

The Influential E.D. Hirsch

Hirsch's message strikes a chord with many teachers and parents. But what are the assumptions behind Hirsch's prescription for school reform? And will his proposals get us where we need to go?

By **Walter Feinberg**

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There is no disputing the influence of E.D. Hirsch, Jr. A familiar figure to parents, teachers and administrators, his books – ranging from *Cultural Literacy*, to his "Core Knowledge Series," to his most recent book, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* – can be found in bookstores across the country. Both conservatives such as Chester Finn and liberals such as Henry Louis Gates have supported his "Core Knowledge Series."

Beneath the appealing titles and approaches, what is Hirsch's basic message? What are the assumptions underpinning his message? Most important, what are the implications of Hirsch's approach to education in a multicultural society?

Hirsch's first book, *Cultural Literacy*, strongly insinuates that economic equality rests on uniformity of subject matter in school, in the view that poor people are at a disadvantage in the economic marketplace mainly because they lack baseline "content knowledge." His most recent book, *The Schools We Need*, argues that the misguided ideas of progressive education are responsible for much of the academic ills of the poor, because such ideas have led to anarchy in school curriculum and prevented uniformity of subject matter.

Hirsch's basic message is that there is important subject matter, or content, that all students need to learn, that this content should be appropriately sequenced and uniformly paced, and that there should be objective measurement of whether students master the content. According to Hirsch, sequencing has to do with the logic of the subject matter and not the "age readiness" of the child, a concept which he dismisses with considerable scorn. He argues that children need to master the simpler elements of content before they can move on to more complex ones, and that all children at a certain grade should receive this material at approximately the same time without wasteful repetition from one year to the next.

In his emphasis on content, Hirsch rejects the idea that students can learn the tools of inquiry, or how to learn, without learning the content entailed in specific subjects. He defends the use of memory and repeated practice and believes that they have been neglected because of an overemphasis on progressive education techniques – which, he further claims, dominate U.S. schools. Hirsch is also a defender of whole class instruction because he believes that it is often the most efficient way of delivering knowledge and skills, and is a harsh critic of "the project method." Finally, Hirsch argues that the facts and skills that children should be taught in school must be continually measured by "objective" tests, and that those who fail should receive remedial work and, if necessary, repeat the grade.

It's hard to argue with Hirsch's basic message that curriculum is important. But Hirsch's message is part of a broader package of ideas about what's happening in U.S. classrooms and schools, about the role of education in the economy, and about the very meaning of "meaning."

Classroom Issues

First, let's take a look at Hirsch's assumptions about classroom life. In his books, Hirsch writes as if every district, every school, and, indeed, every classroom teacher is free to interpret and teach the subject matter as their wills dictate. Based on this assumption, he believes there are insufficient pressures on teachers and schools to promote uniformity.

Hirsch assumes, without evidence, that most classroom teachers are the educational descendants of progressive educators like William Kilpatrick, and that most classrooms are dominated by the project method and other progressive innovations. Unfortunately, he mistakes the talk of some professors of education, often misconstrued and taken out of context, as the

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reality of the American public school. He provides an image of the typical classroom as some Deweyesque laboratory school where children or their teachers do whatever they want, whenever they want.

This is not just an historical issue. If Hirsch is wrong – if, for example, progressive educators have not been successful in wiping out rote memory from the classroom, if this be their intent, or if, as some studies have shown, rote memory is more common in schools with large numbers of poor and minority children – then he misunderstands the cause of classroom failure.

Hirsch, for example, neglects to analyze the multiple influences on teachers, or the extent to which teachers may even use the "project method" or other related pedagogies. He certainly provides no surveys of teachers to discover what their classrooms are actually like. In fact, Hirsch fails to acknowledge that a lot of testing goes on in schools of the kind he supports. Nor does he acknowledge that such testing is increasing so rapidly that there is considerable concern about the effects of over-testing children. As a result, Hirsch tells us what he thinks are the costs of progressive methods, but not what might be the costs of a heavy reliance on tests.

Equally important, in his emphasis on content, Hirsch underestimates the importance of pedagogy. His view of education emphasizes teacher talking to students, rather than listening to them – but more on this later.

School-Level Assumptions

In his books, Hirsch reinforces the unrefined view that American schools are failing at all levels and for all children. Yet given this claim, he cannot adequately explain the admittedly superior quality of American colleges and universities – nor the fact that progressive pedagogy is more likely to be used among children from upper-income homes.

On the all-important issue of race, Hirsch rejects the view that racism accounts for the problem with many schools in the inner city. He deals with the problem of racism by folding it into his overall concern with schools' failure to provide a core curriculum to all students. In his analysis, Hirsch fails to consider that race, class, and gender influence both content and the way it is presented, and, moreover, that they influence it in a way that reproduces patterns of dominance in our society.

