

E.D. Hirsch Jr.:
The Twentieth Century's Liberal Conservative Educator
By Dr. Jason R. Edwards

I. Introduction:

E. D. Hirsch Jr. (1928-) will forever be associated with the term “Cultural Literacy.” Upon publication of his book by that title in 1987, Hirsch has tirelessly defended the rather simple premise that, in order to communicate effectively, people need to share a general body of knowledge. And consequently, a nation’s public schools should make a concerted effort to ensure that each of its citizens has that necessary knowledge.

Though a simple and at least to some degree self-evident idea, Hirsch has been embroiled in continual controversy as his assertion directly touches several political and educational hot buttons. Opponents from the political left generally accuse Hirsch of elitism. Worse yet in their minds, Hirsch’s assertion might lead to a rejection of toleration, pluralism, and relativism. On the political right, Hirsch has been assailed as totalitarian, for his idea lends itself to turning over curriculum selection to federal authorities and thereby eliminating the time-honored American tradition of locally controlled schools.

Due to opposition on both the political left and right, it is somewhat doubtful that Hirsch’s ideas will ever dominate American educational thought and practice. The vehement opposition to Hirsch within colleges of education particularly threatens Hirsch’s viability. Hirsch’s Core Knowledge Foundation, however, has proven to be a lasting presence with the general public. His books on the topic have been best-sellers and his curriculum series has proven successful in public, private, and home school settings. To some degree, *No Child Left Behind*, the bipartisan and largest federal-intrusion-into-public-schooling law ever passed by the United States, is a fruit of Hirsch’s ideas and efforts. So, despite the significant opposition (and

to some degree because of it), E.D. Hirsch deserves to be considered perhaps the most significant educational critic and reformer in the final third of the twentieth century. A familiarity and examination of his ideas is essential for all parents, educators, and concerned citizens.

II. Biography:

Eric Donald Hirsch was raised in Memphis, Tennessee, graduated with a B.A. degree from Cornell in 1950, and received a Ph.D. in English from Yale in 1957. His early career revolved around the study of Romantic poets. He adapted his Yale dissertation for publication which became the book *Wordsworth and Schelling: A Typological Study of Romanticism* in 1960. He also published in 1964 a monograph on William Blake entitled *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake*.

A second stage in Hirsch's career began as he shifted his intellectual focus to questions of literary interpretation and hermeneutics. His works in this field include *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), *The Aims of Interpretation* (1976), and *The Philosophy of Composition* (1977).

Collectively these challenge many "new critical" and "postmodern" literary theories. Specifically and in direct contrast to postmodernists, Hirsch argued that an author's intention must ultimately determine the meaning of a work. Hirsch asserted that a clear distinction be maintained between a work's "meaning" (as intended by the author) and its "significance" (as determined by a reader or critic).

Hirsch's 1977 work, *The Philosophy of Composition*, directly led to the third stage of his career and the one for which he is best known. In *Composition*, Hirsch investigated what makes prose more or less readable. As part of his research, Hirsch gave tests to students at the exclusive University of Virginia and a Virginia community college. In these tests, he discovered that in determining comprehension, the "level" of the prose was not nearly as important as background

knowledge. In other words, what he found was that the students from both institutions were generally equal when it came to “decoding” words, but were dramatically different in their background knowledge. It was the background knowledge that made the University of Virginia students far superior readers. In a story Hirsch frequently references, when he gave a relatively simple reading regarding Generals Lee and Grant to both sets of students, the community college students failed to comprehend it, not because they didn’t understand the words used but because they had no familiarity with America’s Civil War.

The recognition of the importance of background knowledge led Hirsch to formulate his concept of “cultural literacy” – the idea that reading comprehension requires not just formal decoding skills but also wide-ranging background knowledge. Hence, in order for children to succeed, schools needed to move away from teaching only formal “reading skills” of material written without regard to content and move towards instruction from a specific curriculum that would ensure all students had the background knowledge that writers take for granted. He postulated that this effort was particularly essential for elementary-aged children and especially the underprivileged, who would not receive this essential cultural background information at home.

Hirsch’s third and final stage to his career formally began, then, with his founding of the Core Knowledge Foundation in 1986. He wrote and published *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* in 1987. It became a best-seller and made Hirsch a lightning rod for educational debate and controversy. Due to its popularity with the general public, Hirsch published *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* in 1988 (and *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* in 2002). In 1996, Hirsch published *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them*, which expanded his thesis and critique of educational reading methods that have

dominated American schooling since the rise of the Progressive Era at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1997, Hirsch began publishing the Core Knowledge Series of books that focused on particular grade levels such as *What Your Kindergartner Needs to Know*. This series now runs from pre-school to the sixth grade. His most recent book, *The Knowledge Deficit* (2006), summarizes again the arguments made in *Cultural Literacy* and *The Schools We Need* and again pleads that educators and policy makers accept that his theories are non-negotiable facts that need simple recognition rather than merely theories connected to political beliefs or philosophies.

Now retired, Hirsch was a professor of Humanities and English and the Linden Kent Memorial Professor of English Emeritus at the University of Virginia. He was a distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution from 1999 to 2006. He served on the Research Advisory Board of the U.S. Department of Education, and in 1997, received the Biennial Quest Award for Outstanding Contribution to Education from the American Federation of Teachers. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the International Academy of Education, a board member of the Albert Shanker Institute, and remains the chairman of his nonprofit Core Knowledge Foundation.

