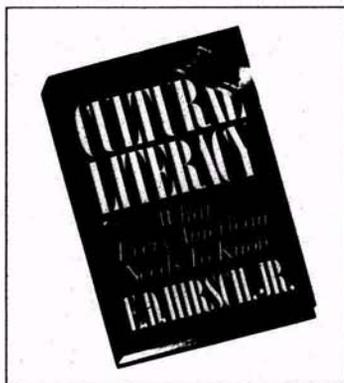


Basic Skills Are Not Enough



At a moment in the history of American schooling when the acculturation of millions of new Americans looms as a critical problem, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., has contributed an important book. Like education critics William Bennett, Diane Ravitch, and Chester Finn, Hirsch sees a decline in the literate knowledge required to cope and thrive in our society. He argues that proficiency in basic skills is not sufficient preparation for life; to participate in today's world, citizens need general knowledge that enables them to deal with new ideas, events, and challenges. This general knowledge—what he calls *cultural literacy*—is needed both to comprehend books, newspapers, and film (which assume a "common reader" who "knows the things known by other literate persons in the culture") and to serve as a reservoir of understanding in facing changing tasks and achieving social goals. Who can understand the ideas and ideals of Thomas Jefferson or Martin Luther King, Jr., unless nourished on the same food?

Hirsch's argument is not new, but it is cogently reasoned. Like the articulate proponents of a general liberal arts education 40 years ago (when American educators last seriously considered general education), Hirsch peppers his discussion with illustrations. He sees early schooling as particularly significant in introducing children to our literary and mythic heritage and draws heavily on empirical research in reading that documents the contributions of background knowledge to comprehension. He does, however, seem surprisingly unaware of the 51-year-old work of I.A. Richards (*Practical Criticism*) and Louise Rosenblatt (*Literature as Exploration*), who were among the first to show us that the knowledge and experience readers bring to a piece of literature influence not only the quali-

ty of the reader's experience but the adequacy of the reader's understanding.

Hirsch is particularly impressive in describing the formation of national cultures and the ways in which American diversity and cultural pluralism can be defended only by those who understand it. He is on shakier ground in writing about the loss of a curriculum consensus in American schools and the rise of a fragmented curriculum. A lack of attention to providing a common cultural core is characteristic of school programs today, but blaming the condition on elementary school reading programs seems simplistic, the more so since until recently few educational or scholarly leaders have even addressed the general cultural conditions of our society. (Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* finds directly parallel conditions to be characteristic of higher education today. Something more than inadequate basal reading programs has clearly been at work.)

But criticism of some of Hirsch's documentation should not deflect us from recognizing the merit of his overall argument. At a moment when the National Assessment of Educational Progress is about to report on the degree of cultural knowledge that children and young people possess, this is an important book to which curriculum specialists must attend.

Still, a 69-page appendix presenting a detailed list of the knowledge about literature, language, history, and science that every American should know is really unnerving. Prepared with two of Hirsch's colleagues at the University of Virginia, the list seems arbitrary and irritating. Why must Americans know the dates for our two world wars, for example, and not the dates for the signing of the Magna Carta or the French Revolution, which in the long run probably contributed more to western culture? Why is *Chicken Little* included but not *Three Billy Goats Gruff*? Why not "The Concord Hymn" and "The Second Inaugural Address" if we seek to understand American traditions? Why Greta Garbo and Marilyn Monroe and not Katharine Hepburn or Elizabeth Taylor? The danger of lists of this kind is that they quickly become regarded as definitive.

One cannot but worry that the assessors of cultural literacy will pounce on the Hirsch list as the basis for selection of test items. Or that curriculum specialists may parcel out these minutiae of content into traditional scope and sequence requirements. Hirsch fortunately concedes that the list is "preliminary." But will it be regarded as such? Presumably a revision will appear in time. And regarded as the initial salvo in a national effort to redefine the common experiences of our curriculum—perhaps 20 percent of our curriculum, although this might vary with level and subject—specificity may be useful. Certainly it should not be dismissed as a cultural trivia game designed only for use in faculty lounges or in graduate seminars.

I find one dimension of Hirsch's argument particularly disturbing: his willingness to accept "mentioning" or "telling about" works of literature or events as the equivalent of experiencing or understanding them. Thus, teachers who find themselves unable

to bring student readers into real contact with *Macbeth* or *Robinson Crusoe* can present only the title or the story of the work, and not worry about the literary experience. This may meet the standard that Hirsch and his colleagues establish for achieving cultural knowledge, which almost exclusively concerns itself with recognition vocabulary, but it clearly does not present the literary experience in the profound ways detailed by Richards, Rosenblatt, and many of the researchers who have written about background knowledge and schema theory.

Better, it seems to me, to identify a

small number of literary or cultural experiences that all children need to share together; and then develop ways of bringing books and readers together. As our best teachers know, some literary pieces and some concepts require intensive teaching. If the number of such critical moments in instruction is not too great, we can do far more than we have in the recent past to introduce young people to major cultural experiences. Readers need help in entering literary experiences beyond their normal grasp, but, properly prompted, they can enter them. One of the functions of the school

must be to define those necessary experiences in education for which "a man's reach must exceed his grasp," and to provide the help for young people so that they, too, can share in "the best that is known and thought" in the world. Not all our curriculum offerings can be circumscribed by the demands of becoming culturally literate, but surely some of them must be. □

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— GRETCHEN SCHWARZ —

A Good Idea Gone Wrong

Unfortunately, the thoughtful advice Hirsch does offer may be overshadowed by the narrow vision it may prompt policymakers to adopt in yet another attempt to "reform" American schooling.

A better title for E. D. Hirsch's best-seller might be *Cultural Literacy: How Good Ideas Go Wrong*. The major theme is significant: "We will be able to achieve a just and prosperous society only when our schools ensure that everyone commands enough shared knowledge to be able to communicate effectively with everyone else" (p. 32). No argument there. The discussion of schema theory and reading comprehension is also worthwhile. Highly debatable, however, are Hirsch's dismissal of cognitive development theory and his shotgun attack on the critical thinking movement, which he derides as "the latest version of educational formalism."

Most alarming, though, is the implicit assumption that a core curriculum is the panacea for American education. Hirsch's offhand remark, "Of

course, we must always present material to children in an interesting way" (p. 130) reflects the worst danger of the back-to-basics mentality, namely, the notion that education is a matter of serving up tasty bits of information, which students can then spit back on cue. Hirsch's 64-page alphabetical list of "What Literate Americans Know" is therefore alarming, not because it is too elitist or too content-specific. It is disturbing because it presents cultural concepts as unconnected, all equally important "bites" out of context of the disciplines from which ideas arise, and removed from the human context of individual learners and educators.

To redesign curriculum without addressing issues of methodology and the nature of knowledge itself, school organization, and the partnership of school, home, and community in the educational process is to guarantee a

continued decline in cultural literacy. Curriculum is an interwoven element in what John Goodlad calls the school "ecosystem." *How Americans can gain shared knowledge is as essential a question as what knowledge is shared, and there is no easy answer; no simple list will do.*

Inssofar as *Cultural Literacy* encourages informed national debate on curriculum, it is a valuable book. Inssofar as the narrow vision of the book tempts politicians to prescribe one more facelift of American schooling, another good idea will have gone wrong. □

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