"I WON'T LEARN FROM YOU"
AND OTHER THOUGHTS ON CREATIVE MALADJUSTMENT

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Uncommon Differences
On Political Correctness, Core Curriculum, and Democracy in Education

I FIRST HEARD THE phrase "politically correct" in the late 1940s and early 1950s in reference to the political debates between socialists and members of the United States Communist Party (CP). These debates were an everyday occurrence in my neighborhood in the Bronx until the McCarthy committee and the House Un-American Activities Committee silenced political talk on the streets. Members of the CP talked about current party doctrine as the "correct" line for the moment. During World War II the Hitler-Stalin pact caused many CP members considerable pain and often disgrace on my block, which was all Jewish and mostly socialist. The "correct" position on Stalin's alliance with Hitler was considered to be ridiculous, a betrayal of European Jewry as well as socialist ideas. The term "politically correct" was used disparagingly to refer to someone whose loyalty to the CP line overrode compassion and led to bad politics. It was used by socialists against Communists, and was meant to separate out socialists, who believed in egalitarian moral ideas, from dogmatic Communists, who would advocate and defend party positions regardless of their moral substance.

Given that history, it was surprising to hear right-wing intel-

lectuals in the 1990s using the phrase "politically correct" to disparage students and professors who advocate multiculturalism and are willing to confront racism, sexism, or homophobia at the university. Yet it is not uncommon, for example, for right-wing critics to accuse students (or other professors) who insist that women's voices or the voices of people of color be included in the curriculum of making rigid, oppressive demands that infringe upon academic freedom. The implication of these accusations is that people calling for compliance with antisexist and antiracist education today are similar to the Communist party hard-liners who insisted on compliance with the "correct" line on the Hitler-Stalin pact. It is a clever ploy on the part of neoconservatives, a number of whom were former CP members and know how the phrase "politically correct" was used in the past, to insinuate that egalitarian democratic ideas are actually authoritarian, orthodox, and Communist-influenced when they oppose the right of people to be racist, sexist, and homophobic. The accusation of being "politically correct" is a weapon used by right-wing professors, and publicized by conservative media critics, to protect themselves against criticisms of their own biases by students or other, usually younger, professors. It is a way of diverting the issue of bias within the university to issues of freedom of speech without acknowledging that the right to question professorial authority is also a free-speech matter.

There is a major question about whether professors have a right, within the framework of academic classes where they control students' grades and therefore students' future options, to be racist, sexist, and culturally biased when expressing those ideas in class is likely to disrupt the learning process. The question is whether the classroom, in which students and professors are not equals, can become a bully pulpit for racist and sexist ideologies as much as it is an issue of academic freedom or freedom of speech. After all, the classroom is not a free-speech forum where

equals gather to express opinions. It is a site of judgment as much as a place of learning, where professors judge their students as much as educate them. Academic freedom is equivalent, in this context, to professorial control of ideas, not to free speech. I remember, for example, the control of legitimacy exerted by philosophy professors when I was at Harvard in the 1950s. At that time Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and just about all the continental European philosophers were ridiculed and their works put off-limits. Any student who took existentialism, phenomenology, or Marxism seriously, for example, was advised to find another major. Only British analytic philosophy, logic, and the philosophy of mathematics were considered intellectually respectable. At that time even the works of Wittgenstein were suspect for being too mystical and unclear. If students tried, as I sometimes did, to question their professors' preferences, they were punished both through their grades and through the kinds of recommendations they got. Philosophical correctness governed learning in the department. The professors' academic freedom to control content and discourse in their fields of expertise limited their students' intellectual freedom.

As I see it, the academic-freedom issue these days is being used to mask the desire of neoconservatives to exert control over ideas at the university and push out ethnic and women's studies as well as prevent the rethinking of the curriculum from a world rather than a West European perspective. In this light the defenders of academic freedom are the ones who are taking a rigid, "correct" line and trying to shut up students and other professors who are proclaiming that there are fundamental problems about the way universities have traditionally defined what it is necessary to know in order to be an educated person.