III. Major Educational Ideas and Works

To understand E.D. Hirsch's educational ideas it is perhaps best to examine his key targets of criticism. To a great degree, Hirsch's educational arguments revolve around attacking two major components of what has become standard educational thought. Hirsch labels those theories "Formalism" and "Naturalism." And, as he writes, it "is hard to say which of the

intellectual errors has been the more harmful to American education.”¹ Both theories derived from Romantic philosophy and even more directly from the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau (particularly his masterwork *Emile*). Likewise, both of these theories gained dominance in the American educational system around the turn of the twentieth century. Although seen in the work of Horace Mann and the Common School in the nineteenth century, naturalism and formalism are even more strongly associated with the Progressives of the twentieth. As Hirsch explains, due to the Progressive dominance of particularly Teachers’ College, Columbia University at the beginning of the twentieth century, the stage was set for the Progressive principles to dominate American education into the twenty-first century.²

To fully understand Hirsch, one must also appreciate his primary motivation: economic egalitarianism. Hirsch is a proud liberal who sees America’s greatest sins resulting from perpetual disparities of wealth and opportunity. Interestingly, his liberal political philosophy leads him to attack what is typically considered “liberal” educational theory. He maintains, as did his Marxist hero Antonio Gramsci, that “conservative” educational methods are the only ones that will bring about “liberal” egalitarian ideals. In any event, his political philosophy and educational ideas lead him to rail not only against educational formalism and naturalism, but also to two important secondary issues. Hirsch challenges prevalent forms of “determinism” that claim a child’s economic status will inescapably determine his economic class as an adult. His final bugaboo is “localism” as he advocates a national curriculum as the only way to create a

¹ E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1996), 15.

² The Progressives’ (specifically John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick) dominance of Teachers’ College, Columbia University is so significant because at the turn of the twentieth century normal schools (teacher training schools) were taken over by universities and made into “colleges of education.” As a result, universities needed professors with doctorates in education and Columbia was essentially the only place offering that degree in the United States (The University of Chicago also had an early program but it too was dominated by Dewey.). As a result, degree bearers from this institution spread across the land and produced the next generation of teachers and education professors. In the twenty-first century most college of education professors are only one or two academic “generations” from Columbia’s Progressives. As a result, educational thinking has been unusually controlled and dominated by one school of thought.

truly meritocratic egalitarian society. Hirsch's political principles, educational philosophy, and the four "isms" he challenges will be fully explained and explored in turn in order to fully encapsulate the pillars of Hirsch's thought.

A. Politics and Philosophy

To Hirsch's horror, due to the educational methods he advocates, many assume he is politically conservative. In Hirsch's mind, perhaps nothing could be further from the truth. Hirsch is an avowed political liberal who is a self-professing pragmatist when it comes to educational theory.³ He advocates the theories he does solely because they "work" for the ends he holds. According to Hirsch, political "liberals really ought to oppose progressive educational ideas because they have led to practical failure and greater social inequity. The only practical way to achieve liberalism's aim of greater social justice is to pursue conservative educational policies."⁴ He takes as a model the infamous Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci whom he labels "a hero of humanity."⁵ For Hirsch, "Gramsci saw that to denominate such methods as phonics and memorization of the multiplication table as 'conservative,' while associating them with the political right, amounted to a serious intellectual error....He held that political progressivism demanded educational conservatism."^{6,7}

³ When interviewed in 2006, Hirsch stated, "I've never voted Republican. I've always voted Democrat. And actually I've always thought of myself – though I've changed somewhat in this – as a quasi-socialist, and a sense of social justice is my chief animating emotion. I don't like great inequalities in the social landscape. I'm egalitarian, I guess. And that's what motivated me from an ideological sense, but it had nothing to do with the character of the technical analysis, which I have to say has never been challenged....I got tagged as conservative, which is not intellectually or politically true. I think that's been the chief problem for Core Knowledge." Andrew J. Rotherham, *Education Sector Interviews: Core Convictions: An Interview with E.D. Hirsch, Jr.*, published September 26, 2006, 2-3. (accessed April 19, 2008) www.educationsector.org/analysis/analysis_show.htm?doc_id=404833

⁴ Rotherham, *Interviews*, 6.

⁵ Rotherham, *Interviews*, 6.

⁶ Rotherham, *Interviews*, 6-7.

⁷ Interestingly, Hirsch contrasts the leftist hero Gramsci with another hero of the left Paulo Freire. Hirsch writes that "history has proved Gramsci to be a better theorist and prophet than Freire. Modern nations that have adopted Gramscian principles have bettered the condition and heightened the political, social, and economic power of

Hirsch does not officially speculate why political conservatives advocate “conservative”/traditional teaching methods, but he seems to assume it must not be to help disadvantaged students. In any event, Hirsch’s official motivation for advocating the educational methods he does is for economic egalitarianism. According to Hirsch, since “inferior education is today the primary cause of social and economic injustice, the struggle for equality of educational opportunity is in effect the new civil rights frontier.”⁸ It is this understanding that has caused Hirsch to dedicate his professional life to reforming American education. For Hirsch, “an early inequity in the distribution of intellectual capital may be the single most important source of avoidable injustice in a free society.”⁹ And, seeing it as avoidable, Hirsch has diligently sought for decades to tear down the barriers standing in the way of an equitable distribution of intellectual capital.

*B. Formalism*¹⁰

According to Hirsch, educational “formalism is based on the idea that inculcating formal skills is much more important than the transmission of knowledge....”¹¹ In other words, teachers for decades have assumed that teaching “decoding” skills or “critical thinking” skills better utilizes limited class time because a child could naturally transfer these supposed skills from one domain to the next. As Hirsch documents, however, accepted research in psychology proves that such transference of skills is impossible. In fact, simple anecdotal evidence disproves this wishful thinking. For instance, a student with the “critical thinking” skills needed to survive a

oppressed classes of people. By contrast, nations (including our own) that have stuck to the principles of Freire have failed to change the social and economic status quo.” Rotherham, *Interviews*, 7.

⁸ Rotherham, *Interviews*, 43.

⁹ Rotherham, *Interviews*, 20.

¹⁰ *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) is Hirsch’s book that focuses on dispelling the tenets of formalism.

¹¹ E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1996), 14.

foray into the streets of an inner city at night will not have those skills translate into success in an academic classroom, a chess match, or even a trivia game show. Likewise, Bobby Fisher's chess ability would not make him safe on inner city streets. Even within related fields, transference fails to occur. An expert on America's Civil War will not successfully answer questions regarding the Peloponnesian War even though both topics revolve around warfare and conflict among a certain set of people.

