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Essay Review

Questioning Core Assumptions: A Critical Reading of and Response to E. D. Hirsch's

The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them

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The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them

By E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

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It is naive to think of the school curriculum as neutral knowledge. Rather, what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable class, race, gender, and religious groups. (Apple, 1993, p. 46)

In *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, E. D. Hirsch presents his analysis of education

in the United States and his vision of how schools need to change. This review deconstructs Hirsch's ideological position and interrogates its relationship to broader rightist mobilizations. *The Schools We Need* is not a solitary work produced in a vacuum; it is symbolic of a body of literature situated within a conservative political landscape and growing educational movement. In providing a critical reading of and response to Hirsch's text, my primary intention is therefore to discern its fundamental premises as they relate to ongoing cultural struggles and rightist mobilizations. It is my hope, however, that this review will not only reveal Hirsch's *core* assumptions, but also call them into question. To accomplish this, I will begin by locating Hirsch's work within New Right politics. Next, I will provide an overview of the book and lay out and respond to its fundamental assumptions. Lastly, I will discuss the role these assumptions play in building political alliances and situate the book within the conservative restoration, particularly the Core Knowledge Movement, the educational initiative connected to Hirsch's work.

In the United States, a complex network of conservative alliances is forming. Known as the New Right, this formation consists of several different but not totally distinct groups engaged in restorational [politics](#)¹ aimed at undermining the limited, progressive gains of the past several decades and delegitimizing the political demands of oppressed groups for representation and redistribution. Michael Apple (1996) defines this hegemonic project as the collaborative, although frequently conflicted, work of four major groups: neoliberals, authoritarian populists, the new professional middle class, and neoconservatives (p. 6).² Each group is waging struggles on a number of fronts — economic, religious, legal, political, educational, cultural. While their interests and concerns often intersect, they are sometimes contradictory and their relative emphases often differ across domains.

In education, the market orientation and consumptive focus of neoliberals has led to the increasing commercialization and privatization of schools (Molnar, 1996). Authoritarian populists, similarly concerned with economic issues but more so with the maintenance of tradition and moral order, significantly influence social and educational policy (Delfattore, 1992; Reed, 1996). Members of the newly emerging professional middle class, armed with valued forms of managerial and technical expertise, seek positions within state social and educational bureaucracies, as well as administrative positions in the economic sector, including newly created roles opening as schools rapidly align with the imperatives of efficiency, centralization, and industry's needs for human capital (Apple, 1995). Neoconservatives have contributed to public efforts and educational initiatives that address a very specifically defined and understood crisis in declining standards, lost tradition, decaying national culture, and a tense, fractured, and degenerating community life (Hirsch, 1987; Schlesinger, 1992). Their most forceful battles are being fought on the terrain of culture, especially with regard to school curriculum and pedagogy.

The contemporary culture wars surrounding the schools, however, may not be fully explained by present social conditions; rather, their origins are partially historical. As a result of racial, gender, and other civil rights struggles in mid-century, demands for cultural representation and economic redistribution have been a central part of political life in the United States. Reforms that threaten the position of those in power, however, do not go unresisted. A variety of historical processes, including White resistance to school desegregation and the distribution of national education reports such as the *Coleman Report*

(1981) and *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission, 1983) gradually shifted the focus from structural causes of inequity to explanations based on the nature of one's background. Undergirding this shift was a powerful discourse on cultural deficit and compensation. In response, oppositional standpoints countered the idea that marginalized groups were culturally "deprived" and needed "compensation," stressing instead that the histories, cultures, languages, experiences, and perspectives of these groups were legitimate and deserved recognition in the school. Demands for greater representation of diverse voices in the curriculum and for multicultural education gained momentum. Unwilling to relinquish cultural dominance, yet having to submit to various political, legislative, and educational compromises, conservative factions led a [countermovement](#).³ Unfortunately, that reaction is presently growing even stronger, particularly under the guidance of neoconservatives.

Perhaps the most influential neoconservative voice over the last decade has been that of E. D. Hirsch, a professor of English at the University of Virginia. Hirsch formed his ideas on culture in the late 1970s and began presenting them at conferences and publishing sketches in the early 1980s. Funded by the Exxon Education Foundation, Hirsch began drafting a preliminary list of cultural literacy items with the assistance of two colleagues, historian Joseph Kett and physicist James Trefil (Hirsch, 1987). Establishing the Core Knowledge Foundation in 1986 and subsequently publishing *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* in 1987 and *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* in 1988 (Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1993), Hirsch laid the foundations for the Core Knowledge Movement, a movement that threatens to be the most powerful arm of the neoconservative educational project.

Overview of *The Schools We Need*

Opening with the foreboding words, "Failed Theories, Famished Minds," Hirsch explains, "What chiefly prompts the writing of this book is our national slowness . . . to cast aside [the] faulty theories that have led to the total absence of a coherent, knowledge-based curriculum, but are nonetheless presented . . . as remedies for the diseases they themselves have caused" (1996, p. 2). According to Hirsch, the progressive educational theories that took shape at Teachers College during the first quarter of this century have held an intellectual and institutional monopoly on schools, especially since the 1950s. They are, he claims, responsible for the deteriorated condition of education. Hirsch aligns American progressive education with European Romanticism's view of the child as a being whose development "should be encouraged to take its natural course." Referring to this body of theory and practice as "Thoughtworld," he contrasts this perspective with Enlightenment thinking that viewed a child as "a still-to-be-formed creature whose instinctual impulses need less to be encouraged than to be molded to the ways of the society" (pp. 72–74).

Tracing the writings of canonized literary icons such as Friedrich Schelling and William Blake, as well as historic education scholars such as John Dewey, Hirsch outlines what he perceives as Romantic fallacies. These include, among others, naturalism, formalism, localism, professional separatism, and the repudiation of standardized tests. According to Hirsch, these have contributed to the emergence of a curriculum that lacks well-defined content and focuses instead upon the abstract tools and metacognitive strategies needed for future learning. As a result, he argues, social inequities have deepened as children

who come to school lacking intellectual capital find an incoherent curriculum and process-oriented teaching unable to remedy their “deficits.” The new civil rights frontier, Hirsch proclaims, consists of assuring that the knowledge gaps of disadvantaged children are filled.

To guarantee what he perceives as educational justice, Hirsch makes a case for a core curriculum. Based on international comparisons of student test scores, Hirsch contends that systems with a national curriculum contribute to greater fairness, as evidenced by a normal distribution of test scores within such nations, and excellence, as demonstrated by their scores in comparison to other nations. To further support his position that a core curriculum is essential to fairness and excellence, Hirsch turns to “mainstream consensus research” in cognitive psychology and neurophysiology. Discussing the role of short- and long-term memory in learning, the function of schemas in prohibiting mental overload, and the importance of automation in facilitating effective thinking, Hirsch calls for a system to deliver predetermined, concrete, sequential, and relevant background knowledge to students and thereby infuse a form of capital that will have later trade value in the common culture and national marketplace. The ultimate promise of such an education, Hirsch claims, is not only the realization of an upwardly mobile underclass and greater social equality, but also the promotion of a shared public culture essential to stable and genuine democracy.