Right-wing professors who challenge students' rights to question racist and sexist attitudes and opinions seem to be effective at the postsecondary level. However, the Right has not yet been able

to shift the debates in public schools from the fundamental equity and equality issues to issues of academic freedom and the personal freedom of expression. There are a number of reasons for this, among which is the fact that the students in most public schools, in urban centers at least, are predominantly minority, the majority of teachers are women, and the expression of racist and sexist ideas are, by consensus, agreed to be out of place and counter to the educational process. This context for considering ethnic and cultural issues and women's issues is very different from the context of overwhelmingly white college student bodies with predominantly white male faculties. Those are not the only reasons, however, that the accusation of political correctness has not surfaced in the schools in the same form that it has at the university. Another important reason this shift from issues of equity to issues of free expression has not been made in the schools is that teachers and college professors do not lead the same professional lives or have the same latitudes of freedom within their jobs.

Teachers work five days a week, eight hours a day during the school year. They are required to be with their students during all teaching hours and are not allowed to leave their classes unsupervised. They are assigned grade and subject levels and, within the constraints of their credentials, can be involuntarily transferred from grade to grade, subject to subject, and even school to school. Most often they are required to teach a set curriculum mandated at the local-school district, or state level. In addition, they are expected to keep their personal politics and values out of the classroom and are subject to parental and community as well as administrative scrutiny.

Classroom teachers have levels of control imposed on them that professors would appropriately consider to be assaults on their academic freedom and insults to their professional expertise. These levels range from immediate site administration to district-level scrutiny as well as outside, university-based evaluation. Beyond these there are state commissions of education that man-

date standards and curriculum content. Within these systems of constraint teachers have developed a covert social code that prohibits outspoken disagreement about educational ideas on a faculty level. Just about everyone complies. Those who don't are usually given the silent treatment during the school year and then involuntarily transferred. I know the power of this code, having been a victim of it years ago as a first-year teacher who tried to speak out about racism at my school and found myself involuntarily transferred to another school. I have also seen some of my current student teachers punished in the same way, just last year.

The individual freedom to express unpopular or even new ideas in the classroom is controlled for both student and teacher by a system that marginalizes such behavior as deviant, disobedient, and "political." Even though there are occasional individual protests and even some successes, it is only when a protest becomes a collective and public matter that systemwide changes develop. Thus, so far as I can tell, the issue of political correctness does not exist within the elementary and secondary schools because there is little protest about racist and sexist practices from within a school. Individuals and small groups who oppose the traditional norms of public schools are simply shuffled around or thrown out. The attempt by individuals to change the norms and values of the institution, even if those norms and values are racist and sexist, is treated as no greater threat in the case of gender, ethnicity, and culture than in the case of budget, supplies, and class size. As an individual teacher or student, for example, it is very difficult to confront a racist teacher at your own school. The individual teacher will be accused of breaking ranks and being disloyal to the teaching profession and will be subsequently isolated or transferred. The student will be defined as disruptive and sent to a special-education class.

Threats to the public schools are, however, taken seriously when they come from outside of the individual school—from community groups, teachers' unions, central administrators, uni-

versity-based experts, the media, and state departments of education. Teaching within the public schools is considered a social act that has to be responsible to societal forces, whereas teaching at the university is still within the domain of individual professorial control within the context of self-certifying professions.