Hirsch particularly emphasizes the importance of establishing broad knowledge in early education due to the overwhelming importance of reading. Thankfully, by the twenty-first century, instruction in phonics is finally becoming widely acknowledged as the best way to teach the decoding element of reading. Whether one still advocates the discredited notions of "whole language" or one entirely embraces phonics, however, Hirsch explains it is still possible to miss the important boat.

"Decoding" words is a necessary part of reading (Hirsch points out that unlike speech, it will not happen "naturally.") but truly successful readers are ones with broad cultural knowledge. "Cultural literacy" is necessary for successful "literacy" generally because authors assume their readers have command of a certain body of knowledge. If readers do not have this information, they will not be able to comprehend the material. Having "skills" to look up words, dates, ideas, or facts does not actually help because the process, even if successful, is too laborious and time-consuming. Importantly, it is also generally impossible to bring these "skills" to bear because due to a lack of general knowledge, the reader will not recognize when specific material needs to be looked up.¹² Finally, as can be experienced by anyone listening to a conversation in a

¹² For instance, if a passage noted that the Morrill Act passed in 1862, the reader would not know to seek connections with the American Civil War unless the reader recognized automatically that 1862 fell within the years of the American Civil War (1861-1865). Almost any person has the "skill" to look up the dates of the Civil War; however, it is only the culturally literate that knows when to do so. Hirsch writes that "there is a consensus in

language they do not know, reading, for those who don't "speak" the language, will become such an unpleasant task that it will no longer be undertaken.

In educational circles, the assumptions are quite different and, endlessly repeated in slogans, are accepted as axioms of fact. One will not be among educational leaders long before hearing claims regarding an "information explosion" that makes attempts to anticipate future information requirements impossible. Consequently, so the argument goes, "process" and "processes" are the highest form of content. "Critical thinking skills" and a "love of learning" rather than specific knowledge must be instilled so that students will have the intellectual "tools" to be comfortable with ambiguous and paradoxical situations. And, besides, avocation of fixed knowledge is "sexist," "fundamentalist," and "racist."

In the current educational environment, Hirsch's call for "cultural literacy" (or, in a semantic tip-of-the-hat "core knowledge") has not been welcome. Despite the best efforts of research conducted on behalf of education journals to prove him wrong, however, the best psychological and neurological science is squarely in Hirsch's camp. People need specific cultural knowledge to read effectively and function successfully in any given culture. And, though there will always be quibbling around the edges, the required knowledge is really not that hard to identify – in fact, E.D. Hirsch, with the help of others, has created just such a workable list.¹³

cognitive psychology that it takes knowledge to gain knowledge. Those who repudiate a fact-filled curriculum on the grounds that kids can always look things up miss the paradox that de-emphasizing factual knowledge actually disables children from looking things up effectively. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., "'You Can Always Look It Up' ... Or Can You?" *Common Knowledge*, 13, 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2000).

¹³ In the book *Cultural Literacy* Hirsch included a list of around 5,000 items. In his subsequent dictionaries of cultural literacy, he generally has included around 7,000 entries. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

C. Naturalism¹⁴

Even more than formalism, naturalism directly descends to the twenty-first century from the Romanticism of the eighteenth. As its name suggests, naturalism is venerating nature to the point of worship. A worshipful veneration of nature has deep roots and a long history in the United States and leads to the assumption that anything “natural” must be “good.” Hence, teachers should look for “natural” educational methods and team with the “natural” development of the child. Of course, the veneration of the “natural” concomitantly leads to a denigration of whatever is labeled “artificial.” In the realm of education, therefore, teachers are to avoid diligently methods that might artificially interrupt the natural developmental processes of the child.

When considering learning, such thinking seems at first self-evident. For instance, children do naturally learn to speak. Unless facing a serious disability, all babies go through a miraculous but natural process that leads to both the ability to understand verbal speech and to participate in it. Though some learn slightly faster than others, it is a process that can be counted on and seemingly requires no outside intervention or artificial manipulation to generate. For the Romantic, all learning should follow this design. Hence, the dominant metaphor for children became seeds that naturally blossom into the beautiful flowers or trees that they were destined to be. Other than perhaps occasional watering, nothing is required from the teacher, and indeed, nothing can be added to the plant from the outside. If protected, but primarily left alone, the plant will grow up as it was designed to do.

Relying on attractive imagery and seemingly self-evident proof, it is not surprising that naturalism as an educational theory has enjoyed such prominence for so long. The problem,

¹⁴ In significant ways challenging naturalism in education is an extension of challenging formalism. Hirsch’s most developed challenge to naturalism is found in *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them*.

however, is that neither the imagery nor the proof accounts for the majority of human learning. After speech, the most essential intellectual ability is reading. And, unfortunately, squiggly lines never naturally turn into letters, nor do letters naturally turn into words. Likewise, it is impossible to turn funny marks on a page into numbers much less equations. All human minds, therefore, eventually have to make the “artificial” jump from seeing meaningless marks on a page to letters, numbers, and words. This jump is achieved solely through direct instruction.

Naturalism also seeks to celebrate the individual nature of each child by catering to individual personalities and learning styles. It is typically forgotten, however, that when Rousseau advocated this for “Emile,” he was describing one-on-one tutoring. While one might wish every child to have such instruction, it is exactly that: wishful thinking. Logistically, nations must educate children in groups. As such, when you give individual instruction to one child in a class, you are neglecting the other 20, 30, or 40 also in that class. The most effective and fair method of instruction, therefore, engages the whole class and tries to ensure that the whole class is “on the same page.” As societies need a common cultural literacy to function, so does each individual class. “The most important single task of an individual school is to ensure that all children within that school gain the prior knowledge they will need at the next grade level,” therefore.¹⁵ In order to do that, schools need to very specifically determine what knowledge will be mastered and taught in each grade rather than trusting this knowledge will be learned “naturally.”