Hirsch bases his analysis on a series of assumptions that warrant close scrutiny. Having sketched his vision broadly, I will now turn to a more thorough examination of the premises underlying it.

Assumption I: Progressivism has a monopoly on schools.

“Critics have long complained that public education in the United States is an institutional and intellectual monopoly,” writes Hirsch (1996, p. 63). He describes this monopoly as a romantic-progressivist body of guiding educational beliefs and practices that value student-centered, naturalistic, hands-on, process-driven, and thinking-skills-oriented schooling. The sovereignty of progressivism, says Hirsch, has supplanted verbal instruction (lecture) focused upon transmission of a body of coherent, discipline-based, and factual content (dominant knowledge) reinforced by distributed practice (drill, repetition, and memorization). If progressive thought enjoys the transcendence that Hirsch claims, and if it has shaped the educational practices responsible for the decline of American schools, one would expect a wealth of evidence to support this contention. Instead, Hirsch provides no support for his claim — at least none that withstands critical analysis.

To document the emergence and subsequent ascendancy of the progressive monopoly, Hirsch traces its history through the writings of various literary figures and educational scholars. After quoting Romantic poets about the divine nature and inherent goodness of the child and citing academic passages on child-centered schooling authored by early progressive curriculum scholars, Hirsch infers:

Education schools . . . converted to progressivism in the 1920s and '30s. From these cells, the doctrine emerged victorious in the public schools in the 1950s. . . . Thereafter, it took a full generation of progressive students, extending from preschool to high school, before the

full effects of Romantic progressivism manifested themselves in the graduating seniors of the 1960s. (1996, pp. 78–79)

Seeking to demonstrate the continuing dominance of progressivism, Hirsch writes, “There is, in short, little in the current literature of school reform that does not yield a powerful sense of déjà vu to anyone who has read the Romantic, progressive literature of the teens, twenties, and thirties of this century” (p. 53).

In his attempt to provide evidence of the favored status of progressivism, Hirsch oversimplifies educational history by denying the existence of competing educational discourses. Referring to the field of education as a fortress, Hirsch contends that progressive dominance was an inevitable result of an educational thoughtworld that promoted only progressive ideas. Bemoaning this alleged conformity, Hirsch quotes Arthur Bestor’s observation that “one of the most shocking facts about the field of education is the almost complete absence of rigorous criticism from within” (Hirsch, 1996, p. 65). Citing the preeminence of Teachers College in the field of education, Hirsch points out that William Heard Kilpatrick, a well-known progressive educator who taught there in the first half of this century, “trained some thirty-five thousand students during his career,” a statistic Hirsch believes “helps explain the relative uniformity of current American educational doctrine” (p. 118).

While it is naive to deny that particular discourses maintain hegemony within disciplines, it is also erroneous to view any field as completely devoid of ideological conflict. Herbert Kliebard (1995), for example, traces four varied ideologies active in the struggle to define the American curriculum from 1893 to 1958. In that period, humanists advocated the development of student intellect through the study of subjects pertinent to Western civilization. In contrast, developmentalists emphasized the need for a curriculum geared toward the nature of the child. Articulating another perspective, social meliorists stressed that schools should be organized around issues of social justice and transformation. Social efficiency educators, posing a different viewpoint, called for a curriculum tied to the functional needs of society. Over the course of more than half a century, representatives of each group advanced competing and sometimes intersecting arguments over what should be taught in schools. Significantly, this history reveals the varying impacts these different educational discourses had on actual school practice. Contrary to Hirsch’s descriptions of an ideological monopoly, great disparities existed between the theories espoused and the curriculum studied in the majority of schools. Instead of grappling with these ideological struggles and discussing the way in which social context shaped the relative impact of these ideologies on curriculum, Hirsch characterizes the field of education as one mired in progressive doctrine only and ignores the schism between theory and practice.

In a sense, Hirsch confuses intellectual history with material historical conditions. In their review of *Cultural Literacy*, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux (1991) critique Hirsch’s reductionist approach:

It assumes that ideas are the determining factor in shaping history. . . . Hirsch’s history lacks any concrete political and social referents, its causal relations are construed through a string of ideas, and it is presented without the benefit of substantive argument of historical

context. While ideas are important in shaping history, they cannot be considered to be so powerful as to alter history beyond the density of its material and social contexts. (p. 232)

Hirsch repeats this error in *The Schools We Need*, this time mistaking the expression of progressive ideas with their material existence. Yet as James Shaver, O. L. Davis, and Suzanne Helburn (1978), John Goodlad (1984), and Larry Cuban (1993) have documented, schools overall remain traditional institutions that offer teacher-centered, whole-class, textbook-focused instruction. These findings suggest that Hirsch's claims are not merely historically inaccurate, but empirically false.

Hirsch goes on to explain the mechanism through which he believes schools of education currently ensure the continued proliferation of progressivism in public schools nationwide. He writes:

This monopoly is sustained by its power to certify teachers. Education schools and their allies in state departments of education perpetuate themselves by requiring prospective teachers to take a specified number of courses . . . in order to be credentialed. . . . When . . . intellectual conformity is combined with administrative control over employment . . . it is not surprising that the citadel should become an institutional monopoly. (1996, pp. 63–65)

Had Hirsch apprised himself of certification requirements in even a few states or investigated any number of teacher education programs, he would quickly have realized the errors in his position. The courses required for professional teacher certification are not predominately grounded in progressive philosophy. Rather, the work required is largely focused upon the psychology of learning, classroom management, educational standards, assessment, and subject matter (Andrews, 1996; Goodman, 1986; Tryneski, 1997) — the domains of educational thought Hirsch claims have all but disappeared due to this progressive monopoly.

In deconstructing Hirsch's assumption that progressivism monopolizes schools, it is important to avoid making the opposite claim that traditional philosophies and practices have absolute control over schools. Progressive struggles have had an impact on schools. Such gains, however, have not significantly transformed curricular content and pedagogical practice overall. For example, many multicultural reform efforts have concentrated on changing individual attitudes or the superficial insertion of cultural and historical information about oppressed groups into the already dominant organization of school knowledge. At the same time, critical forms of multiculturalism that critique the privileging of particular perspectives, engage in a more nuanced discussion of cultural relations and identities, and question the nature of power have yet to enter many schools (McCarthy, 1993). These partial efforts to accommodate progressive demands may be explained by what Apple (1993) has called "the politics of cultural incorporation" — a politics in which the curriculum is "the product of often intense conflict, negotiations, and attempts at rebuilding hegemonic control by actually incorporating the knowledge and perspectives of the less powerful under the umbrella of the discourse of dominant groups" (p. 56). While schools have been responsive in particular ways to appeals for greater representation of marginalized knowledge, such inclusion has not significantly altered the status of canonized school knowledge. On the whole, traditional curricular and pedagogical forms remain intact, and progressive practices are more

often the exception rather than the rule.

In the end, Hirsch provides no concrete evidence to support the claim that a progressive monopoly exists. Perhaps what is most important, though, is not the presence or absence of evidence, but why Hirsch and others on the New Right *perceive* a progressive monopoly and how this shapes their agenda. Why has the impact of demands for representation tended to be exaggerated in the minds of neoconservatives? One possibility is that fear of subverted power and undermined cultural authority distorts neoconservative interpretations of schooling.