Even though issues of equality, equity, and multiculturalism—which are at the heart of debates about political correctness—are not played out on an individual level within the public schools, they are being confronted on the much larger scale of institutional and public policy. Those forces that keep the individual teacher powerless and the individualistic problem of political correctness out of the public schools are the same forces that are central to overt debates about affirmative action, multicultural curriculum, and gender-fair education. Public schools may pretend to a mythology of political neutrality and have built-in mechanisms of control, but because they have the obligation to accept all of the children, they must respond to the communities they serve. Given that the public schools in most cities in the United States are predominantly nonwhite, that, for example, whites make up a minority of public school students in the state of California and may be close to that status nationwide, the schools must deal with multiculturalism and racism. And since the schools, as opposed to the colleges and universities, are predominantly staffed by women, they must also deal with issues of gender and sexism. It is one thing for a few professors at the University of Michigan to defend their cultural and gender biases in such an overwhelmingly white institution and another to defend the same attitudes toward culture and gender in the New York City public school system, where fewer than 20 percent of the students are white and over 68 percent of the teachers are women.

As a practical matter, the political forces for equity and equality are stronger within the community of people concerned about public education than within the community of people concerned

about colleges and universities. To continue to teach the superiority of white European male-dominated culture in schools where 90 to 100 percent of the students are African-American, Asian-American, or Latino, for example, is not merely to perpetuate unsubstantiated myths, but to insult the culture and integrity of the students and the community, and to insult the gender, competence, and quality of the majority of the teachers. It causes teachers to lose credibility with their students and within the school's community and puts teachers in the role of defending a dying colonialism that is considered the enemy of learning by students, parents, and community members alike.

Even a neoconservative educator like Diane Ravitch must come up with some concessions to multiculturalism in the school curriculum to maintain credibility in the debate over the content of public education. She sets herself firmly on the ground of supporting a West European curriculum with multicultural add-ons, a position that, at Stanford and other universities, which modified their freshman civilization courses to include non-Western sources, would be considered by neoconservatives to favor the undermining of Western civilization. In the schools, however, that position is conservative and opposed by advocates of ethnocentric and pluralistic curriculums that place Eurocentric visions of history and culture in the perspective of many other cultural visions. In Portland, Oregon, for example, the entire school district has adopted an Afrocentric, multicultural curriculum that treats the history and culture of the United States from the perspective of all of the peoples that made our nation. This is not merely a minor change in focus, but a fundamental rethinking of what we tell our children about who we are as a society.

Let me give an example of Eurocentric curriculum and show why it has been rejected in many public school systems. The Addison-Wesley high school textbook *United States History from 1865*, volume 2 (1986), summarizes U.S. history from "prehistory

to 1850" in pages 4 to 31. African-American peoples enter the stage of U.S. history on page 8 in the following words: "Traders also exchanged New England rum in Africa for slaves to be sold in the West Indies or the Thirteen Colonies." Aside from the historical falsity of the assertion that rum was the sole medium of exchange in the slave trade and its racist implications for current debates on substance abuse, there is the question of people being introduced as slaves. Were they slaves or were they carpenters, kings, weavers, farmers, etc., who were stolen into slavery? Whose perspective do we want our children to take?

The textbook destroys black people's identity by starting from slavery, rather than from Africa prior to slavery. It is centered on the perceptions and narratives of slave masters, not the people who are their victims. It gives students no sense of the language, culture, and society of the people who were made slaves, and therefore encourages the idea that enslaved Africans came to this continent with nothing to offer other than involuntary labor and the ability to breed. If this seems like an exaggeration, I suggest you go into a white middle-class school that uses such texts and ask the students about the character and culture of early African arrivals on this continent.

The textbook I am using for an example does, however, make concessions to multiculturalism, as Ravitch would advocate. For example, the same page I quoted above has a large sidebar devoted to the life of Olaudah Equiano. His story begins when he was enslaved at eleven. Nothing before. Then we are told about nice whites who rescued him from slavery and are given a full color picture of the galley of a slave ship. The reader can take nothing away from this multicultural pastiche other than that Equiano was a slave, that slavery was horrible, and that he was rescued through the kind graces of whites. Where is his person, his culture, his humanity?

It is personhood, culture, and humanity that Afrocentric and other ethnocentric curricula try to provide, as well as more historical truth than is allowed in our history textbooks. There are unpleasant aspects of our national history, and it is better for our children to know about them than to become party to reproducing them.

