

# Letters

## Critique of Hirsch

Ironically, while E. D. Hirsch, Jr., dismisses the critique of his work by Estes, Gutman, and Harrison as a caricature ("The Best Answer to a Caricature Is a Practical Program," September 1988), in his book Hirsch himself dismisses—and distorts—the work of John Dewey by caricaturing Dewey's educational theory. Hirsch (mis)represents Dewey as an advocate of the child-centered curriculum. In fact, Dewey saw in the educational experience a synthesis of the natures of the child, the subject, and the wider society. Hirsch's analysis of Dewey's work, however, is not enough to uncover the complexities of Dewey's philosophy of curriculum.

The reason for Hirsch's error on this point seems apparent: he is working without a substantive knowledge of the literature of the field of education in general and of curriculum in particular. Yet his prescriptions are beginning to influence school programs across the country.

Professional educators need to protect public education, taxpayers, and our youth from the potentially miseducative proposals of special interests operating with inadequate knowledge of the field of education.

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## Research and the Realities of Schools

In a symposium at the 1984 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, the proponents of four instructional models described how those models had been presented to the staff of school districts in Maryland four years earlier as part of the state's School Improvement Through Instructional Process (SITIP). Speakers included Bob Slavin, who discussed cooperative learning, and Jim Block, who discussed mastery

learning. My role was to discuss results of a four-year study of the implementation of the four models. Conditions of implementation were the same for all models. Data for the SITIP study were collected through surveys, document analyses (including analysis of student achievement data provided by the 24 participating districts), interviews, and on-site observations. Here I would like to respond to Bob Slavin's comments ("On Research and School Organization," October 1988) by referring to some of the results of the SITIP study.

I agree that "how it's done" is critical—for mastery learning or any other instructional model. In the SITIP study, fidelity for mastery learning was defined as a set of six essential components: scope and sequence of objectives (not always "chopped into little pieces" as Slavin suggests), curriculum alignment, "no fault" and summative testing, provision of corrective instruction to students scoring below 80 percent mastery on the "no fault" test, and documentation of student progress. Slavin's example of a 10-day instructional unit and his assumption of loss of two days' time-on-task does not match my experience in looking at implementation of mastery learning in nine school systems (49 schools). Strategies for corrective instruction did include in-class teacher-directed group instruction in some cases, but also included various forms of cooperative and individualized instruction, both in and out of regular class time. Use of strategies was determined by the teachers involved, none of whom would tolerate "craziness [with] no bearing on what they [do] on a day-to-day basis" (p. 29).

The issue of research design is difficult. Of the nine districts using mastery learning in SITIP, only two systematically collected data using standardized achievement tests, and only one of those used experimental and control sites. The latter, Baltimore County, reported that for one year of implementation in mathematics, "3rd

and 4th grade mastery learning students gained averages of 22 and 16 percentile points, respectively, compared with a 5 percentile point gain for non-mastery learning students" (Kozlovsky 1986). In this district, by the end of the 1983-84 school year, over 500 students in 10 schools (about equally divided between experimental and control conditions) were involved. Other data from all mastery learning sites indicated that student achievement did improve, as did teachers' knowledge of research of effective teaching and skill in instruction. (These effects on students and teachers were defined as instructional gain.) Overall, teachers and administrators considered that mastery learning was worth the work they invested; they valued their investment in curric-

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ulum alignment and exploration and application of new instructional strategies, but considered record keeping too time-consuming.

Of the four instructional models presented in 1980, by June 1984 mastery learning was being used by 711 teachers; cooperative learning was being used by 200 teachers. The average number of years for teacher involvement was about the same for both models. However, mastery learning teachers used the model for an average of several months in that school year and for 43 percent of their weekly teaching time, while cooperative learning teachers used that model for five months for 19 percent of their weekly teaching time. Fidelity was higher for mastery learning than for cooperative learning, in part because there was greater administrative press for the former. Teacher and administrator ratings indicated that cooperative learning was most popular with students, but achievement increased most for mastery learning. No standardized test data were provided for cooperative learning. It should be noted that teachers and administrators did test student achievement, usually with criterion-referenced tests. "The single strongest influence on plans (for future use of a model) was student achievement results (62.91 percent), followed by improvement in teachers' instructional skills (49.65 percent). Achievement of a local priority and liking for SITIP were about equally influential" (Roberts and Kenney 1984).

The SITIP study concluded that, for the two models under discussion here, greater instructional gain was likely for mastery learning, with best results shown for elementary mathematics. Cooperative learning resulted in less instructional gain since educators used it sporadically.

While researchers such as Slavin may choose to ignore data from studies that do not conform to experimental designs including use of control

groups, the realities of schools and districts more readily permit quasi-experimental designs. Such designs comply with protection of human subjects laws maintaining local control of students' grades and scores and protect policymakers from protesting parents who argue for equity in program use and avoidance of nonrelevant testing. The business of teachers is curriculum, instruction, and nurturing children's development. The business of administrators is the management of the local community. Only very rarely can resources be used for research. The Catch 22 suggested by Slavin is that cost-effective education should use "proven" models; but researchers can't reach consensus (and spend too much energy trying to prove the value of a pet theory at the expense of others), and practitioners have more pressing business.

After 12 years in research and development, I am now employed by a school district, trying to apply what I believe to be exemplary practice and research in a 3rd grade classroom. I do not use any one model to the exclusion of others, but combine mas-

tery learning with Tom Good's active teaching and use cooperative learning strategies also. The immediacy of the classroom allows me to apply only those strategies over which I have executive control. Metacognition is a luxury.

I'm tempted to spend more time on this letter, to explore research questions that Bob Slavin and others might address. However, I have to plan a science project and deal with a new language arts curriculum. If I mind that business, I know it will make a difference: I'll leave the arguments of research to others.

#### References

- Kozlovsky, J.D. (1986). "Making Mastery Learning Work: Part II District Level Implementation." *Outcomes* 5, 2: 41-53.
- Roberts, J.M.E., and J.L. Kenney. (1984). *Institutionalization of Statewide Instructional Improvement (Executive Summary)*. Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools.

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