Assumption II: The existing curriculum is incoherent.

“The idea that there exists a coherent plan for teaching content,” writes Hirsch, “is a gravely misleading myth” (1996, p. 26). According to him, the progressive monopoly has rendered the existing curriculum incoherent — that is, schools lack an agreed upon scheme for the transmission of specific content to students. Hirsch maintains that various aspects of progressive education, including formalism, naturalism, and localism, have contributed to this incoherence.

Hirsch claims that the curriculum is incoherent as a result of the formalism, or anti-intellectualism, of the progressive monopoly. Formalism, or “the belief that the particular content which is learned in school . . . is far less important than acquiring the formal [intellectual] tools which will enable [the learning of] future content” (1996, p. 218), has left the curriculum in shambles. In Hirsch’s view, the curriculum, over the past seventy years or so, has become an exercise in metacognition at the expense of solid, specifically defined content. He writes that “American educational theory has held that the child needs to be given the all-purpose *tools* that are needed for him or her to continue learning and adapting. The particular content used to develop those tools need not be specified” (p. 21).

Hirsch contends that naturalism, or “the belief that education is a natural process” that should be “connected with natural, real-life goals and settings” (1996, p. 218), has also contributed to the vagueness of the curriculum. In short, he argues that naturalism has resulted in the proliferation of process-oriented, child-centered pedagogies throughout the school system. Hirsch writes that although the doctrine of natural pedagogy “assumes that the proper way of learning involves lifelike, holistic projects which . . . teach [children] how to work together and use knowledge,” it nonetheless “turns out to be a very insecure way of learning” (p. 86). Such teaching methodologies, broadly applied and prescriptively weak, are thus responsible for the curriculum’s indistinct state.

Hirsch asserts that another cause of curriculum incoherence is localism, or the tradition of determining locally what children should learn. He maintains that other nations have recognized the need for “translocal commonality in the content of early schooling. . . . Nonetheless,” he continues, “it is quixotic to resist educational localism in the United States, where there is no plausible mechanism for replacing this sanctified arrangement. . . . Granting the inevitability of localism, . . . a chief aim of educational policy ought to be to compensate for its most egregious shortcomings” (1996, p. 97). In Hirsch’s opinion, the curriculum is decentralized, highly unregulated, and vulnerable to the whims of localism.

Yet Hirsch underestimates the centralizing and regulatory role of textbook adoptions, patterns of textual representation, function of standardized testing, and use of predetermined curricular packages in the coherence of curriculum. While none of these guarantees the unmediated transmission of dominant culture, each shapes a cohesive and patterned body of knowledge accorded status through institutionalized channels.

In the case of textbooks, it is essential to recognize that “while there is no official federal government sponsorship of specific curriculum content in the United States . . . the structures of a national curriculum are produced by the marketplace and by state intervention in other ways” (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 32). State textbook adoption processes, for example, have a tremendous influence on the regulation of school knowledge. Although not all states have statewide adoption policies, almost half do, and the portion of the market controlled by this sector largely determines which texts are available for sale across the entire nation. Therefore, the composition of state textbook committees, access to resources for mobilizing around content issues, and even the way that labor is structured within the publishing industry have an impact on the official knowledge embodied in the text (Apple, 1993; Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991).

Beginning in the late 1970s, rightist groups initiated organized campaigns to influence textbook content. These battles over textbook knowledge continue and their outcomes suggest that conservative interests have been well served (Delfattore, 1992; Gabler & Gabler, 1985). In light of such struggles, it is important to recall Hirsch’s claim that localism renders the curriculum fragmented and that formalism and naturalism make content a peripheral concern. Instead, it appears that textbooks form a national network regulating the distribution of knowledge and that content is a central preoccupation on the minds of publishers, members of the state educational apparatus, and community groups, with each attempting to make certain the curriculum coheres in a way that serves particular interests.

Also relevant in deconstructing the assumption of curricular incoherence are studies that address the issue of symbolic representation in school textbooks. For example, in examining texts utilized across a number of grade levels and subject areas, many have discovered relatively coherent patterns of representation of race, class, gender, and disability (Anyon, 1983; Banks, 1969; Cobble & Kessler-Harris, 1993; Commeyras & Alvermann, 1996; Cruz, 1994; Hahn & Blankenship, 1983; Potter & Rosser, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). Findings clearly show the extent to which content focuses on dominant groups while according the experiences of women, labor, and other such groups marginal status. Despite Hirsch’s claim, patterns of textual representation reveal that the curriculum does have coherence and is far from neutral regarding content. Discussing the implications of historical texts, Howard Zinn (1995) stresses that while “selection, simplification, [and] emphasis . . . are inevitable,” textual representations are “released into a world of contending interests, where any chosen emphasis supports . . . some kind of interest, whether economic or political or racial or national or sexual” (p. 8). Undoubtedly, the impact that such representations (or lack of) have on student knowledge is of great consequence, and the terms under which particular groups are either included in or negated from texts render claims of content incoherence [illegitimate](#).⁴

Standardized testing also challenges Hirsch's assessment of curriculum incoherence. Testing represents a multimillion-dollar national industry in this country (Educational Testing Service, 1998). The widespread uses of testing in American culture and the role of tests as gatekeepers to social resources underscore the regulatory functions of tests. Significantly, Geoff Whitty (1985) researched the politics surrounding the transformation of Britain's public examination system where a number of interest groups sought to influence the process. Teacher control over examinations was opposed by rightist groups who believed it "permitted teachers to use their professional mandate in the interests of [leftist] political goals" (p. 123). Conservative humanists, concerned with preserving tradition and setting parameters on what was taught and measured in classrooms, advocated control of course syllabi and assessments by external boards. Although the United States does not have an official system of comprehensive national testing as does Britain, it is evident that tests nonetheless serve to ensure that specific content is given priority in American classrooms. Even Hirsch (1996) acknowledges that tests set boundaries on what constitutes relevant knowledge when he acknowledges the widespread practice "of teaching narrowly to high-stakes" tests and using them "as tool[s] of accountability" for teachers (pp. 192–193). In the end, then, systems of testing do lend coherence to the curriculum by way of their regulatory power.

Finally, Hirsch fails to recognize the increasing regulation of content through prepackaged curricula. One emerging trend has been for school systems to purchase "a total set of standardized material, one that includes statements of objectives, all of the curricular content and material needed, prespecified teacher actions and appropriate student responses, and diagnostic and achievement tests" (Apple, 1995, p. 131). Such developments seem to indicate that the inverse of Hirsch's position is true: the curriculum, rather than being incoherent and local, is tacitly micromanaged and centralized.