The easily missed emphasis of Hirsch’s argument is specificity of knowledge. Most schools, if asked, can produce a curriculum guide complete with goals and objectives. When examined, however, what one will almost invariably find is that these “objectives” are incredibly vague and focus on processes rather than knowledge. Consequently, these “objectives” allow

¹⁵ Hirsch, *Schools We Need*, 33.

generous discretion by the teacher on what knowledge will actually be covered and taught. As a result, the actual training students receive varies vastly from teacher to teacher, and no student gets the benefit of building upon knowledge previously mastered because subsequent teachers have no way of knowing what students entering their classroom have been taught. As a result, Hirsch maintains it is not vague “goals and objectives” that are needed but clear, specific, standardized knowledge.

In *The Schools We Need*, Hirsch launches a devastating attack on naturalistic teaching by compiling an impressive amount of independent scientific research that flatly contradicts accepted educational theory and practice. For instance, neurological research proves children need to memorize and drill when young because this develops synaptic connections in the brain – something that will cease around the age of thirteen. Leaving a child to exercise his mind only as much as he is naturally inclined will permanently inhibit his brain’s ability to function by limiting the number of synaptic connections he will have in his lifetime. Furthermore, international studies strongly suggest that not only do classrooms that utilize traditional methods (memorization, drill, testing, etc.) accomplish more academically, students actually enjoy them more. Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that demanding academic classrooms produce children with healthy self-esteem and positive self-image far more successfully than classrooms that emphasize self-esteem and student-centered instruction over academic rigor.¹⁶

Perhaps nothing offends naturalistic educational assumptions more than testing. Hirsch’s basic response to test aversion is that educators are shooting the messenger.¹⁷ He rightly suspects

¹⁶ Hirsch, *Schools We Need*. See particularly Chapter 5: “Reality’s Revenge: Education and Mainstream Research.”

¹⁷ Hirsch damningly states that “remarkably, the disappointments of reform to date have not led educational experts to question the Romantic principles on which their proposals are based, but rather, to attack the messenger that is bringing the bad news – standardized tests.” (Hirsch, *Schools We Need*, 3.) Hirsch states clearly that the “tests aren’t the problem; it’s the scores our children are making on them.” E.D. Hirsch, Jr., “Many Americans Can Read But Can’t Comprehend.” *USA Today*, February 25, 2004, 13A.

that criticism of standardized testing would not likely be so vociferous if the results were better. Regardless, Hirsch advocates standardized testing that primarily relies on objective questions. He does so because testing needs to be done to hold both students and instructors accountable (And they need to be accountable to specific academic knowledge.). Furthermore, such testing is equitable, and when created with care, can be very legitimate academically. Finally, it is logistically feasible to create, give, and evaluate objective tests. While arguably more “natural,” essay exams and academic “portfolios” are far too subjective and time consuming (and probably not as accurate or fair) for practical use.

D. Determinism

Though an admirer of certain Marxists, Hirsch is not a pure economic determinist. He is a critic of America’s distribution of wealth, and he certainly is concerned that those born to the lower rungs of America’s economic ladder are at a severe disadvantage. He does not necessarily think, however, that the distribution of wealth is fixed nor does he think it is impossible to overcome being born to economic disadvantage. In fact, his anger at current educational policy stems from the fact he believes that America’s economic stratification is “fixable.” Hirsch believes that America’s school system is the way that a more egalitarian society will be achieved if progressive educational methods are abandoned.

Hirsch is outspoken against determinism because in educational circles determinism is often used to defend the faulty progressive educational theories Hirsch believes are the true problem. In other words, when presented with the abundant evidence that progressive educational theory fails to produce good academic results, educators often dismiss the poor

results as determined by outside forces beyond their control. Thereby, it is not the educational theories that are failing, but the parents or society at large. Hirsch writes that the

significant part of the blame-society theory is the claim that social conditions *necessarily* keep poor blacks and Hispanics from reading well. This is the theory of demographic determinism, which holds that reading problems have their roots outside school, in economic and cultural conditions (which is initially true). But the theory then goes on to claim (falsely) that low test scores in reading are beyond the power of schools by themselves to overcome.¹⁸

The acceptance of social determinism, then, represents yet another barrier for the adoption of Hirsch's educational ideas.

E. Localism

Hirsch considers the creation of national guidelines for education a necessary component to his educational theory. He is fully aware, however, that this runs against American tradition and arguably against the democratic principles he advocates. According to Hirsch, the "principle of the local curriculum is desirable in a democracy, so long as schooling is effective and fair. But against the principle of local autonomy must be weighed the paramount principles of educational excellence and social fairness. Democratic principles sometimes conflict with one another; none is absolute."¹⁹ For Hirsch, his egalitarian goals outweigh the importance of local freedom. In fact, Hirsch has recently ramped up his rhetoric against localism, stating that along "with the terrible trinity of naturalism, formalism, and determinism, localism deserves a dishonored place in American education."²⁰ Clearly frustrated, Hirsch goes on to claim that localism "brings

¹⁸ E.D.Hirsch, Jr., *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 15.

¹⁹ E.D.Hirsch, Jr., *Schools We Need*, 37.

²⁰ Hirsch, *Knowledge Deficit*, 112.

liberals and conservatives together to collaborate in support of anti-content, process-oriented ideas about education.”²¹

While liberals and conservatives alike certainly find localism convenient at times, it remains doubtful that it unites them around the same curriculum. If one advocates the essential nature of a nation’s cultural literacy, however, it logically follows that a national curriculum must be implemented. Hence, opposition to that idea founded on political traditions rather than educational arguments naturally frustrates an educational reformer.

Hirsch further builds a case against localism by frequently referencing American propensity to move. In a more stable society, local control of education would perhaps seem more defensible to Hirsch. In the United States, however, it is common for children to attend multiple schools even in just their elementary school years. Some urban schools in the United States experience continual turnover in their student bodies. When students move from school to school, they naturally fall behind as gaps occur in their learning due to the vast variety of subjects covered in American classrooms. This fact hits the economically disadvantaged child the hardest because he is both the most likely to move and the most likely not to have academic ground made up at home.

Since it brought national standards and testing to American schools, Hirsch is generally supportive of *No Child Left Behind*, which he called the “most hopeful and important federal education legislation that has been enacted in recent years.”²² *NCLB*, however, did not bring the very specific and detailed academic standards that Hirsch advocates. In addition, Hirsch believes that administrators and teachers are responding to this federal law in exactly the wrong way. In order to pass the national standards, many schools have increased the time spent in school on

²¹ Hirsch, *Knowledge Deficit*, 112.