Recently, the textbook-adoption committees in Oakland and Hayward, California, rejected all social studies books that came before them for consideration. The grounds were that without exception they were racist, sexist, and historically inaccurate. The state textbook-adoption committee in California accepted only one series. That series was adopted as the best of a bad lot simply because school people claimed that most schools could not function without textbooks. There were some of us, however, who suggested it was better to go without texts for a few years and rewrite the texts, which is what Oakland and Hayward decided to do.

The textbook wars in California make university-based struggles to add a few books to Western culture classes seem mild. And that is only part of the rethinking of the content of school curricula that is currently taking place. Women's groups are increasingly vocal about the representation of females throughout the curriculum; other groups are making school people more sensitive to slights and insults on the basis of handicaps, age, or sexual orientation. Many teachers are listening and, because they have support outside of their schools, they are taking leadership roles in making the schools more democratic and decent places for all children. Of course, there is resistance, but not as much as in the universities. That is because white dominance is slipping in the arena of public education. Unfortunately, with that slippage, we see a strategy of defending public education, breaking up public school systems through bogus choice programs, and official neglect.

I believe the culture wars in the public schools reveal the issues that underline the media events that constitute the political correctness debate. These issues are not about professors' rights to freedom of speech in their classrooms but are struggles over

shifts in dominance in our society. They represent resistance to demands for multicultural and gender-fair inclusive curricula.

E. D. Hirsch, Jr., under the guise of proposing a core curriculum for all students from first through sixth grades, has mounted a subtle attack on multiculturalism, and on antisexist and antiracist curriculum. Hirsch, you may remember, is the author of the best-selling book *Cultural Literacy*, which is subtitled *What every American needs to know*. At the end of that book Hirsch provides a sixty-three-page list of words and phrases that "illustrate the character and range of the knowledge literate Americans tend to share."* That list provides the language and conceptual apparatus of Hirsch's vision of "Everyman," a university-educated European American, most likely male, who speaks in platitudes and has a passing acquaintance with words drawn from the sciences, humanities, and the arts. For example, Hirsch's Everyman tends to "know" the following *P* words and phrases:

> perfectibility of man, periodic table of the elements, pax Romana, pay the piper, pearl of great price, peeping Tom, Peloponnesian War, penis envy, penny saved is a penny earned, persona non grata, Peter the Great, Phi Beta Kappa, philosopher king, photoelectric cell, plate tectonics, Pickwickian, Planck's constant, play second fiddle, pogrom, proof of the pudding is in the eating, and Pyrrhic victory.†

I've been searching for Hirsch's Everyman and haven't found anyone who knows all of the words on this very abbreviated list. "Planck's constant" stumps just about everybody. An equal number are uncertain about the exact nature of "photoelectric cells" and "plate tectonics." "Perfectibility of man" and the "periodic table" are recognized but not necessarily understood in any complex way. "Peter the Great" and the "Peloponnesian War" are

* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 146.

† From pp. 193–98.

somewhat more familiar, though the "pax Romana" is often greeted by a blank stare.

The people I asked are all college-educated, quite well read, and are interested in ideas. They are not college professors, and their work does not involve constant reference and citation. However, by any reasonable definition of "literate," they qualify. Where they part ways with Hirsch's list is in areas where special knowledge is required or an archaic, Latinate, and formal way of speaking is implied.

Perhaps there are people who have mastered the meaning of most of the words on the list and understand the concepts they represent in some depth, and it may be that Hirsch wishes to restrict his notion of literacy to that small group of polymaths. He seems, however, to include among the literate those people who have encountered the words on the list at one time or another during their reading or education and only have a vague idea of what many of them mean. The problem is that Hirsch elevates such superficial acquaintance with words to the status of "knowledge." That is why, when he turns to learning in the early grades, he can take a strong stand in favor of rote learning and the memorization of factual information, while insisting that "all children master a core of information that is necessary to their competence as learners in later grades."* Mastery, for Hirsch, is memorization; information is knowledge. Parents must, he says, "decline to be bullied by oversimplified slogans (like 'learning to learn') which have not worked."† Hirsch argues that mastery of what he calls core knowledge is a necessary step we must take in the United States toward creating fairness and excellence in education:

* *What Your First Grader Needs to Know: Fundamentals of a Good First Grade Education* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1991), p. 10.