Though Hirsch is partially insightful in recognizing the absence of an explicit curricular logic, he fails to note those mechanisms that indirectly combine to lend coherence. As mentioned earlier, Hirsch's perception is likely associated with the threat posed by demands for the integration of diverse cultural and historical perspectives into the curriculum. For Hirsch, then, incoherence is not the absence of content; instead, it is the inclusion of content that has traditionally been excluded. Gerald Graff (1992) suggests that conservatives tend to confuse curricular coherence with consensus over what constitutes legitimate school knowledge. He argues that challenges to canonical knowledge need not lead to a curriculum consisting of disconnected components. Rather, the lack of consensus itself has the potential to constitute a common educational experience around which students and teachers discover "what is at stake in one way of knowing against another" (p. 186). From this perspective, coherence is not compromised by cultural struggle. It is cultural struggle that unites the educational experience.

Assumption III: Education is a cognitive-technical process through which factual content is transmitted.

Hirsch (1996) complains that a major barrier to improving education has been "the politicization of educational issues that are at bottom technical rather than political" (p. 66). He sees education as a cognitive-technical process through which factual content is transmitted to students for storage in memory. Using cognitive psychology and neurophysiology, or what Hirsch terms consensus research, as a basis for his educational theory, he asserts that excellence in schooling necessitates an appreciation of the centrality of short- and long-term memory, repetition and automation, development of mental

schemas consisting of vocabulary and specific facts, and the continuous acquisition, chunking, assimilation, and stocking of new information in an accurate fashion. Using the words of John Dewey, Hirsch warns that the result of failing to effect “genuine and thorough transmission” will be the relapse of “the most civilized group . . . into barbarism and then into savagery” (Hirsch, 1996, p. 121). His view of schooling thus seems more descriptive of an inculcative rather than an educational process.

Learning, for Hirsch, is the consumption of what he variously calls core content, relevant background knowledge, intellectual capital, traditional subject matter, book knowledge, shared national culture, vocabulary, and solid facts. These referents shelter Hirsch from having to discuss the political nature of knowledge and schooling. He never questions the role of power in determining what is considered relevant, whose knowledge is worthy of knowing, or why particular accounts pass as “fact” in classrooms. In fact, he consciously chooses not to explore such issues, reasoning that “once you start down that road, where will you stop?” (1996, p. 31). Instead of exploring this political slippery slope, Hirsch emphasizes the need to reach an agreement on a common sequence in the curriculum, “at least in those areas like math and science and the basic facts of history and geography, which, unlike sex education, are not and should not be subjects of controversy” (p. 37). Discounting the validity of conflict over knowledge, Hirsch chides, “The educational community’s identification of knowledge with ‘elitism’ — a theme that long antedated the recent addition of ‘Eurocentrism’ to the antiknowledge armory — is a strategy born more of hostility than of rational principle” (p. 116). Hirsch’s world is free of cultural struggle; it is a world in which one needs only to disarm, reclaim abandoned sensibilities, and soberly internalize unproblematic content. Considering which and whose knowledge constitutes school curriculum is, much to Hirsch’s dismay, an ongoing “road” we need to continuously travel. The danger resides not in the inability to “stop” questioning, but in the suggestion that we should ever cease asking these questions.

Hirsch urges, “One of the fundamental aims of an adequate education is to gain a large vocabulary — to become what [is] disparagingly call[ed] ‘a dictionary.’” He continues:

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. . . . There is rarely a comprehensible connection between a word and a thing, only a cultural connection that has to be memorized, not ‘understood.’ (1996, p. 111)

Emphasizing transmission rather than critical reflection, Hirsch argues that memory is an active and constructive process. “Unless one believes in thought transference or mental telepathy . . . the only way a student can understand what a teacher is saying . . . is through a complex, sometimes strenuous activity of constructing meaning from words” (p. 134). In essence, Hirsch is claiming that because it takes effort to memorize something or grasp its “intended” meaning, this process of mental gymnastics constitutes engaged learning. He does not recognize the important difference between having students participate in continuous dialogue and reflection to construct knowledge and meaning, and simply expecting them to acquire a static and mandated perspective and commit it to memory through repetitive practice. While Hirsch fleetingly acknowledges the need for children to “ask questions like ‘How does he know that?’ about a wide range of claims,” he insists that “absent a great deal of solid knowledge,” critical thinking is

impossible (pp. 142–143). His idea that students should passively accept “solid knowledge,” only later to think critically about it, is particularly misguided. It seems that “solid knowledge” is what students should question from the start.

Hirsch, however, rejects such descriptions of his position as inaccurate, arguing that his educational stance has been caricatured. Regarding his earlier work, Hirsch complains, “Among the several criticisms of *Cultural Literacy*, the most dull-minded was that it advised educators to teach disconnected, rote-memorized words and facts” (1996, p. 145). And yet, while Hirsch insists he does not advocate such a pedagogy, the ideas he articulates, along with the evidence leveraged in support, reveal the opposite. For example, Hirsch references what he calls “consensus research” on effective teaching, explaining that findings have indicated “almost anything connected with the classical recitation pattern of teacher questioning (particularly direct factual questions rather than more open questions) followed by student response, followed by teacher feedback, correlates positively with achievement” (Brophy & Good, quoted in Hirsch, 1996, p. 161). Ideally, Hirsch clarifies, students will be able “to supply the right answer or to follow the right procedure very fast, without hesitation” (p. 164). To acquire such intellectual efficiency, Hirsch reminds us that memory studies have shown that “the best approach to achieving retention in long-term memory is ‘distributed practice’” (p. 223). Thus, Hirsch concludes, although progressives may abhor “traditional schooling indoors — at desks, in rows, and largely by means of words and drill and practice,” research tell us that “wherever there is an absence of ‘traditional’ schooling — there is also an absence of secure and universal learning” (pp. 217–218). For Hirsch, education is a cognitive act of memory facilitated through a “scientifically” validated pedagogy; learning and teaching are technical matters, not ideological or political ones.

His denial of the role of politics in education extends as well to standardized testing. Discussing testing in a highly technical manner, Hirsch argues that standardized testing is not political. Instead, he maintains, it is the fairest form of assessment. Unlike authentic [assessments](#)⁵ that often yield different scores depending on who does the grading, Hirsch stresses that the same score is always awarded for the same performance on standardized tests. Scoring thus becomes the only criterion of fairness; the nature of the questions and the knowledge being privileged and tested are not, for Hirsch, issues that warrant serious consideration. He dismisses the claim that standardized tests are culturally biased (what he refers to as the racial-social objection). “Americans, to their credit, have been pioneers in developing objective tests,” he says (1996, p. 177). This assumption of objectivity not only reveals a naiveté regarding the politics of knowledge, but is also historically inaccurate. Stephen Jay Gould (1996) examines the nativistic, racist, sexist, and classist origins of testing in the United States in great depth. When standardized testing is examined in historical context — something that Hirsch typically overlooks — the claim of cultural bias is not so easily dismissed.

Clearly, Hirsch’s theories of knowledge, pedagogy, and testing are plagued by his denial of cultural politics and his insistence that education is apolitical. His *Cultural Literacy* (1987) provides an important insight into his denial of the importance and role of politics in education. Hirsch discusses the drafting of the preliminary list of cultural literacy items:

Early in our project, my colleagues and I decided that our list should aim to represent but not to alter current literate American culture. . . . We have tried to avoid any of the prescriptiveness that is inherent in cultural politics. . . . We are aware that the suspicion may be entertained that our list is merely academic or male or white. . . . But a similarity of shared knowledge . . . controverts the ad hominem assumption that, because a list was made by so and so, it merely reflects so and so's view of American literate culture. (pp. 136–137)

Hirsch's belief that he can represent American literate culture unproblematically reveals an unwillingness to avow his own politics.

