

yet its brief coverage of many of the core issues in the crisis make it only one of several pieces of required reading.

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The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools

E. D. Hirsch Jr.

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Historian David Tyack breaks educational progressives into two types: pedagogical and administrative (Tyack 1974). The former are champions of “child-centered” instruction in the classroom, while the latter want centralized, government control of the schools.

The last century has been good to anyone who embraces both types of progressivism. But for E. D. Hirsch Jr.—who reveres government schooling but hates progressive pedagogy—it has been deeply frustrating. And as his new book, *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools* makes clear, that frustration is likely to continue. For politically progressive reasons, Hirsch won’t break with the system that has given progressive pedagogy a stranglehold.

Literature-turned-education professor Hirsch is probably best known for his “cultural literacy” crusade. His 1987 book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* resided on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 26 weeks and was a major flashpoint in the culture wars of the 1980s. At about the same time the book came out, Hirsch founded the Core Knowledge Foundation and assembled curricula based on his theories.

What does it mean to be “culturally literate,” according to Hirsch? Ultimately, to possess the shared knowledge necessary to fully interact with other members of one’s society; to have all the historical, literary, and other knowledge that constitutes a community’s culture. Because culture changes slowly, and is, naturally, based largely on what was prominent in the past, this corpus of knowledge consists of much that is often considered dead-white-male stuff in America.

There is an important side benefit to cultural literacy: actual literacy. Research cited by Hirsch demonstrates that effective reading requires not just the ability to decode letter sounds, but also previous knowledge of much of what is being read. You need to start off

understanding a lot in a reading selection to focus on what is new. Otherwise, reading can be much like trying to comprehend a story about a baseball game without knowing what “pitchers,” “strikes,” or “innings” are. You can read the words, but comprehension is hopeless.

Cultural literacy’s inherently “traditionalist” focus has put Hirsch at odds with pedagogical progressives, who believe, broadly, that the best way to educate a child is to let him pursue what draws his attention, not force him to learn a set body of knowledge. It’s a philosophy typified by the notion that the teacher should be “a guide on the side,” not “a sage on the stage.” Many progressives have also come to view core curricula as oppressive, intended to force on children the biases of those in power.

Unfortunately for Hirsch and the millions of students who could have benefited from the kind of curriculum he advocates, progressive educators have had near-monopoly power over colleges of education and the public schools since at least the 1930s. Indeed, progressive dominance has been so great according to Hirsch that it has created a “thoughtworld,” an impenetrable space in which nothing but progressive pedagogy is allowed to exist (Hirsch 1996).

The outcome of this suffocating dominance, Hirsch contends, has been the opposite of what progressives should desire. Rather than giving the poorest children the means for upward mobility, it denies them the intellectual currency they need to succeed in the culture. By not providing the shared knowledge necessary to understand and participate in American society—knowledge wealthier children get at home, private schools, or good public schools—progressive educators have crippled low-income students.

So how does Hirsch propose to get content-rich curricula to kids? Hirsch’s answer to this question is not convincing. Selectively reading history and disregarding his own lamentations about the thoughtworld, Hirsch sacrifices the best hope for combating pedagogical progressivism—school choice—to his politically progressive conviction that only government schooling is consistent with democracy. Rather than freeing education from the thoughtworld-enforcing government monopoly, Hirsch calls for a reality-defying “intellectual revolution in public opinion” that will result in a rigorous, common curriculum for all public schools (pp. 185–88).

At the hollow foundation of Hirsch’s “solution” is the factually dubious assertion that education—especially government-run edu-

cation—has always been understood as essential to the survival of a free, American republic.

Latching onto James Madison's famous fear of factions, for instance, Hirsch asserts that in *Federalist* No. 55 Madison expresses a need for "far more than checks and balances in the structure of the national government. We would also need a special new brand of citizens who . . . would subordinate their local interests to the common good" (p. 4). From there Hirsch moves to "early thinkers about education," who were supposedly convinced that "the only way we could create such virtuous, civic-minded citizens was through common schooling" (p. 5).

This is an egregious misrepresentation of *Federalist* No. 55. Madison says nothing of needing a "new brand of citizens," but instead writes that more than any other form of government a republic "presupposes the existence" of good qualities *already* in men. Moreover, *Federalist* No. 55 is clear that the republic will not stand if we rely on the decency of human beings or education, intoning famously that "had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob."

Like his twisting of *Federalist* No. 55, Hirsch misrepresents history by repeatedly citing founders such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush who were proponents of government-run education, while ignoring overall reality. From the early colonial period well into the 19th century—when the nation was formed and its foundational principles established—there was little "public schooling," as we would define it today, with no states having compulsory schooling laws and education primarily conducted in private or voluntary community settings. Moreover, most early Americans simply did not envision a major government role in education, nor did they see schooling as critical to a free society. Indeed, in his lifetime Jefferson never got even the rudimentary public schooling system he wanted for Virginia because too few Virginians supported it.

This is not to say that the education that occurred—and there was much of it—did not teach children a common, American culture. Look no further than sales of the famous, intentionally "American" spellers of Noah Webster. By 1829, 20 million copies of the spellers were in circulation, though the entire population of the United States was less than 13 million (Urban and Wagoner 2004: 81). And they were ubiquitous because people freely bought them.

Unfortunately, Hirsch's paradoxical conviction that government education is necessary to maintain a free society forces him to look past public schooling's political reality: that the people employed by the system have by far the most power over it, and it is in their interest to promote a "child-centered" curriculum that makes their jobs easier and more pleasant.

Ticking off core curriculum defeats in Tennessee, Illinois, Hawaii, and Texas, Hirsch all but admits as much. As he writes about Texas, "Teachers and administrators turned out in force to denounce the idea of inserting specific guidance onto the state standards—exerting a social and political pressure that the [state] board could not resist" (pp. 172–79).

Sadly, Hirsch's political progressivism does more than force him to embrace the system that hates him. It also compels him to attack what has been his best friend: school choice. According to the Core Knowledge Foundation's 2008 *Annual Report*, schools of choice such as charter and private schools make up 56 percent of all Core Knowledge schools while encompassing only about 30 percent of schools nationwide (Core Knowledge Foundation 2008: 11). Nonetheless, Hirsch shuns choice because it doesn't fit into his unity-through-government ideal. Indeed, in just two sentences Hirsch attacks choice and demonstrates the illogic of his anti-choice position:

When parents are asked if they think there should be a definite core curriculum in elementary schools, they generally say yes. When the school-choice movement focuses sharply on expanding parents' options, it is concerned with the freedom to choose different schools, but it does not offer parents the possibility of a common, coherent curriculum [p. 59].

Other than choice by its very nature not *forcing* one curriculum on all children, these two sentences practically scream at Hirsch to embrace educational freedom. After all, if parents generally want a core curriculum, surely more children would be exposed to one if parents could choose schools than get one under the status quo. Indeed, as Diane Ravitch, a historian and friend frequently cited by Hirsch, has related, parents generally wanted to maintain academic curricula during the rise of progressive education, but eventually had

nowhere to run (Ravitch 2000: 283). Had there been school choice, that would not have been the case.

Unfortunately, no dose of reality about the ugly status quo, or the great promise of school choice, seems able to sway Hirsch. Even though it means the near-certain defeat of his own crusade, Hirsch simply cannot shake the progressive belief that government must control what free people are taught.

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