²² Hirsch, *Knowledge Deficit*, 19.

“language arts,” which typically means ramping up training in “decoding” and “critical thinking.” Consequently, time is taken away from specific subject instruction. It is the specific instruction, however, that Hirsch argues will ultimately garner more success in reading tests. For Hirsch, *NCLB* is largely testing the right things, but the teachers are preparing students in the wrong way.²³

While perfectly logical, adopting a national curriculum ultimately proves an ironic position for Hirsch to take. As will be explored further in the next section, Hirsch is frustrated by the singularity of thinking in educational circles. Hence, the likelihood of Hirsch’s ideas being adopted on a national scale is essentially zero. In fact, Hirsch owes what success he has enjoyed from the fact that local schools have the authority to adopt curriculum of their own choosing. Hirsch might not think it ideal, but the reason that there are any “core knowledge” schools in the nation is a direct result of the fact that the United States respects parental and local control of education.

F. Philosophic Conclusion

Hirsch challenges assumption after assumption held within educational circles. Despite Hirsch’s consistent polemics against the dominant educational theories of the day, it is worth noting that he does not intend his criticisms to be an indictment of teachers. As he writes, teachers “have been as ill-served as our students by the inadequate ideas and impoverished

²³ Hirsch states it this way: “Those in Congress in charge of crafting revision should understand that the law’s disappointing results owe less to defects in the law than to the methods and ideas schools use in their attempts to fulfill the ‘adequate yearly progress’ mandate for all groups of students; this causes schools, as many complain, to teach to reading tests rather than educate children, but intensive test preparation by schools has resulted in lower reading test scores in later grades. ‘Teaching to the test’ does not effectively teach to the test after all. Studies of reading comprehension show that knowing something of the topic you’re reading about is the most important variable in comprehension. After a child learns to sound out words, comprehension is mostly knowledge.” E.D. Hirsch, Jr., “The Knowledge Connection” *Core Knowledge and Educational Policy*, published February 16, 2008. (accessed April 19, 2008) <http://www.coreknowledge.org/blog/2008/02/16the-knowledge-connection/>

subject-matter instruction they have been compelled to absorb in order to receive certification.”²⁴

For Hirsch, this is a battle over ideas with the highest stakes involved: America’s children, its ideals, and its future. So in summary, it is perhaps best to allow Hirsch himself to highlight the paradoxes he sees most often within education:

- To stress critical thinking while de-emphasizing knowledge *reduces* a student’s capacity to think critically.
- Giving a child constant praise to bolster self-esteem regardless of academic achievement breeds complacency, or skepticism, or both, and, ultimately, a *decline* in self-esteem.
- For a teacher to pay significant attention to each individual child in a class of twenty to forty students means individual *neglect* for most children most of the time.
- Schoolwork that has been called “developmentally inappropriate” has proved to be highly appropriate to millions of students the world over, while the infantile pablum now fed to American children *is* developmentally inappropriate (in a downward direction) and often bores them.²⁵

IV. Critics

As has been alluded to previously, Hirsch is criticized on a number of major fronts. “Traditional” and “conservative” educators appreciate his arguments, but their philosophic and political beliefs run counter to Hirsch’s embrace of pragmatism and a national curriculum. Interestingly, some “back-to-basics” proponents might be at odds with Hirsch if their “basics” solely means phonics, for instance. Hirsch endorses teaching decoding skills but emphasizes content as even more important. Likewise, what some might consider “traditional” assignments, such as essays on “What I did last summer,” are at odds with Hirsch’s methods. Rather than wasting time on discussions of summer vacations, Hirsch would have students doing the same reading, writing, and speaking assignments but on more substantive and essential cultural topics.

²⁴ Hirsch, *The Schools We Need*, 15.

²⁵ Hirsch, *The Schools We Need*, 66.

Much more significantly, Hirsch faces criticism from the political left. Liberal educators (And liberalism overwhelmingly dominates the field.) recoil at Hirsch's canon which emphasizes the accomplishments of white Europeans and focuses on the Judeo-Christian tradition at a time when multiculturalism is considered moral high ground. Likewise, progressive educators believe that class time should center on "higher-order" thinking skills, not "drill and kill" rote memorization. They claim that Hirsch's lists of facts promote a shallow understanding of content and are limited in practical value. The progressive classroom is committed to "child-centered" learning that revolves around the building of self-esteem.²⁶ Alfie Kohn may be Hirsch's most high profile critic and is representative of many educators when he claims that Hirsch's "curriculum steal[s] time from more meaningful objectives, such as learning how to think critically....The best classrooms aren't organized around a bunch o' facts but around problems, projects, and questions."²⁷

Other liberals find Hirsch's criticism of schools distracting. To them, poverty causes low reading scores, and until poverty is eliminated in the United States, it is unreasonable to hold schools accountable for student failure. Richard Rothstein, a former educational columnist for the *New York Times*, is representative of this mindset. Rothstein argues, "Blaming the achievement gap mostly on failing schools is a mistake, because it diverts attention from the need to improve the economic and social gaps between children that thwart academic potential long before school starts."²⁸

²⁶ Kathleen Kennedy Manzo, "Learning Essentials" *Education Week*, May 21, 2008, 23.

²⁷ Manzo, "Learning Essentials," 23.

²⁸ E.D. Hirsch, Jr. *Knowledge Deficit*, 15.