† Ibid.

> In this period of our national life, to ensure that all young children possess a core of shared knowledge is a fundamental reform that, while not sufficient by itself to achieve excellence and fairness in schooling, is nonetheless a *necessary* [italics added] step in developing a first-rate educational system in the United States.*

Hirsch's core of knowledge is derived from an idealized construction of European history which implies that it is a manifestation of all that is excellent in the history of humankind. In defining what is central there is much that Hirsch chooses to leave out. As pointed out in Graywolf Press's anthology, *Multicultural Literacy*,† which criticizes Hirsch for his Eurocentric cultural bias, Hirsch's list leaves out many words and phrases that relate to progressive thinking and non-Western culture. Among the *P*'s, for example, Hirsch's sixty-three-page list has overlooked words and phrases such as

> peace activists, pesticides, political prisoners, potlatch, premenstrual syndrome, prison, prophylactic, prostitution, pueblo, and prime time.

Whatever one's conception of a culturally literate adult, it can reasonably be assumed that most of these concepts are as central to the "core" in our culture as ones on Hirsch's list. It is difficult not to wonder how Hirsch's list is generated and what justification he has to decide upon the legislation of a core of knowledge, given the complexity of life and language in our society. The question of who decides what is core knowledge becomes even more crucial in the case of legislating a "necessary" curriculum for young children.

The list of omissions drawn from *Multicultural Literacy* can easily be expanded, and Hirsch would most likely respond by adding some of the above omitted words to his core list while

* Ibid., p. 2.

† Rick Simonson and Scott Walker, *Multicultural Literacy* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 1988).

arguing for cultural literacy as an expanding process with a Eurocentric core. However, in addition to this amended list there are other words and phrases that so-called literate Americans "tend" to know, words and phrases such as

> prick, piss, putz, pussy, patronize, palimony, prissy, putsch, pig (as in violent police officer, as opposed to "pig in a poke, buy a," which is on Hirsch's list), profligate, play politics, play the field, poke fun at, play into one's hands, and pick apart.

Hirsch does not acknowledge that these words contribute to making a literate person. Literacy is a morally correct notion for Hirsch, one that distinguishes between what is proper and what is not. Hirsch has selected part of a so-called literate person's whole vocabulary and chosen to elevate that as "literate." Yet, who can read and comprehend much of the best in Western literature without understanding the "low" list as well as Hirsch's "high" list? Hirsch may be pure, but literature isn't.

There are real problems with the cultural and class biases of the notion of cultural literacy that Hirsch is selling. There are also problems with his notion of what knowledge is. All of this goes to the heart of why his new books for parents and teachers, with the pretentious titles *What Your First Grader Needs to Know: Fundamentals of a Good First Grade Education* and *What Your Second Grader Needs to Know: Fundamentals of a Good Second Grade Education*, are pernicious, stupid, and dangerous. These two books are the first of six volumes published by Doubleday, one for each grade from the first through the sixth, which constitute the *Core Knowledge Series*.* The six volumes prescribe "a specific sequence of core knowledge that young Americans should at a minimum learn."† There is no modesty involved in Hirsch's claim for the importance of this series. According to him, teach-

* Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1991.