Hirsch is rightly concerned about the high mobility of poor and minority children. He believes that a unified core curriculum from school to school would help significantly. Yet to require that all schools and all children be given this core curriculum seems radical and unworkable, especially since he doesn't consider less drastic alternatives, such as allowing children to finish the year wherever they began school or, for children who move out of the district, providing extra help to ease the transition to a new school. (Interestingly, in his more recent presentations, Hirsch seems to back off from his emphasis on a single core curriculum, apparently forgetting his concern for poor students who move frequently.)

The Social/Economic Level

One of Hirsch's concerns is economic equality. Many scholars have pointed out the problems of simplistically equating economic equality with improved schooling. They argue that there are structural economic inequalities that go beyond whether or not one has a high school or college degree. Hirsch fails to address these critics.

Instead of carefully considering such scholarship, he opposes it with a subtle patrician style – "The children of the poor ... should learn the value of hard work"¹ – and by a shallow analysis of poverty and the condition of American education. He simply does not even try to consider the effect of the Reagan/Bush/Gingrich policies on poverty. Furthermore, Hirsch is silent even about the most obvious relationship between economic policy and poverty – unequal school financing.

Hirsch also reinforces the questionable link between international achievement on standardized tests and national economic performance. He fails to acknowledge that, at least in terms of standard measures of productivity, the American economy has been humming along quite well in recent years. Meanwhile, the economies of nations such as Japan, whose students score higher on these international tests, have stagnated.

Hirsch uses Japan's and France's more standardized educational system to argue that our decentralized one is a primary cause of inequality. In the case of Japan, he claims that its greater equality of academic achievement across social classes is the reason for its greater degree of economic equality. Yet Hirsch fails to mention that at the lower grades, many Japanese schools have been heavily influenced by progressive education. Further, the American commission that worked to restructure Japan's education system after the Second World War advocated progressive educational ideals, discouraging memorization and promoting "independent thinking." Moreover, the achievement of Japanese children has much to do with the fact that the school year is longer and that Japanese parents spend considerable private resources tutoring their children if they start to fall behind their peers.

Contrary to Hirsch, the greater income equality in Japan is not caused by greater equality in academic performance, although both coexist. In fact, the dependent economic situation of Japanese women with high academic backgrounds is one striking counter example to his claim that high academic performance causes high income. (This oversight is indicative of a larger problem with Hirsch's work – the way it serves to wash out sex, as well as race, as explanatory factors in educational or income achievement.) Further, in

Japan, both equality of income (for men) and equality of achievement are manifestations of a stronger communal ideology.

An Alternative Philosophy of Education

The above-mentioned critiques of Hirsch are important. But the most fundamental problem with Hirsch's work is that he has an inadequate understanding of the character of education.

The problem can be seen clearly by looking at what Hirsch says about meaning: "Whether a word is learned by targeted practice or by the contextual method of enriched language use, its actual meaning is, for the most part, just a brute fact. In a sense, all words are learned by rote."² Given this view, the way in which meaning is learned is incidental, as is the role of the teacher. Meaning is meaning and it doesn't matter much how it is delivered. Adults have it and children are expected to learn it.

This is the crux of Hirsch's theory. His books are embellishments, telling us why children do not share enough meaning with adults and how to get them to do so. If his assumption is correct, then schools will work if teachers and students do what they are told.

Hirsch's philosophy is based on what is sometimes called a transmission view of meaning: teachers hold meaning in their heads and their job is to transmit it in the most efficient way to the heads of students. Whole class instruction, telling, and rote memorization are frequently seen as the most effective means for accomplishing this. And standardized tests are the most effective way to tell if the task has been accomplished. (I suspect this is why, in analyzing uneven academic achievement, Hirsch does not examine factors such as class size and unequal funding.)

But there is an alternative view to how children learn, one best described as "transactional." Not surprisingly, this approach is advocated by many of the progressive educators whom Hirsch dismisses.³

This view takes meaning as a social activity, one that originates in interaction and the social needs of people. Meaning is a doing – and that doing also involves reading, listening, talking, and writing. These interactions help us to be conscious of our purposes, to reflect on them and, when appropriate, to change them.

In the transactional view, meaning is not a one-sided "brute fact," static and unchanging. Rather, meaning has both a crystallized and a fluid quality. The crystallized quality focuses on the constraints, the existing "meaning." The fluid quality focuses on the possibility for development and change.