Perhaps even more revealing is the story behind the naming of Hirsch's Core Knowledge Foundation. Initially called the Cultural Literacy Foundation, Hirsch explains his decision to change its name: "Teachers pointed out that the term 'Cultural' raised too many extraneous questions, whereas the term 'Core Knowledge' better described the chief aim of the reform . . . to introduce solid knowledge in a coherent way into the elementary curriculum" (1996, p. 13). Replacing Cultural Literacy, a designation that raised "extraneous" questions (such as whose culture), with Core Knowledge, a term conveying a certain universality, was an interesting tactical maneuver for one who disassociates himself from cultural politics. This highly symbolic shift illustrates Hirsch's ongoing attempt to depict that which is political and cultural as an unprejudiced educational project in the general interest of all.

In the end, Hirsch fails to acknowledge that schooling is a cultural undertaking rather than a cognitive-technical matter. The questions of what and whose knowledge defines an educated and literate person and the implications of these questions are at the heart of critical examinations of schooling. That the construction of knowledge is a political process and that the privileging and obliteration of culture have been central to the history of this nation are sticky issues Hirsch knowingly or unknowingly evades. For him, the inherent worth of education lies in its stabilizing potential, its ability to reinforce tradition and transmit "literate" culture and "core" knowledge. In challenging the meaning of education Hirsch embraces, it is perhaps appropriate to pose the question as Paulo Freire (1993) might: Is education about the depositing of information into the minds of people, or is it about engaging in a process of reflection and praxis, naming the world in order to transform it?

Assumption IV: Schools must compensate for the knowledge deficits of children from culturally impoverished backgrounds.

Embracing the findings of the Coleman Report that correlated particular home backgrounds with academic failure, Hirsch emphasizes that "this pattern of social determinism . . . still persists in the schools" (1996, p. 21). He advocates *compensating* for the *deficits* of *disadvantaged* children so they may "secure the knowledge and skills that will enable them to improve their condition" (p. 7). In fact, Hirsch's enthusiastic support of a national curriculum is based largely on his understanding of it as a compensatory measure. Hirsch views schooling as an assimilative and civilizing process that ensures the proper maintenance of "tradition" and protects against the dangers of incoherence, social disintegration,

and savagery lurking on the cultural periphery. Though the racial and class overtones of this discourse are apparent, the position is articulated with a certain benevolence, an air of good will, a concern that democratic ideals be upheld.

Hirsch's position on schooling is founded on a sort of cultural supremacy that fails to recognize itself as such. In talking about lower levels of educational achievement of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, Hirsch explains that it is "overwhelmingly clear that the chief explanation must be cultural rather than individual or genetic" (p. 103). To support his argument that particular cultural backgrounds hinder proper schooling, Hirsch cites Orlando Patterson, a Caribbean scholar who compares the achievements of Blacks in Jamaica with those of African Americans in the United States:

A comparison of the two school systems suggests that attitudes are much more critical than the material resources of the schools or the homes of students. . . . School success . . . is more profoundly related to attitudes towards the dominant culture. . . . If we [Patterson/other Black students in Jamaica] wanted to succeed, *we had to acquire this thing*; if we didn't, well, it was up to us. (Patterson, quoted in Hirsch, 1996, p. 103; italics added)

For Hirsch, the true source of disadvantage lies in deficient cultural traditions that differ from and resist replacement by that "thing" called dominant culture. For children from culturally impoverished backgrounds to advance, he argues, they need to acquire some genuine cultural capital. Hirsch reasons that "students from good-home schools will always have an educational advantage over students from less-good-home schools" (p. 43). He does not address why the cultural traditions, linguistic practices, or social mores of one home are considered good, while others are viewed as symptomatic of illiteracy, ignorance, and cultural deficit. His propensity to dismiss nondominant forms of knowledge is epitomized in the explication: "Just as it takes money to make money, it takes knowledge to make knowledge. . . . Those children who arrive at school lacking the relevant experience and vocabulary — they see not, neither do they understand" (p. 20). Yet, Hirsch expresses guarded optimism:

Young children who arrive at school with a very small vocabulary, and a correspondingly limited knowledge base, *can* fortunately be brought to an age-adequate vocabulary by intelligent, focused help . . . [but] when this language and knowledge deficit is not compensated for early, it is nearly impossible . . . in later grades. (p. 146)

Drawing startling parallels between knowing and unknowing students, Hirsch praises the benefits of core knowledge and traditional pedagogy for "the palace-tutored prince as well as the neglected pauper" (p. 226).

His perspective prevents him from recognizing that children — whether non-White, working-class, or Spanish-speaking — bring to the classroom lived experiences, cultural traditions, and languages that are diverse and rich sources of knowledge that have the potential to serve as a powerful critique of dominant ways of [knowing](#).⁶ Based on her ethnographic research in schools, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994)

suggests that successful teaching occurs not when students are required to abandon their cultural identities in order to learn, but when educators view student culture as an asset rather than an impediment. Ladson-Billings discovered that successful teachers of African American students saw “teaching as ‘digging knowledge out’ of students” and had “an overriding belief that students come to school with knowledge and that that knowledge must be explored and utilized” (p. 52). Such teachers viewed “knowledge as something that is continuously re-created, recycled, and shared” (p. 81), rather than something static and passively acquired from an external, objective source. These findings imply a vision of schooling, a promise, that Hirsch denies. In contrast to his argument, it appears “the schools we really need” are those that relentlessly seek to embrace students as knowers.

Hirsch’s perception of particular cultural forms as normative, if not superior, results in the derogation and nonrecognition of student knowledge, especially the knowledge possessed by those viewed as deficient. Some educators, however, have uncovered the potential of a pedagogical perspective very different from Hirsch’s. For example, Rosa Hernandez Sheets (1995) illustrates that students’ first language can be a means of developing literacy. William Tate (1995) documents an approach to teaching math based on community experiences. In addition to individual teachers, entire school communities have affirmed the educational and social impact of democratic efforts aimed at recognizing student knowledge. At the Rindge School of Technical Arts in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for example, teachers, students, and community members participate in an ongoing collaboration that entails the application of student knowledge to the assessment and resolution of community needs (Apple & Beane, 1995). In part, these examples illustrate the promise of an education that is culturally relevant to students.

Hirsch contends that one of the major reasons students fail is “boredom compounded with humiliation — emotions that are induced and exacerbated by lack of shared knowledge in the classroom” (1996, p. 25). Hirsch has articulated a partial insight; many children do understand their education to be irrelevant and degrading, but not for the reasons Hirsch advances. He could perhaps find a fuller explanation in Paul Willis’s (1977) argument that children increasingly resist schooling as their own knowledge is deemed insignificant in the educational process. Forced into a system that denies their experience and renders their identities meaningless, they resist — or in Hirsch’s language, they fail.