† From the general introduction included in all volumes of the series, p. 1.

ing the sequence laid out in the series is "a *necessary* [italics added] step in developing a first-rate educational system in the United States."* Hirsch even goes on to point out that "all of the best—i.e., highest-achieving and most egalitarian—school systems in the world, such as those in Sweden, France, and Japan, teach their children a specific core of knowledge in each of the first six grades" and that "shared background knowledge makes schooling more fair and democratic."† In addition, "shared background knowledge helps create cooperation and solidarity in school and nation."‡ Indeed, according to Hirsch, "no modern nation has achieved both excellence and fairness in education without defining core knowledge for the elementary school."§

First off, Hirsch begs the central question of whether any "modern nation" has achieved either excellence or fairness in education, and does not bother to substantiate his claims about Japan, France, and Sweden. Of his three examples, Japan and France have elitist school systems that do not have a universal postsecondary education as a goal. Competition to enter the elite schools in those systems is intense, test-related, and frequently class-bound. Immigrant communities in both societies, but especially in France, are for the most part out of the system, and racism, both personal and institutional, is not uncommon in their schools.

But there are other problems with Hirsch's call for a national core curriculum. First of all, when talking about adult literacy, Hirsch lists what literate Americans "tend" to know and have as shared knowledge. However, when he comes to children, he strengthens his position to claiming that he provides a curriculum of what children "need to" know. There is quite a bit of slippage

* Ibid., p. 2.

† Ibid., pp. 2, 3.

‡ Ibid., p. 4.

§ Ibid., p. 5.

between "tends to" and "needs to." What one tends to know can be derived from many different sources, and the overlap of one person's knowledge with that of others is a matter of experience, cultural background, gender, and class. What one "needs" to know becomes a matter of prescription and, if one considers the movement toward a national curriculum, even legislation. At the core of Hirsch's program for young children is a desire to set a path from childhood through adolescence that will channel young people's thinking. However, even if he succeeds in legislating his core curriculum, I believe that Hirsch's enterprise is bound to fail to provide either the quality educational system or the production of excellence in learning he claims for it.

It is important to look at the notion of core knowledge itself and understand the contradictions built into it in order to understand that it is a formula for failure as well as an insult to the intelligence of the children it presumes to educate. One way to begin is to look at Hirsch's first- and second-grade books and examine what he considers required knowledge for six- and seven-year-olds.

The books themselves are designed to look like old school texts. They are drab, badly illustrated, and not meant to charm or interest children. In fact, the reading level of the books is much too difficult for beginning readers. The books are meant to be read to children, not read by them. The child is to receive knowledge from the books as mediated by some adult, not to participate in her or his own learning. From the very beginning, Hirsch sets up a situation in which the child is to accept whatever is prescribed rather than learn to question and explore issues and ideas.

Within this passive learning situation Hirsch offers six- and seven-year-olds nursery rhymes, fairy tales, proverbs, music lessons, history, science, and math—all that is presumably *necessary* to succeed in school. The connection between later school success and mastery of this material is never made, and yet, that

claim is used as a selling point in advertisement for the books. The whole enterprise smacks of the same advertising hype which claims that expensive cars will lead to sexual success and fancy speakers will result in heightened self-esteem.

The reason particular rhymes and tales were included in the books and others omitted is baffling. Some of Hirsch's choices seem bizarre, like having a section entitled "Patriotic Music" as part of necessary learning in the second grade. The two books, read straight through, seem like hastily pasted together collections of platitudes and pieties, part McGuffey's reader and part nineteenth-century math and science exercise books.

An examination of some of the specific contents of Hirsch's core curriculum raises some serious educational questions that go beyond style and hype, however. First- and second-graders, according to Hirsch, must know, in order to succeed in the future, *Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Hansel and Gretel, Beauty and the Beast, The Princess and the Pea,* and *Snow White*, among other tales. If children don't know these, they are likely to fail as they move through elementary school and high school, according to Hirsch. Why? We are never told, but I suppose it's because if they can take in those tales as exemplary, they can take in anything the authorities want to shove down their throats. These tales of royalty and wealth are filled with passive or wicked females, evil stepparents, pure and handsome princes, or kind, innocent, and harried fathers. Young women are portrayed as needing to be rescued from older women, purified for marriage into royalty, or sacrificed to save their fathers. In *Snow White*, for example, we have a wicked but beautiful stepmother who tries to murder her stepdaughter. The reason for all this seems to be that the stepmother (for whom there is no sympathy whatever in the tale) is getting older and becomes aware that her stepdaughter, Snow White, is beginning to surpass her in beauty. Because the only power accorded to both Snow White and her stepmother is their physical beauty, and because aging is inevitable, the tale becomes an

