

The 5 'Isms' That Destroyed Education

It is increasingly believed that the United States' education system has lost its way; that it is in crisis.

During the century-long reign of progressivism in U.S. schools, basic proficiency [has declined](#), the racial and economic achievement gaps have not been closed (in fact, [they've widened](#)), and American students [have fallen behind](#) their international peers.

In response to the perceived crisis, technocrats have been scrambling for decades to devise and implement new policy initiatives and reform measures.

But as [Albert Jay Nock once noted](#), all of these technocratic activities represent mere "tinkerings" that are doomed to fail because they do not address the problematic philosophy behind the current education system.

In his book [The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them](#), University of Virginia professor [E.D. Hirsch](#) outlines the deeply-held principles that make up this philosophy, which has eroded the quality of education in American schools.

1) Romanticism

"Although the United States was born in the Enlightenment, it was bred in Romanticism," writes Hirsch. Prior to the introduction of Romantic theory in education, it was believed that the child was merely an adult-in-training whose instincts needed to be properly molded through rigorous instruction and discipline. Romanticism, however, introduced the sentimental notions that human nature is innately good and that children are unique snowflakes whose creativity and imagination should be given free reign. According to Hirsch, "It is by now a very

deeply rooted sentiment in American education to think that what is natural works automatically for the good.”

2) Developmentalism

Hirsch defines developmentalism as the belief that “each child develops at his or her naturally ordained pace, which should never be forced lest the child be harmed or perverted.” It assumes that learning should almost always be painless and effortless. The influence of developmentalism is seen in the education system’s shift away from the methods of drill and practice—which are still emphasized in teaching musical instruments and sports—and in delaying when students engage with complex literature and ideas.

3) American Exceptionalism

American Exceptionalism is “a widespread set of attitudes that claim ‘distinctive characteristics’ for our country and its institutions, making us so entirely different from other countries that we have little or nothing to learn from them, and ought not to be compared with them.” According to Hirsch, this sentiment caused progressive American educators to wean the curriculum of great works of the past and any sort of fixed content, and to quickly dismiss any international comparisons—especially those that show American students lagging behind their international peers.

4) Individualism

Hirsch rightly notes that “Individualism is as American as pecan pie... No one is going to give it up or wants to.” But, he writes, “[O]ur present ideas of individualism are quite different from those current in the United States before 1850.” The more modern, radical species of individualism emphasizes that each child’s instincts and dispositions are

unique and of equal worth. In education, it has given rise to such phenomena as grade inflation and social promotion. After all, if each child has a unique creativity and learning style, how can one possibly judge them according to any standard?

5) Anti-Intellectualism

“American thought has been conflicted about the value of book learning since the mid-nineteenth century,” writes Hirsch. At that time, certain thinkers began to disparage traditional academics and “rote memorization” in favor of experiential, hands-on learning. Hirsch points out that the recent push for teaching “critical thinking skills”—something that can supposedly be gained apart from a content-rich education—is a species of this anti-intellectualism.

As Hirsch points out, there is truth in each of these “isms.” One could, for instance, regard America’s concern for freedom as “exceptional” in the history of the world, and experiential learning does have tremendous value.

But these “educationist ideas have been carried too far,” writes Hirsch, and their effects on American education “have been as wrong as they have been deleterious.” In Hirsch’s mind, the American education system cannot be fixed without an overhaul of the progressive philosophy underlying it.

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