Minimizing the importance of representation in the school curriculum, Hirsch insists: “Wherever public schools have offered the choice of truly effective mainstream academic training . . . minority families have signed up in disproportionate numbers. . . . These parents clearly recognize the direct connection between economic advancement for their children and the mastery of . . . mainstream culture (1996, p. 208). Hirsch fails to note the predicament in which many “minorities” find themselves — they must submit to cultural dominance or risk economic hardship. Rather than having a profound respect for the “mainstream,” it is more likely that marginalized groups seek to maximize chances of security. The coercive nature of this situation seems to escape Hirsch’s critique. The question that needs to be posed is: What are the costs of citizenship and economic survival in this society? Undoubtedly, the costs to identity, culture, and language are great indeed.

Contradicting the picture Hirsch paints of an empowering “mainstream” culture, many have discussed the personal struggle entailed in trying to succeed academically while at the same time maintaining

cultural identity (Deyhle, 1995; hooks, 1994; Kissen, 1993; Villanueva, 1993; Willis, 1995). Cornel West (1993), for example, has argued that the most significant problem confronting the African American community is the “nihilistic threat” that he describes as “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness” (p. 23). He maintains that self-loathing and lack of meaning result from the “white supremacist beliefs and images permeating U.S. society and culture” (p. 27). Though West does not mention schools specifically, one of the major institutions contributing to nihilism is most certainly the school, for on a daily basis, children of color are subjected to a curriculum that reflects little of themselves. The compensatory impulse that Hirsch regards as constructive is, from this vantage point, destructive.

From Hirsch’s perspective, however, a bit of “destruction” is necessary; it is the cost of maintaining a cohesive society. In an article written several years prior to *The Schools We Need*, he explains that while “the theme of lost ethnicity is as old as antiquity, [the] benefits conferred by . . . civilization entail the pain of some cultural loss” (1992, p. 2). For Hirsch, the social good requires conformity to dominant culture and a compensatory measure capable of securing its continual hegemony, guaranteeing the suppression of disparate voices, and protecting against the corruption of the grand tradition. Subsumed beneath a discourse of deficit and compensation, one discovers highly undemocratic cultural presumptions.

Assumption V: A common culture is shared by all members of society and should be promoted through a national curriculum in support of democracy.

Hirsch’s nonrecognition of culture as a site of struggle is sustained by his belief in the historical existence of a common culture. Praising Thomas Jefferson’s conception of a “common grade-school,” he describes Jefferson’s aspiration to “create a literate and independent citizenry as well as a nesting ground for future leaders” (1996, p. 17). Hirsch claims that America’s founders “desired that the laws and customs of the public sphere should favor no single sect but should promote the general welfare” (p. 234). Hirsch, however, remembers his history selectively, omitting evidence that would disrupt his fantasy of an inclusive public space. For example, though Jefferson’s advocacy of public schooling was unique for his time, Hirsch overlooks the fact that the educational system proposed by Jefferson was gradational and intended to function as a filtering mechanism through which “the best geniusses [sic] will be raked from the rubbish” (Peden, 1982, p. 146). Guided by a republican ideology that emphasized the maintenance of a virtuous citizenry — a group narrowly constituted along lines such as gender and race — Jefferson hoped schools would foster a more informed, independent, incorruptible populace and an aristocracy of talent capable of leading the new nation.

Hirsch repeats this limited reading of history in his analysis of the common schools, claiming that they had “the goal of giving all children the shared intellectual and social capital” necessary for participation in “the economy and policy of the nation” (1996, p. 233). His uncomplicated rendering of history enables him to forget that the intellectual capital transmitted by the common school was not “shared.” As Carl Kaestle (1983) has shown, common schools were founded upon a native, Anglo-American, Protestant, republican, capitalist ideology that left many groups alienated. Furthermore, the underlying purpose of the common school was to promote moral, social, and cultural stability rather than genuine educational

and political development.

Hirsch's social and educational vision is built on the notion that a utopian public sphere — a mythic one that has never existed — is being undermined by the educational initiatives and politically divisive perspectives of progressives. His politicized reconstruction of the past allows him to evade the complexities and contradictions of a history shaped by struggles against unequal power. Within the parameters he sets, Hirsch chooses not to acknowledge that common culture is a particular rather than a shared tradition, a specific and highly exclusive construction of class, race, gender, sexuality, language, and history.

Hirsch's obsession with the maintenance of a common culture and the need to protect it against potential dissolution is best encapsulated in his ongoing discussion of cosmopolitanism. Hirsch articulates his position in an article entitled "Toward a Centrist Curriculum: Two Kinds of Multiculturalism in Elementary School" (1992). Focusing on multiculturalism, Hirsch explains, "There's a progressive form that will be helpful to all students, and a retrogressive kind that . . . tends to set group against group. . . . The universalistic view . . . might be called cosmopolitanism. . . . The other is a particularistic vision that stresses loyalty to one's local culture. It could be called . . . 'ethnic loyalism.'" The central issue, Hirsch asserts, is "do we define ourselves as belonging to a particular 'ethnos' or . . . a broad 'cosmopolis'?" (pp. 1–2) Hirsch's distinct understanding of multiculturalism and the posing of this question reveal his fear of difference, the need for its subversion, and its close association with the disintegration of tradition and social cohesion. For the cosmopolis to thrive, challenges to cultural dominance must be silenced and demands for representation, rooted in "ethnic loyalism," must be fended off. Critiques of power are an impossibility because, in the cosmopolis, we are all the same. The cosmopolis is thus an ahistorical place where a mythical consensus overshadows the ugly reality of racial, cultural, and economic oppression.

One cannot underestimate the importance of consensus to Hirsch's theory of society and schooling. Democracy, for Hirsch, depends on consensus and falters without a commonly embraced culture. This conception of democracy, however, is highly questionable and raises some crucial concerns. Does diversity compromise the democratic ideal or does it protect it? Further, how can a democracy be sustained without an ethic of criticism? When dialogue ceases, might democracy gravitate toward fascism? Perhaps most importantly, in a society in which class, race, and gender have played a central and historical role in the formation of present day realities, can democracy come into being without recognizing the ways differences have functioned in shaping relations of power and exploitation?

Hirsch is preoccupied with how to uphold the Jeffersonian ideal amid contemporary threats to cosmopolitanism. If the schools are currently controlled by the progressivist monopoly, as Hirsch claims, and cultural disintegration is imminent, then the United States must act to stabilize incoherence by creating a mechanism through which consensus will be enforced, differences quarantined, and the cosmopolis maintained. For Hirsch, that tool is the public school system. "In a large, diverse nation," Hirsch asserts, "the common school is the only institution available for creating a school-based culture that, like a common language, enables everyone to communicate in the public sphere" (1996, p. 233). To break the progressive stronghold and reclaim the common school, the adoption of an official national

curriculum is thus needed. This core curriculum would promote a common culture and protect against the multicultural threat. As a compensatory measure, Hirsch promises that it will remedy deficiencies and protect the culturally impoverished from themselves. Most importantly, it will fulfill Hirsch's vision of the ultimate democratic ideal — entrance into the marketplace.