Though criticism of Hirsch is easy to find, in some ways it is misleading.²⁹ The most common reaction to Hirsch by his critics is simply to ignore him. Hirsch's biggest challenge is what he labels (borrowing a term coined by Arthur Bestor) education's "interlocking public school directorate" which consists of: 1) professors of education; 2) school administrators; and 3) school officials, "experts," and bureaucrats in state and federal offices of education. These professional educationists maintain a monopolistic control over American education through the power to certify teachers. Consequently, whatever this group believes is enforced throughout American schools and whatever they reject is likewise eliminated from American public schools. As Hirsch explains, the "millions of teachers who pass through this certification process become a captive audience for indoctrination."³⁰ Simply put, despite the supposed tenets of liberalism and its dominance within the educational field, professional educationists are shockingly single-minded in their thinking and fundamentalist in enforcing their beliefs. They simply do not allow an open debate within the colleges' of education walls, and so Hirsch (and hosts of other critics) are defeated simply by being ignored or tarred as beyond the pale.³¹ As Hirsch references further,

²⁹ Perhaps not surprisingly, Hirsch believes that especially the criticism from the Left is misguided. In a recent interview Hirsch stated: "I think the two biggest misconceptions about Core Knowledge are that it's really drill and kill and that it's conservative politically in its impulses. It's true that literate culture is conservative in that the things that we all take for granted are rather slow to shift. But in fact, if you really want to be effective in changing power structure or the society, you had better be able to manage that machinery. It's a real paradox that all these people damned the book [*Cultural Literacy*], but in doing so demonstrate their own cultural literacy, because they're using allusions that only a person who is extremely well educated could understand. There is this kind of strange elitism in the reaction of the academic left to *Cultural Literacy*, which is very egalitarian in its impulses. Rotherham, *Education Sector Interviews*, 2-3.

³⁰ Hirsch, *The Schools We Need*, 64.

³¹ Hirsch asks, "Why do educators persist in advocating the very artifact, anti-rote-learning, antiverbal practices that have led to poor results – persist in urging them, indeed, even more intensively than before?" And responds that "The basic answer is this: Within the educational community, there is currently no *thinkable* alternative. Part of essential American education doctrine has consisted of the disparagement of so-called "traditional" education. The long dominance of antitraditional rhetoric in our teacher-training institutions has ensured that competing, nonprogressive principles are not readily available within their walls. No professor at an American education school is going to advocate *pro-rote-learning*, *profact*, or *proverbal* pedagogy. Since there is only one true belief, expressed in one constantly repeated catechism, the heretical suggestion that the creed itself might be faulty cannot be uttered. To question progressive doctrine would be to put in doubt the identity of the education profession itself. Its foundational premise is that progressive principles are right. Being right, *they* cannot possibly be the cause of educational ineffectiveness." Hirsch, *Schools We Need*, 69.

when “such pressure for intellectual conformity is combined with administrative control over employment and the dispensation of a great deal of foundation money, it is not surprising that the citadel should become an institutional monopoly.”³²

It is far more likely that Hirsch’s name will be celebrated by the general public than professors at college of education. Likewise, Hirsch’s books can easily be purchased without special order in bookstores across the land but rarely appear in college bookstores filled with assigned books for education classes. In the realm of professional education, Hirsch’s challenge is not proving he is right; it is proving that he has a right to be heard.³³

VI. Christian Analysis and Critique

A specifically Christian analysis of Hirsch could be considered superfluous. Whether or not a person needs to know a common body of knowledge to function effectively within a society is not a theological debate. If true, Christian justice and kindness would indicate instructors should attempt to instill this knowledge. If false, as good stewards, time should be spent on other things. Examining Hirsch’s arguments, however, from the perspective of a Christian should be done because it actually does lead to a more robust understanding of his position.

Christians would probably be attracted to the fact that Hirsch fully embraces the necessity of all American students to be very familiar with Western Civilization and consequently the Bible. Hirsch certainly thinks it is a major mistake for public schools to avoid discussing and

³² Hirsch, *Schools We Need*, 65.

³³ In testament to the effectiveness of ignoring rather than engaging, Hirsch noted the reluctance of educational researchers to even try to prove him wrong. In 2005, he noted, “My experience with evaluation of the Core Knowledge program has been that the research community has not wanted to study the rumored effectiveness of Core Knowledge....The reading scores in Core Knowledge schools are outstanding. Yet without comparative analysis it has been hard to make more than anecdotal claims.” E.D. Hirsch, Jr., “Educational Reform and Content: The Long View,” *Brookings Papers on Educational Policy*, 2005, 178.

indeed teaching Bible stories, proverbs, and ideas. He certainly would not favor an official endorsement of Biblical teaching by public schools, but he recognizes that American culture has been so shaped by the Bible that any person unfamiliar with both the Old and New Testaments in the United States is at a severe communicative disadvantage.

As with all knowledge, Hirsch's argument values information based solely on its practical importance in communication. Hence, as the United States becomes increasingly secularized and Biblical familiarity less assumed, Hirsch would undoubtedly curtail Bible teaching (and arguably downplays it now to avoid controversy). In this way, Hirsch's position could prove a boon or bust for Christians. If widely adopted, Hirsch's instructional plans, however, would generally increase Americans' familiarity with Christianity and prolong its cultural significance in the United States.

Hirsch is a great "defender" of the Western Canon including the Bible. But, his "defense" of this canon – which undoubtedly pleases Christians and conservatives alike – stems from a utilitarian economic position. Since Christians and cultural conservatives do not think of economic utilitarianism too fondly, here is a case of educational policy making strange bedfellows. Hirsch attacks multiculturalism and supports teaching the Bible and Western culture not for the sake of their inherent value or truth but because it is necessary to know that material in the West if one is going to thrive economically. In other words, if Hirsch was advising an Islamic, Hindu, or secular country (or likewise a Middle-Eastern or Asian country), he would not advocate learning about the Bible or about Western Civilization but the Koran, Eastern mysticism, or the like. Hirsch advocates learning whatever the dominant religious and cultural teachings of whatever country a person finds himself in order to succeed financially there. Such is a pragmatic relativism that might rightly make Christians cringe.