How does this relate to education? A transactional approach does not believe that the role of schools is just to transfer meaning from one head to another. In the transactional view, the goal of education is to refine the process of making meaning, through the interactions that occur between writer, reader, and text, between teacher, student, and text, and between different students. In the transactional view, meanings change over time and are connected to experience. Because a child's experience cannot be assumed by a teacher, teaching must allow for hearing and seeing – for listening to and interacting with the child.

The more cultures diverge, the more this work has to be done – and the less we can rely on decontextualized "telling" and "rote" memorizing.

Rote memorization is most successful when a large network of cultural meaning is already shared and meaning can be anchored in a larger, assumed set of associations and purposes. There is surely room for targeted practice to take place, where in some extended sense of the term teachers "tell" and students learn by "rote." But it is critical to develop classrooms where telling does not dominate and where teachers engage students in serious conversations, activities, and projects – not only with themselves but with other students – and where teachers listen as much as they talk.

Granted, whole-class, teacher-centered instruction has certain benefits. But such an approach is not sufficient if we are also to teach children to learn across their differences. Students need a pedagogy that will help them to engage their differences with one another and to challenge taken-for-granted meanings. When such an approach is discouraged, it becomes more difficult to challenge conventional meanings, especially those that are presented as nonpolitical.

Consider, as an example, Hirsch's treatment of Vietnam for sixth-graders in his "Core Knowledge Series."

In the book, Hirsch writes that he intends this section to be read as an evenhanded, objective treatment of the war, taking into account the position of "hawks" and "doves." He mentions that some protesters viewed the conflict as a civil war that the United States should have had little to do with. However, his over-narrative, or the seemingly anonymous, neutral voice commenting on the conflicting views, reinforces the idea that Vietnam was a war against communism and not a civil war, and that the other side fought dirty by pretending to be civilians (rather than real civilians defending their homeland), and that large-scale protests at home wore down the U.S. war effort.

Hirsch mentions the killings at Kent State University (where white students were killed) but not at Jackson State (where Black students were killed) and chalks them up to the inexperience of the citizen soldiers. But he does not mention the inflammatory rhetoric of the political elite in which the shootings took place. Nor does he mention that the protest at Kent State was in

book price. He does not mention that the protest at North State was in response to the devastating and illegal bombing of Cambodia by the United States, nor that the war flamed up (after the French left) after our government refused to support an internationally sponsored election because we did not believe that our side could win.⁴

Hirsch's representation of this as a nonpolitical treatment is one example of the confusion between the conventional and the political. It is also an example of the way discussions of this episode in our recent history have been muted by the presentation of "facts." More to the point, Hirsch's pedagogy allows few opportunities to challenge these facts because they are presented in terms of an essential framework that all students should assimilate.

The Evolution of E. D. Hirsch

If one listens carefully to Hirsch these days, especially as he speaks to audiences that are more sophisticated about educational matters, one can hear a change in tone and a slight recognition that there may be more to schooling than curriculum. Hirsch now says he wants schools to have a core curriculum, but no, it need not be his. Different schools might even have different cores. (This admission, however, is hard to reconcile with his belief that a single, inter-school core is best for highly mobile poor children.)

In more recent remarks, Hirsch portrays the core curriculum as less of a prescription and more of a guide to help teachers in a school think collectively about their goals and communicate them to parents. He now speaks of his proposal not as the cure for all the ills of schools but, like a vitamin, one of several nutrients that schools need.

This new Hirsch is emerging after considerable criticism of his work. But there is an important question of whether the old and the new Hirsch are really compatible. In his newer incarnation, Hirsch does little to acknowledge the impact of his critics. Thus while the "old" Hirsch appears as a stone fortress, keeping out alien ideas, the "new" Hirsch seems more like a sponge that dissolves otherness by absorbing it into itself.

It could be argued that this new Hirsch was present all along in the "ifs, ands, buts, and maybes" of the old. Or it could be argued that the new Hirsch is simply trying to make the old more palatable to people who think that other things – children's interest, self esteem, motivation, experience, etc – do matter, and that just throwing vitamins at the schools will not solve their problems.

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Portions of this article first appeared in Feinberg, W., "Educational Manifestos and the New Fundamentalism," Essay Review of E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them, Educational Researcher, Nov. 1997, pp. 27-35, and Feinberg, W., "Rejoinder: Meaning, Pedagogy and Curriculum Development," Educational Researcher, Oct. 1998, pp. 30-37.

Footnotes

¹ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 7. He is describing Gramsci's view here, but it is quite doubtful that Gramsci would have thought that the main reason children are poor is because they do not understand the value of hard work.

² Ibid., p.111.

³ These would include Dewey as well as Friere, although in quite different ways.

⁴ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., ed., *What Your 6th Grader Needs to Know: Fundamentals of a Good Sixth-Grade Education* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), pp. 217-23.

Spring 1999

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