The adoption of an official national curriculum is not the apolitical matter Hirsch claims. In considering any curriculum, one must ask: What and whose knowledge will be included or excluded? Who will decide? And what does the finality of deciding imply? Regarding the issue of what and whose knowledge will be granted official status, Hirsch states:

In the United States, the process of reaching agreement about a sequence of common learnings in the early grades is likely to be lengthy, conflict-ridden, and, at the start, unofficial. . . . Gradually, however, general agreement on such a core might be developed if the public and the educational community became fully persuaded that some degree of grade-by-grade commonality is necessary. (1996, p. 235)

Hirsch's preoccupation with reaching an agreement overshadows questions related to why particular forms of knowledge would constitute the core curriculum while others would not. Further, Hirsch assumes that a consensus over knowledge should exist. His emphasis on moving beyond conflict to consensus reveals the degree to which he views knowledge as the common possession of agreed upon, grade-by-grade distributed facts. "The strongest resistance to commonality in schooling may come from a widespread fear of uniformity," says Hirsch (p. 237). The opposite, of course, could be concluded. The need for commonality, in other words, may be the result of a fear of diversity. And it is precisely this fear of diversity that raises serious concerns about what and whose knowledge would comprise the core curriculum.

The second question relevant to the adoption of an official national curriculum is who decides — no minor consideration since democracy relies on collective and involved participation. Yet, except to note that such a process would be conflictive, Hirsch does not address this issue. The answers to key questions such as who has access to channels of decisionmaking power, whose voice is valued within those channels, and what exactly are the channels and processes of negotiation are by no means inconsequential and must be relentlessly and unromantically interrogated in relation to how power is distributed (Apple, in press; Fraser, 1997). Negotiations surrounding the current public school curriculum have had little regard for these issues. In much the same way, the politics surrounding the production of the Core Knowledge Sequence, the curriculum affiliated with Hirsch's Core Knowledge Foundation and adopted by core knowledge schools across the nation, have not been explicitly discussed. Hirsch simply describes the curriculum as one that was "reviewed and revised by panels of teachers [and] further revised by almost 100 people of diverse backgrounds" (Hirsch, 1993, p. 2). Who decided and the processes by which decisions were made remain unclear.

The third issue pertains to the implications of reaching a final consensus on the contents of an official national curriculum. For Hirsch, consensus and commonality are part and parcel of not only national

culture, but school culture as well. Reaching a final consensus over school curriculum, however, implies that knowledge is static and unchanging, a problematic tenet. Hirsch's conception of knowledge as a relatively settled and fixed entity is revealed quite clearly when he states:

For most problems that require critical thought by the ordinary person . . . the most needed knowledge is usually rather basic, long-lived, and slow to change. True, just as physics is under revision at the frontier, so American history . . . is constantly under revision in certain details. . . . But behind the ever-changing front lines, there is a body of reliable knowledge which has not changed, and will not change very much. (1996, p. 155)

Knowledge, for Hirsch, is a stable body of fact occasionally altered by the addition of newly discovered details. But clearly, this conception of knowledge should be eschewed. Knowledge results from ongoing cultural struggle and is constructed and reconstructed through complex social processes. It is produced through conflict on the front lines, efforts to reclaim forgotten and suppressed histories, and demands for curricular representation, all of which Hirsch trivializes in the midst of praising the uncompromised status of the canon.

In sum, the curriculum that currently dominates public schooling and the official national curriculum Hirsch advocates are inherently undemocratic. Ultimately, one must ponder a more just and viable alternative. Such reflection may provide an avenue for imagining possibilities as well as a direction for work that challenges hegemony. To begin, it may be said that any democratic curriculum will pay particular attention to what and whose knowledge constitutes the curriculum. R. W. Connell (1993) lays out the specifications of a model of curricular justice and gives significant consideration to the knowledge valued in schools. Primary to any socially just curriculum, Connell believes, is the widespread adoption of the perspective of "the least advantaged." Making the knowledge of the least advantaged the center of curriculum requires that "we think through economic issues from the standpoint of the poor. . . . Gender arrangements from the standpoint of women. . . . Race relations and land questions from the standpoint of indigeneous [sic] people . . . questions of sexuality from the standpoint of gay people" (p. 43). The suggestion that the cultural and historical experiences of oppressed groups be privileged within schools seems democratic, for it is difficult to fathom how advantaging the knowledge of the elite and powerful could promote a more just society. In some respects, such a curriculum might resemble that of Central Park East, a high school in East Harlem that maintains as one of its guiding curricular questions, From whose viewpoint am I knowing? (Meier & Schwartz, 1995).

The idea that multiple voices shape the curriculum through an ongoing process of negotiation over knowledge, and that conflict, rather than consensus, constitutes the curricular foundation must also be considered in any discussion of democratic educational initiatives. It is conceivable that Hirsch would question the degree to which schools could operate, students learn, and society remain intact without a consensus about what specifically constitutes knowledge in the educational sphere. Yet, Graff (1992) articulates a curriculum theory that responds to political struggles over school knowledge, appreciates the changing nature of knowledge, addresses the difference between consensus and coherence, and concerns itself with the social implications of knowing. He stresses the tendency to "speak as if the content of [common] culture were already *settled* — as if there were no question about what the common culture

will include and who will have a voice in defining it” (p. 45). Instead, Graff recommends that ongoing struggle and conflict over knowledge constitute the school curriculum. We need to imagine, Graff stresses, “how conflict, disagreement, and difference might themselves become a source of educational and cultural coherence — indeed, the appropriate source of coherence for a democratic society” (p. 143). It should be underscored, however, that Graff does not envision his proposal as a means for defusing tension through the promotion of a relativistic pluralism. Rather, such a curriculum would enable students to understand the social implications of different ways of knowing and increase their awareness regarding “how knowledge is produced . . . thus [making] them capable of playing an active role in their society, enabling them to intervene in the dominant discourses of their culture” (p. 186).

Graff’s emphasis on heightened consciousness and social action brings into focus the final point to be considered with regard to any democratic curriculum. As Freire acknowledges, critical dialogue, reflection, and social action are important in any transformative educational project aimed at the realization of the collective good. He notes that “as [teachers and students] attain . . . knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators” (1993, p. 51). Hence, any democratic form of schooling will endow students, through processes of engagement, with the knowledge needed to re-create self and society.

Beyond the Book: Rightist Mobilizations and the Core Knowledge Movement

Having called into question some of Hirsch’s core assumptions, one inquiry still remains: Why, despite the problematic nature of the social and educational foundations of the neoconservative vision, is it successfully drawing so many people into the hegemonic alliance? Much of the answer may lie in the New Right’s and, more specifically, the neoconservative ability to “work on popular sentiments, to reorganize genuine feelings, and in the process to win adherents” (Apple, 1993, p. 20). Using what Apple (1993) calls “the politics of common sense,” the New Right has tapped into the real experiences, anxieties, and hopes of many people, subsequently rechanneling and rearticulating them in ways that support the rightist political agenda. This insight into the dynamics of New Right politics provides a framework for discussing how neoconservative assumptions — particularly those expressed in *The Schools We Need* — function as discourses that appeal to individuals’ understandings of the world, thus spurring them to join the hegemonic alliance and, more specifically, the Core Knowledge Movement.