implacable and murderous encounter between generations of women. In fact, in the original Grimm version, when the prince decides to take Snow White as his bride, the stepmother is invited to the wedding. A surprise is awaiting her at the celebration:

> And when she (the stepmother) went in she recognized Snow-White; and she stood still with rage and fear, and could not stir. But iron slippers had already been put on the fire, and they were brought in with tongs, and set before her. Then she was forced to put on the red-hot shoes, and dance until she dropped dead.*

This is the gruesome conclusion to a tale our children *need* to know in order to succeed in school. The central problem here and one that is at the root of creating any core knowledge is that it will not be taken in the same way by all learners—there is no core response. For some, especially the want-to-be princes in the classes, it can be an affirming and empowering tale. For others, the girls who believe in their autonomy and refuse to accept male definitions of their strengths, it can be disconfirming. For stepchildren, it can reinforce family tension. For children who do not see themselves as European princes and princesses, it can lead to depression and marginalize their participation. And for all children it can provide a model of cruel and vindictive revenge that might allow them to tolerate or even contribute to the sufferings of others.

The nature of this story is to categorize and divide people, to judge them by externals, and to reinforce an order in which upper-class-male power makes all the rules. This is not necessary knowledge for children in a democracy, though as one story among a thousand, if learned in a casual setting, it probably wouldn't cause much damage.

Even Hirsch, or the people who actually wrote the text of the tales in his books, acknowledge some aspects of the problematic

* *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 258.

nature of this tale, for Grimm's ending of *Snow White* is softened by Hirsch's version:

> As for the wicked Queen, some say she fell off a cliff, some say she was struck by lightning, and some say she danced herself to death at Snow White's wedding. But one thing is certain: she never bothered Snow White again, and Snow White and the prince lived happily ever after.*

Grimm has no "happily ever after" and is unambiguous about the fate of the queen. Hirsch has reconstructed his core for a gentler and kinder America. So our core knowledge, in Hirsch's hands, is not even authentic. Rather, it is a moralistic manipulation of traditional materials that purges them of the cruelty and bias that is part of the European heritage and which determines many of the ways in which people in the United States treat each other.

Hirsch claims that a common core of knowledge creates fairness in education. Nazi Germany had a core curriculum, as did the Stalinist Soviet Union. It elevates the values of the people who legislate that core to the status of universal standards of excellence; but if the core reproduces the inequities that exist in a society, it is simply another attempt to keep power relations from changing.

The covert text of Hirsch's core curriculum implies that no fundamental economic or social changes need occur to create equity (he uses the word "fairness") in education and that sensitivity to children's knowledge about their own life circumstances is irrelevant to the educational process. For example, another proverb Hirsch would require all six-year-olds to know is "There's no place like home," adding the following commentary that parents and teachers are urged to share with children: "People use this saying to mean: travel may be pleasant, but home is the best place of all. 'We had a great trip, but there's no place like home.' "† Try sharing this with a group of children living in the

* *First Grader*, p. 54.

† *First Grader*, p. 81.

midst of violence and poverty—tell them that the proverb provides necessary knowledge for them to succeed in school, and ask them to share their travels and describe how wonderful it felt when they got home. Add insult to the injury of poverty in the name of fairness, deny middle-class bias in the curriculum, and you have hard-core Hirsch.