In obvious contrast, Christians maintain that whether or not Biblical knowledge helps temporally, it pales in significance besides the fact that it will save a person eternally. Likewise, Christians and political conservatives alike defend Western Civilization not primarily because it is practical but because it is eternally true and good everywhere. Realist, traditional, and Thomistic critiques of multiculturalism by authors such as Joseph Pieper, Mortimer Adler, and William Bennett, for instance, argue that the Western Canon has proven itself over time as an effective way to become fully human. The Western Canon including the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas and the like leads to the best knowledge that there is: self-knowledge of people's common humanity. While these idealists would certainly acknowledge the necessity for people to have a functional cultural literacy of whatever country in which they lived, for them, whatever is not eternal is eternally out of date. Within a country, therefore, they reject multiculturalism's focus on the particulars of what makes people different not only because it hinders communication, but more importantly, because it detracts from the eternal, and hence, most valuable aspects of humanity. Regardless of place, these idealists maintain that unchanging, timeless truth must be the focus of education, and the Western Canon best approximates that, truth, and thereby deserves the lion's portion of school time.³⁴ Whether or not E.D. Hirsch believes in this elevated understanding of Western Civilization – and it is doubtful that he does – it remains far beyond his more modest argument that cultural literacy is simply necessary to thrive economically regardless of its eternal veracity.

Especially in Hirsch's pragmatic value scale, it would be short-sighted for Christians to reject Hirsch simply because he fails to fully endorse Christianity or the teachings of the West. Hirsch provides Christians with probably the most powerful neutral argument why removing the

³⁴ For a particularly good treatment of multiculturalism, its advocates and its critics look to Michael L. Peterson, *With All Your Mind: A Christian Philosophy of Education* (particularly Chapters 2 and 6) (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame, December 2001).

Bible from public schools is harmful to students. Whether officially teaming with Core Knowledge proponents (which seems like a good strategy) or not, Christians interested in returning the Bible and Christian teachings to the public school classroom should absolutely use the findings of Hirsch in their arguments. Whether people like it or not, the United States was founded by a people steeped in Christianity, and the vast majority of Americans in the twenty-first century continue to associate themselves with Christianity. Though assumed less than in the past, writers will still take for granted that Americans have a broad familiarity with Biblical stories and beliefs. A person unfamiliar with Christianity is incapable of understanding the politics, structure, or culture of the United States. Consequently, Hirsch has explained why schools must help ensure that children do not leave their halls without this essential core knowledge.

VII: Legacy

Though preferring “core knowledge,” Hirsch will seemingly be forever associated with the term “cultural literacy.” And, he has enjoyed tremendous popular support for his ideas. As of 2006, there were well over 100 official Core Knowledge elementary schools and nearly 800 schools that used his curriculum to some degree across the country. Nearly 300 schools have adopted the prekindergarten curriculum. His curriculum books have been popular sellers and are available at bookstores across the country, so there is strong anecdotal evidence suggesting that parents outside of school and in the growingly popular home school movement frequently use his books informally. Based on Core Knowledge Foundation statistics, the use of the materials is quite balanced between urban, suburban and rural settings and widely dispersed between public,

charter, private, and parochial schools.³⁵ Likewise, though not a blanket endorsement of Hirsch's ideas, *No Child Left Behind* represents a move towards both the national curriculum and achievement testing Hirsch sees as essential. As such, one can surmise that Hirsch's broader influence will continue to be significant and perhaps grow.

Despite popular approval, Hirsch's acceptance in official educational circles has not been nearly as successful. The core of Hirsch's educational argument is that American education has been undermined by a deep contempt for factual knowledge and an addiction to Romantic fallacies such as "project method" instruction, "child/student-centered" learning, artificial "self-esteem" building, and "critical thinking skills" transmission theory. Seeing these as false ideas that tragically condemn children to a deficient education, Hirsch has called for a return to so-called traditional educational methods that emphasize mastery of broad and specific academic knowledge and do not shy away from memorization, practice, and drill. For reasons Hirsch elucidated, however, it almost goes without saying that colleges of education across the United States have universally dismissed Hirsch's call for change and abandonment of Romantic maxims and will assuredly continue to do so.³⁶

Internationally, the educational principles Hirsch advocates predominate in many countries. Hirsch, indeed, consistently uses international comparisons to prove his case. Nevertheless, it is entirely unforeseeable that American education will change course and adopt the more successful educational methods advocated by Hirsch and used internationally. In fact,

³⁵ According to statistics provided by the Core Knowledge Foundation on their official website, nationally, as of April 2006, schools implementing Core Knowledge were 44% public, 35% charter, 15% private, and 6% parochial. Urban schools comprised 39% of the list, while another 39% were suburban, and 22% were rural. Core Knowledge Foundation, <http://www.coreknowledge.org/CK/schools/index.htm> (accessed July 9, 2008).

³⁶ Again, for an explanation of what Hirsch labels the "Interlocking Public School Directorate" that ensures the rejection of any thought divergent from Romantic-Progressivism in the American school system see *Schools We Need*.

the trend in the United States is to adopt Romantic-Progressivism with even more vigor and determination.³⁷ Thereby, Hirsch and his writings will remain a dramatic and poignant example of the striking disconnect between America's education officials and her people, the American educational establishment and educational leaders internationally, and America's education professors and the university as a whole.

³⁷ J. Martin Rochester writes that "there is arguably a stronger momentum behind progressivism today, propelled partly by new technologies and partly by new cultural values that are making progressive ideas, which have always been seductive, even more enticing and hence more problematic. The Internet and other computer applications are seen as a godsend for realizing the centuries-old progressive dream of every child his or her own Socrates (of classrooms based on the Socratic method minus Socrates). A post-1960's, post-modern sensibility, fusing libertarianism with egalitarianism, has given us the self-indulgent, nonjudgmental classroom in which rigor and merit are now considered four-letter words, concepts that threaten to stifle individual creativity or favor one group of students over another." J. Martin Rochester, "Education Reform and Content: The Long View: Comments," *Brookings Papers on Educational Policy*, 2005, 199.

Appendix A:

An annotated bibliography of E. D. Hirsch's key works on education.

1) *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987).

In the book that began the firestorm, Hirsch argues that children in the U.S. are being deprived of the basic knowledge that would enable them to read and function successfully in contemporary society. In it he criticizes Romantic theories that have dominated American education since the turn of the twentieth century that rely on a Rousseau-inspired assumption that children will naturally acquire necessary knowledge. This work includes an appendix with some 5,000 essential facts to know.