For example, Hirsch claims that, by acquiring needed intellectual capital through the core curriculum, students traditionally condemned to economic marginalization will gain entry to a marketplace that promises financial stability and greater access to material resources. Hirsch writes: “Improving the effectiveness and fairness of education through enhancing both its content and its commonality has more than educational significance. The improvement would . . . diminish the economic inequalities within the nation” (1996, p. 238). The curricular initiative proposed by Hirsch thus becomes associated with a broader distribution of economic resources.

Although it is difficult to understand how groups denied cultural representation will, at the same time, obtain greater equality within the economic sphere — especially since struggles for recognition and

redistribution are interrelated (Fraser, 1997) — this is precisely Hirsch’s argument. Despite the flaws of its logic, the assurance of social mobility is something no parents would wish to deny their children. As families endure a persisting economic crisis marked by increased poverty, unaffordable housing, inaccessible health care, and corporate layoffs, combined with a job market principally offering low-paying work in the service sector, many parents understandably want security for their children and fear withholding from them anything that may enhance their future chances of financial survival. It is not difficult to appreciate, then, why many parents would enthusiastically mobilize around a school curriculum that provides the “background knowledge” needed for their children to “succeed economically.”

Hirsch’s *What Your K-6 Grader Needs to Know* series (1991–1996) is certainly meant to appeal to this sense of urgency and further aligns parents with the agenda of the Core Knowledge Movement. Like many parents, but likely for different reasons, large numbers of school administrators and teachers are also joining the New Right, particularly the Core Knowledge Movement. Under tremendous public pressure to do something to alleviate problems in schools, many public school administrators, it appears, turn to adopting the Core Knowledge Sequence. Further, as core knowledge schools are chartered across the nation, it is possible that technically skilled administrators may be seizing newly created managerial positions while teachers may be seeking an avenue of escape from elevating levels of frustration, hoping that the proposed curricular reform will make a difference.

Both in addition and related to the economic lure of the neoconservative vision, Hirsch’s call for a return to tradition — in the guise of reinstating curricular coherence — appeals to prevalent fears of a racialized “other.” In the midst of demands for the recognition of diverse cultural perspectives in the curriculum, those tired of Blacks, women, and others politicizing everything conceivably find themselves attracted to the position that the school curriculum need not become a terrain for political struggle, but rather be recognized as a means through which factual content is transmitted. Further, the cumulative and progressive gains made over the past few decades have made many feel anxious about losing privileges afforded by traditional social arrangements. And, in perhaps a different vein, some may hope that a “commonly shared culture” nurtured by the schools will diminish racial divisions and engender greater social cohesion without having to address the cultural domination and unequal distribution of power and resources at the center of these tensions. Thus, on multiple levels, the agenda set by Hirsch synthesizes and redirects a plethora of racial and other difference-related feelings and convictions.

In quite another way, Hirsch’s educational position fuses with people’s beliefs in the “best” of U.S. traditions — the pursuit of fairness, provision of equal opportunity, and desire to strengthen democracy. Moving beyond domestic concerns, the discourse on educational excellence, with its nationalistic flair, is alluring because of its focus on international competition and U.S. dominance within the global economy, a market ideology embraced by many. Although this brief discussion only begins to consider the ways neoconservative discourses are being mobilized to build alliances, it illuminates some of the reasons the New Right is currently prevailing and why the Core Knowledge Movement is growing.

Hirsch’s *The Schools We Need* is but a fragment of an advancing political initiative. As a figurehead, Hirsch provides the Core Knowledge Movement with a guiding voice. The Core Knowledge Foundation

has provided the organizational structure needed to coordinate activities at both the local and national level. A financial base, partially generated by the sale of Hirsch's books, is in place. The literature of the foundation and the movement provides a means of mobilizing ideological support. The Core Knowledge Sequence (Core Knowledge Foundation, 1995), a grade-by-grade, content-specific curriculum, has been developed, placed in public schools through state mechanisms such as school charters, adopted districtwide by several public school systems, and embraced by some private and parochial schools as well. Since the first core knowledge school opened in 1990, this curriculum has been implemented in over seven hundred schools in forty-one states (Core Knowledge Foundation, personal communication, April 1998) and its adoption continues to spread. Movement supporters have attended annual national core knowledge conferences, the seventh of which was held in March 1998. Significantly, the Core Knowledge Foundation initiated and funded a longitudinal evaluation of several core knowledge schools in November 1995. Conducted by researchers at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Memphis, the study represents an attempt to document quantitatively and qualitatively the efficacy of the Core Knowledge Sequence (Stringfield, Datnow, Nunnery, & Ross, 1996). Possibly, it will provide the movement with the "scientific" evidence needed to launch a case for a national curriculum — likely the Core Knowledge Sequence already in existence in hundreds of schools across the United States.

Thus, the Core Knowledge initiative, supported in a range of ways, continues to advance and poses serious threats to a social order already unjust and unequal. Because of this, it is imperative that one examine closely the ways particular rightist discourses are being mobilized and the manner in which they reorganize the commonsense understandings people have of their lives and social conditions. Only by gaining insight into these processes may the hegemonic power of the New Right be potentially disrupted and the fears and desires of people reoriented in more democratic and emancipatory directions.

[Read a Response to this Essay Review](#)

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Notes

1. “Restorational politics” refers to New Right political mobilizations directed toward “restoring” social formations of gender, sexuality, race, and class that existed decades earlier while simultaneously attempting to weaken the partial victories acquired through progressive struggles. Examples include organized attacks on public welfare programs, women’s rights, or school-based gay and lesbian groups.

2. As defined by Michael Apple (1996, p. 6), neoliberals are those “intent on ‘modernizing’ the economy and the institutions connected to it,” largely through commercialized exchange and schemes of privatization. Authoritarian populists may be broadly described as the religious right, or those “concerned with security, the family, and traditional knowledge and values.” The new professional middle class refers to those “whose own professional interests and advancement depend on the expanded use of accountability, efficiency, and management procedures.” Neoconservatives are those concerned with “a return to ‘high standards,’ discipline, and social Darwinist competition” in the arenas of culture and economy. For a more extensive discussion of these groups, see references cited in relation to each group.

3. In addition to Hirsch’s work and the Core Knowledge Movement, this backlash has also taken the form of textbook content battles; various educational campaigns calling for a return to “the basics”; a standards movement focused on educational goals and subject matter guidelines for students; and initiatives advocating the increased use of tests for measuring student achievement, assessing teacher competency, and holding educational administrators accountable.

4. Though it is true that teachers and students interact with materials in ways that lend credence to as well as undercut the credibility of textual narratives, I still contend that excluding such content from the knowledge deemed important in classrooms does have notable, if not indisputable, effects on student learning.

5. Authentic assessment refers to forms of testing, such as portfolio assessment, that evaluate the learning process by allowing students to demonstrate the development of knowledge over time through multiple, nonstandardized means.

6. “Dominant ways of knowing” refers to those ways of seeing the world that privilege the perspective of powerful groups while either marginalizing or ignoring alternative views. Cameron McCarthy (1998) explains, for example, that “American schoolchildren come to know the world as one made by European ancestors and white people generally” (p. 111).

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