

literature. Further, while major changes in the curriculum had apparently already taken place by the time of Anderson's 1964 survey (only 12 of her titles were on the 1907 list), changes in the curriculum have continued to be made to these mid-century changes; only 18 of the 43 books on Applebee's 1989 survey are on Anderson's 1964 list, and only 16 of the 45 books on the NEATE survey are on Anderson's list. Finally, many major characters in the most frequently assigned works of fiction are now adolescents—as in *The Pearl* and *Romeo and Juliet*—and many of the top 40 or so titles for grades 7-12 are now suitable for students with moderate reading ability.

To judge by these lists, there does not seem to be any strong evidence for the existence of a canon in high school literature programs over the past century, if by a canon we mean a group of literary works remaining essentially unchanged from decade to decade. We do not yet know how much the content of contemporary secondary school anthologies has changed over the century, but the surveys noted here clearly indicate a cultural change over the course of the 20th century in the major works now read in the schools. Perhaps results from future surveys of contemporary anthologies will help us determine whether this cultural transformation is reflected in these texts as well.

Nor is it clear that a majority of our students today read the same works. Almost 800 titles were listed by the 322 schools in Applebee's survey. The 132 teachers in the NEATE study named 720 unique titles, only 328 of which were mentioned two or more times, and only 12 of which were mentioned by 20 or more teachers. The results of the NEATE survey, especially, suggest that one teacher's literature program may be quite different from another's, if not from teacher to teacher in a school, then at least from school to school.

Questions to Consider

Although we should rejoice that

What a 1st Grader's Parent Needs to Know

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In 1987, E.D. Hirsch Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy* quickly became the center of debate over what our children should know. You either hated it, or you loved it. Now the first two volumes of *The Core Knowledge Series*, *What Your 1st Grader Needs to Know* and *What Your 2nd Grader Needs to Know*, edited by Hirsch (Doubleday, 1991), purport to offer the "fundamentals of a good 1st (or 2nd) grade education." With industry, government, and interest groups exerting pressure for increased student achievement, the debate over whose curriculum to teach will become even hotter.

Highlighting the fundamentals of language arts, geography, world and

American civilization, fine arts, science, and mathematics, both books are compact, with fewer than 300 pages of text, pictures, and brief suggestions for use. They are being mass-marketed to parents and schools through bookstores and supermarkets.

To parents, the books recommend discussing the material with their children "20 minutes per school day in the academic year." In homes where time to read and access to literature is limited, the anthology of poetry, stories, and essays, though small, is useful. To educators, the books offer only a skeleton for a core curriculum. The content will be familiar to most teachers, with many old favorites from children's literature. The information is intended to supplement, not replace, classroom materials—to be used "about 40 to 50 percent of

students' instructional time."

If these recommendations are followed, the series might be useful. However, Hirsch seems to imply a questionable cause-and-effect relationship between this core curriculum and student achievement. Two other implicit reasons for a balanced core of shared knowledge are at least as significant: the importance of continuity of instruction in a mobile society and the need for a shared foundation of accurate data from which to make meaning. The former makes the case for a common sequence of content area coverage, the latter for factual content. This does not exclude the need for thinking skills, although readers might infer this from the absence of discussion about how to use the materials most effectively.

American high school students now tend to be exposed to a predominantly "Americo-centric" literature program insofar as major titles are concerned, my analysis of the changes in these top titles raises a number of questions for English teachers and coordinators (Stotsky 1991a). I raise these only as questions because I believe that university researchers should not presume to tell high school educators what they should or should not do.

Intellectual content. First are questions about intellectual content. Are we in danger of losing our poetic heritage, the influence of the language and ideas of the 19th century British and American poets who have been among the most gifted writers of the

English language? Further, are today's students sufficiently exposed to adventure stories or works of humor to stimulate strong reading habits? In addition, are our most able readers studying works of fiction and nonfiction as intellectually complex and as challenging in vocabulary as students 100 years ago studied? Or have we "dumbed down" the curriculum for all students in a legitimate effort to accommodate an extremely broad range of students? The brevity and the vocabulary in many contemporary works raise this concern. Conversely, are we patronizing many less able readers and denying them an opportunity to become acquainted with longer, more thematically complex, and lexi-

cally challenging works?

Moral content. No less important are questions about moral content. Have we distorted or arrested character development in our students by providing excessive exposure to juvenile protagonists in the works they read? Should more characters of intellectual and moral maturity be available as role models in the literature they read? My concern is not the absence of moral issues (most contemporary works contain moral issues) but the absence of morally mature characters in contemporary works, of all ethnic and racial groups, "white" and "nonwhite," and of both genders.

For example, I've been unable to find any teacher who assigns *Maggie's*

The series will certainly draw fire for its seemingly "Eurocentric" bias and quite possibly for arbitrary choices of material for inclusion. Also, the highly condensed format — for example, words and letters, sentences and paragraphs, and punctuation marks all explained in four pages for grade 1 — may lead lay readers to believe that this is an adequate treatment of the material — a most unfortunate conclusion. Finally, coverage of content is not balanced: it's notably thin in science and mathematics, and there's no explicit treatment of technology or interdisciplinarity, nor any effort to integrate content between sections.

In addition to these concerns, prospective buyers should be aware of three issues. First, use by parents without substantial preparation and coordination with in-school instruction may further confuse children about what is expected of them, especially because the book's presentation is at odds with what is now known about how children learn.

Second, the books may be seen as a quick fix by both parents and teachers. Consequently, they may become a limiting standard for scope and sequence, rather than a partial platform on which to build a more comprehensive curriculum reflecting local needs.

Third, the focus on building a base of factual information underplays the importance of maintaining a balance between fact acquisition and development of the intellectual skills needed to use that base appropriately to solve problems of importance to the child.

As yet, no reliable empirical data document the costs and benefits of using *The Core Knowledge Series*. Anecdotal information based almost entirely on one school's experience is favorable. In September 1991, the Brown Foundation convened a panel of international educators in Houston to discuss Hirsch's concept of a nationwide core curriculum. The 60 educators generally supported the concept without going so far as to endorse Hirsch's particular selection

of content and sequence.

The concept of a balanced core of common knowledge and skills for all students is important. With a rising rate of transience in our society, a nationwide sequence of instruction is essential if students are to fulfill their learning potentials. Given that the time devoted to formal schooling is inadequate to meet the demands placed upon it, parental involvement in schooling is vital. Practically speaking, the marketplace is the only platform we have for developing a national consensus on the content of a core curriculum, and Hirsch is there first.

This series will be most useful when seen as a preliminary model, one of many attempts to form a consensus on curriculum certain to follow. The essential benefits that can evolve from a discussion of core curriculum should not be lost as the nits are picked. □

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