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The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr.

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should be on Christ.

Catholic educational leaders have a call to promote the faith development of a faculty or a team. Jackson's management style, concentrating on vision and teamwork, is powerful and has proven successful. As leaders, the use of these tools to achieve autonomy and focus are lofty goals shown to be attainable by Jackson, and Catholic religious practices and traditions centered in Christ can act as a comforter to replace the "crazy-quilt" (p. 186) spirituality Jackson uses to motivate winning teams.

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THE SCHOOLS WE NEED AND WHY WE DON'T HAVE THEM

E. D. HIRSCH, JR.
ANCHOR BOOKS, 1996
\$15.95, 317 pages

Reviewed by Daniel Tully

Across the nation, workshops, professional development seminars, and college courses are teaching educators to use inquiry learning, cooperative learning, hands-on learning, discovery learning, and constructive techniques to educate their students. The current emphasis on pedagogy is in teaching students how to learn how to learn. Teachers are called facilitators and moderators and any notion of rote learning or memorization is largely frowned upon. It is against this educational backdrop that Hirsch intends to bring about a renewed emphasis on content-based learning in schools in *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*.

With failing schools across the country, especially in minority and lower socio-economic neighborhoods, the problem of inadequate education is widespread. The reason, according to Hirsch, is not because of diversity, socio-economic status, or creativity in the classroom, but rather the fault lies with European Romantic-era beliefs ushered in during the 19th century. For

decades, pedagogical terms like classrooms without walls, lifelong learning, and project-based education, have floated across the educational landscape. These ideas about education come not from new inventions or researchers, not even from Dewey's child-centered teaching, but from the writers, thinkers, and educators of the Romantic period. From here, Dewey gets credit for spreading the educational gospel, but it is really William Heard Kilpatrick and the Teachers' College of Columbia University that get the credit. Throughout the 20th century, these ideas were given new life and reintroduced, finally catching on with potency in the 1960s. Not coincidentally, educational performance began to decline at almost the same time across the country, continuing to do so over the last decades.

One of the traditional reasons for educating young people in Christian faith was to assist them in overcoming original sin. St. Augustine describes his natural instinct to throw pears at pigs: "To give one's fallen natural instincts free rein would beget a life of greed, selfishness, and crime" (p. 74). While many of the thinkers of the Enlightenment abandoned the notion of original sin, some, like Thomas Jefferson and his fellow Founders "took a skeptical and suspicious view of human nature" (p. 73). Despite being suspicious of humans, Jefferson also called for a majority that could read and write in order to protect their rights and freedoms. Hirsch, like Jefferson, sees a need for shared information in sustaining a democracy. It is not the tools of education that must be imparted, but intellectual capital. Eventually, it is Horace Mann's common school that will become the provider of this intellectual capital.

Hirsch blames the lack of a shared bank of knowledge for the deterioration in classroom performance: "For effective classroom learning to take place, class members need to share enough common reference points to enable all students to learn steadily" (p. 24). Especially at younger ages and lower grades, students must build a base of knowledge from which to reference while they add to it over time. For instance, students should learn the location of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the fourth grade, not just visit a river. Later on, these students will be able to identify the rivers in the context of discussion about the beginning of civilization. Furthermore, the lack of a core knowledge base is unfair and ineffective. It has shown no long-term benefits and successes in classrooms, and it is inherently unfair to lower socio-economic classes and minorities who tend to have higher mobility rates than others.

Hirsch takes great pains to show that, despite the argument being in the minority, the world of education has no basis to claim that critical thinking and project-based curricula are benefiting students. Inquiry learning means less whole-class instruction leading to less attention paid to students and a slower pace of learning. Integrated curriculum often translates into a lack of

coherence in information. Waiting for developmentally-appropriate curriculum to be appropriate means allowing precious time to pass before imparting knowledge to students, knowledge that is frequently shared early on in other countries. In fact, Hirsch points to France and the core knowledge example of the *écoles maternelle* as a successful model of educating young students at very early ages with content-based curriculum.

The arguments against this kind of teaching have been repeated often. Rote learning is often boring and makes no causal connection for recall. Memorization is impractical and fragmented. Verbal education ignores other senses, learning styles, and abilities. Hirsch notes that these are generalizations attached to fact-based curriculum by Romantics and education professors who claim their way is better. Without any solid psychological research backing their support, Hirsch dismisses the claims and describes content curriculum as the best method we know for achieving the task of imparting basic, foundational knowledge.

Hirsch also supports the often-maligned standardized test as a useful way to measure learning and support education of content. Tests have largely become scapegoats for poor results, labeled as unfair for minorities and pigeon-holing students. According to Hirsch, "Tests are also effective in determining the adequacy of a teacher's or a school's performance, in gaining students' attention, and in creating an opportunity for further learning while students are reviewing for the test and while they are taking it" (p. 177). There are any number of invalid and unreliable tests and formats, but properly created and administered tests can effectively measure student learning. Hirsch combats the arguments that multiple choice tests cause teachers to teach to the test, do not support higher-order thinking, encourage rote memorization, and are easily cheated. In the end, tests are a very necessary evil which should be used to show year-by-year content-based learning so that the foundation for further education can be continued.

Catholic schools across the United States might be able to institute a core content curriculum more easily than public schools. Because many Catholic schools have high scholastic achievement, less baseline instruction would be necessary for those who do not meet the standards of core content, especially at lower grades. There would be less catching up to do. Essentially, Catholic schools already work with a core content curriculum, providing students with the deposit of faith through various means of instruction. In fact, the *Baltimore Catechism* was one example of compulsory core content. Using this example, however, shows a weakness of Hirsch's argument. Ask nearly any Catholic school-educated person around the age of 50 what the *Baltimore Catechism* is, and he or she will likely be able to recite it word for word. Millions were drilled with the verses of the *Baltimore Catechism*. Ask that same person what the Catechism really means and sig-

nifies, and few will be able to answer. The major flaw of content-based learning becomes clearer. Rote learning, in this case, was effective in conveying knowledge, but not understanding. Core content can and will be retained. It is also useful as a building block for further depth of knowledge. However, it requires further processing to be understood.

Hirsch provides thorough and convincing arguments. The book anticipates potential contrary arguments and gaps in the logic of suggested plans. A good deal of research supports his beliefs. In closing, Hirsch calls for specific, content-based, grade level standards nationally. Since the book was published in 1996, many states have written standards, many of which are content specific, and others which are not. In fact, Chicago's public schools created specific content standards to be measured by standards-based tests. Problems such as mass cheating, tests which included inaccurate items, and frequently evolving standards arose. Teachers, asked to connect content to teaching methods simply wrote lesson plans and then matched them with standards that were close enough to what they had written. Hirsch, like many writers on education, provides few real world solutions to implementing the core content beliefs. Numerous questions arise. How do you begin in an environment where so many students are already behind grade level? How do teachers stay engaged in classrooms where they are given specific content to impart upon students? At what point, if any, are students able to move to learning depth instead of breadth on a subject? How do you address the problem of connecting knowledge with understanding? The systematic problems that instituting a content-based curriculum would cause are staggering and need to be addressed. Hirsch ignores making policy recommendations and offering solutions, choosing to repeat his mantra of content knowledge.

Even though Hirsch sounds conservative and focused, in the end, a rote, memorized world of knowledge is not desirable. Instead, "a combination of showing and telling yields the fastest and surest results in both writing and teaching" (p. 86). The battle between process learning and content learning is clearly not over. Many will continue to argue that students must connect education with experience while Hirsch argues that knowledge must be connected with a core body of knowledge. As with most educational research and scholarly work, the real world answers probably lie somewhere in the middle.

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