelming majority of children public schools offer the best techniques, curriculum and extracurricular opportunities: in short, the most comprehensive education available." Although studies have shown that the large, well-established private schools do an admirable job teaching their affluent middle-class clientele, we know little about the effectiveness of the newer, more fundamental Christian schools.

Dr. Gangel challenges this assumption. In a recent year the bill for public education in the U.S. was $278.8 billion, greater than all other nations combined. In a number of cities, public schools spend more than twice the average cost per student than do private schools. But comparisons with other countries and most private schools point to an inferior product, and studies such as *A Nation at Risk* state that mediocrity threatens our very future as a nation.

One study points out that if cost were not a factor, 45 percent of parents who send their children to public schools would change to private schools. In Chicago, almost half of the public school teachers send their own children to private schools. One very important reason for this is that on standardized tests such as the Stanford Achievement Test, Christian school students perform, on the average, 1.04 years ahead of their public school counterparts.

The reason for the superiority of Christian schools, according to Dr. Gangel, is that they are more focused than public schools. They have made a commitment to the basics of reading, writing, and math. They are not trying to be all things to all people, which is often the demand placed upon public schools. Smaller classes, a consistent philosophy of education, and strict discipline more than make up for whatever is lacking in

facilities and equipment.

Dr. Gangel's argument for private schools has recently been supported by a secular source. The Brookings Institution has published a study titled *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* that sees public schools in America as unable to teach the average student effectively because of a lack of autonomy. Too many outside influences are demanding that schools solve our society's most unyielding social ills. As a result, the mission and focus of our public schools have been blurred.

Summary

Mr. Harris is not shy about his support of teaching our children at home. He asserts that home schooling yields better results in less time and with less money than the alternative systems. He feels the superiority of home schooling is based on two principles. First is the advantage of tutoring over classroom instruction. Tutors are much more able to focus on the student's work, give immediate feedback, and adjust the work to an appropriate difficulty level. Parents who focus on the individual learning styles of their children can fashion a curriculum that plays to the child's strengths, rather than forcing the child to conform to a fixed program.

The second principle is that of delight-directed studies. Parents can focus on what the students are actually interested in and use that natural curiosity to motivate the student. Content at an early age is not as important as developing a taste for the process of study and learning.

Another very important aspect of home schooling is character development. Mr. Harris contends that character is caught, not taught, and that the character of the teacher is of utmost importance. While the courts have stated that the behavior of public school teachers outside of the school setting is not relevant to their classroom duties, home schooling assures that a consistent model will be presented to the student.

Because of the controversy over self-esteem curricula that use relaxation techniques very similar to transcendental meditation and yoga practices, many parents are willing to take on the task of home schooling to avoid their children being forced to take part in therapy they deem harmful. Also, more and more evidence is accumu- lating that the drug- and sex-education programs used in our schools are breaking down parental and religious barriers to dangerous activities and replacing them with the incredible peer pressure of our youth culture.

Another concern for all Christians is the strong influence of the multiculturalism movement in public education. As this movement grows, it is removing from the curriculum the great works that have defined Western Civilization. Much of what is replacing these works is feminist and Marxist in nature, challenging the very foundation of our society's values.

A recent Gallup poll revealed that six out of ten parents with children in public schools are calling for greater choice in where their children will attend school. For the Christian parent, choice takes on a much larger role. Like all important decisions, it must depend on our goals as parents and our understanding of what God would have us to do as His servants. To choose wisely, we must know our children well. I personally believe that no single environment is appropriate for every child. We must understand that a spiritual war is being fought for the minds and hearts of our children, and that the philosophy of this world is not compatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We have entered a period in our history as a people when a biblical worldview is no longer accepted as the predominant one. As a result, we must think carefully about the purpose of education. If education is just the accumulation of cold data, mere facts to be collected, public schools may be a viable option. That option becomes less attractive if we acknowledge the moral aspect of education.

In 1644 John Milton wrote a short essay on what education should accomplish for the Christian. It reads, in part, “The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him.” Are our children learning to become disciples of Christ, and to love God with all of their hearts, their souls, and their minds?

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