2) *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them* (1996).

After nearly a decade of fighting for change in American public schools, Hirsch produced *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them*, which, though less known, is probably his essential monograph. Though containing a curious attempt to defend John Dewey (an effort he abandons in *The Knowledge Deficit*) by singling out William Heard Kilpatrick, it is here that Hirsch most fully develops and defends his educational theory. Reiterating his attack on educational "naturalism" (the foe identified in *Cultural Literacy*), Hirsch focuses most of his ire on educational "formalism" which maintains that students need to merely learn transferable thinking skills rather than concrete knowledge. In proving this assertion false, Hirsch presents a damning case against what typically passes for educational "research." This work concludes with a lively glossary that demystifies a plethora of educational slogans, jargon, and pet phrases.

3) *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children* (2006).

In this succinct book, Hirsch reviews ground that will be familiar to those who have read his earlier works. Hirsch again attacks educational "naturalism" and "formalism" and the Romantic theories that spawned them. New to this work is a helpful analysis of *No Child Left Behind*, its relation to Core Knowledge, and how schools should be using cultural literacy to meet *NCLB* requirements but sadly are doing the exact opposite.

4) *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (1988, 1993) and *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (2002).

As their names suggest, these reference books offer a thumbnail description of people, places, and things that "literate" Americans know. Containing nearly 7,000 entries, the items are organized thematically under chapters such as Mythology and Folklore, Life Sciences, World History, Literature, and the Bible. The most recent edition particularly bulked up its entries in technology and science spheres.

5) The Core Knowledge Series (*What Your Kindergartner Needs to Know, etc.*).

Hirsch has published a very successful curriculum that is the foundation for Core Knowledge schools but can be utilized by any public, private, or home school. The series runs through the sixth grade and now includes a volume for pre-kindergarten and a companion work entitled *Books to Build On*.

Appendix B:

These are the articles written by E.D. Hirsch that are highlighted and linked at the official Core Knowledge website.

<http://www.coreknowledge.org/CK/index.htm>

Essays by E. D. Hirsch

- "Plugging the Hole in State Standards, One Man's Modest Proposal," *American Educator*, Spring 2008.
- "The Knowledge Connection," *Washington Post* and other newspapers, February 15, 2008.
- "Narrowing the Two Achievement Gaps" (The 18th Education Trust National Conference, Washington, D.C., November 9, 2007).
- "Strategic Thoughts — Undelivered Remarks" (Philanthropy Roundtable, November 10, 2006).
- "Talk about *The Knowledge Deficit* and New York City Reading Scores" (Manhattan Institute, May 4, 2006).
- "The Case for Bringing Content into the Language Arts Block and for a Knowledge-Rich Curriculum Core for all Children," *American Educator*, Spring 2006.
- "Many Americans Can Read but Can't Comprehend," *USA Today*, February 25, 2004.
- "General and Particular Aims of Education," *Principal Leadership*, March 2003 (*You must be a member of NASSP to view this article.*)

- “Neglecting the Early Grades” in *Our Schools and our Future: Are we Still at Risk?* ed. Paul E. Peterson, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 2003).
- “Not So Grand a Strategy,” *Education Next*, Spring 2003.
- “Reading Comprehension Requires Knowledge — of Words and of the World,” *American Educator*, Spring 2003.
- “Classroom Research and Cargo Cults,” *Policy Review*, October-November 2002.
- “Breadth Versus Depth: A Premature Polarity,” *Common Knowledge*, Fall 2001.
- “The Latest Dismal NAEP Scores: Can We Narrow the 4th-Grade Reading Gap?” *Education Week*, May 2, 2001.
- “Ideas, Convictions, Courage: People Tell the Story of Core Knowledge,” *Common Knowledge*, Spring 2001.
- “Jeanne Chall's Last Book,” *American Educator*, Spring 2001.
- “Overcoming the Language Gap,” *American Educator*, Summer 2001.
- “The Roots of the Education Wars,” *Catholic Education Resource Center*, 2003. Reprint from presentation at a 2001 conference. Also adapted and published in *The Great Curriculum Debate: How Should We Teach Reading and Math?* ed. Tom Loveless. The entire text of this book may be read at Google Books.

- “The SAT: Blaming the Messenger,” *The Hoover Institution Weekly Essay*, May 28, 2001.
- “Choosing Excellence ” from Segment Two of *The Merrow Report*, a public radio and TV documentary series on youth and learning (NPR, June 6, 2000).
- “The Tests We Need and Why We Don't Quite Have Them,” *Education Week*, February 2, 2000.
- “You Can Always Look It Up — Or Can You?” (Ninth Core Knowledge National Conference, Anaheim, CA, March 18, 2000).
- “Romancing the Child,” an article adapted by *Education Next* from a speech (Harvard University, October 1999).
- “Why Core Knowledge Promotes Social Justice,” Convocation address (University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, October 6, 1999).
- “An Address to the Joint Committee on Head Start Reauthorization,” (March 26, 1998).
- “Class Size: A Question of Trade-Offs,” Excerpts from testimony before the Joint Congressional Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families Hearing, (February 24, 1998).
- “Heroes of Education Reform,” *Common Knowledge*, Fall 1998.

- “Why General Knowledge Should Be a Goal of Education in a Democracy,” (Seventh Core Knowledge National Conference, Atlanta, GA, March 14, 1998).
- “An Address to the California State Board of Education,” (April 10, 1997).
- “Toward a Centrist Curriculum: Two Kinds of Multiculturalism in Elementary School,” an essay for the Core Knowledge Foundation, 1991, 1997.
- “What Al Shanker Taught Us,” *The Washington Post*, (Op/ed) March 1, 1997.
- “Why Traditional Education is More Progressive,” *The American Enterprise*, March/April, 1997.
- “Challenging Intellectual Monopoly,” an excerpt from *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, 1996.
- “Reality’s Revenge,” *American Educator*, Fall, 1996, an excerpt from *The Schools We Need*.
- “Fairness and Core Knowledge,” The Core Knowledge Foundation, 1992.

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