To be sure, there are some concessions to diversity and multiculturalism in Hirsch's volumes. In the first-grade volume, out of twenty tales there is one from Africa, one of Spanish origin (not Latin-American, however), and one Native American tale. In the stories of great scientists there are one European male (Copernicus), one American female (Rachel Carson), and one African-American male (Charles Drew). One wonders: why these three? But there is even more of a problem within this effort at showing diversity. Consider the following quote from the minibiography of Charles Drew, whose scientific work was responsible for making blood transfusions easy and who set up the first blood bank. Also remember that this is supposed to be part of necessary knowledge for all six-year-olds.

> For a long time, the Army and Navy refused to accept blood from black people. Even after it started to accept "colored" blood, the Army told the Red Cross to separate the donated blood of black people from that of whites. Charles Drew explained that there was no such thing as "black" and "white" blood. Blood was blood. But no one listened. This made Charles Drew very sad and angry. He resigned from the Red Cross.*

So we know that Charles Drew was sad and angry. The army spoke to the Red Cross. No one listened to scientific evidence. But in this version there are no specific white people involved, no racism, no ignorance or rejection of science. There is no rage.

* *First Grader*, p. 233.

What is this telling children about Drew? That he got sad and quit. So what happened then? Was there a confrontation? Did Drew do more than quit? According to the *Historical and Cultural Atlas of African Americans* by Molefi K. Asante and Mark T. Mattson,

> the importance of Charles Drew's research was underscored by the fact that Europe was at war [World War I] . . . and thousands of soldiers who would have been considered mortally wounded prior to Dr. Drew's discoveries, were saved. In 1941 the American Red Cross appointed Drew director of its first Blood Bank. When Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese, Drew was able to provide blood plasma for Americans who were wounded during the surprise attack.
>
> However, the American Red Cross decided to use only blood from white donors for wounded members of the military, insisting that they did not want to mix the blood of African Americans with white blood. Drew was enraged. He resigned from his position over the unscientific position of the American Red Cross saying, "The blood of individual human beings may differ by blood type groupings, but there is absolutely no scientific basis to indicate any difference according to race."*

According to *Webster's American Biographies*, "instead of establishing a private practice, he spent his time in teaching and recruiting" African Americans to become doctors.†

Drew died in an automobile accident at the age of forty-six. According to the *Historical and Cultural Atlas of African Americans*:

> On April 1, 1950 . . . [Drew] was fatally injured in a car accident in North Carolina. . . . It was reported that Drew bled to death because the "white" hospital would not admit him. Ironically, the surgeon, scientist, scholar, whose life's work was devoted to saving others was denied access to the methods and procedures he invented to save his own life.*

* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 136–37.

† (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam, 1975), p. 292.

If we choose to tell our children about Charles Drew (a fine thing to do, though perhaps not a necessity for six-year-olds), we owe them a story that does justice to Drew's pain and to his reaction to racism as well as his brilliance. It might help them understand more about how racism functions and how it can be confronted. Since six-year-olds can be victims of racism or can perpetuate it, there is no reason why they shouldn't also be helped to think about it. This points once again to the danger of avoiding dealing with the processes by which learning takes place and believing, as Hirsch seems to do, that the only important thing is the information learned.

Hirsch insists that the information contained in his core curriculum, and not the way it is taught or how students respond to or think about it, is what will provide fairness in the curriculum. He defends rote learning. And yet even rote learning isn't as simple as Hirsch makes it out to be. To memorize and regurgitate something that is humiliating or insulting, to preserve in your memory as received authority disempowering stories, partial truths, and homilies that go against your better judgment or insult your experience, is not a road to fairness or excellence but rather a sure formula for the perpetuation of ignorance and inequality.

Hirsch's books are dangerous because they have been packaged to provide anxious parents and nervous educators with a formulaic road to competitive advantage. Despite mouthing the idea that they provide a fair basis for all children to get ahead in school, they implicitly promise that if your child does master the content they provide, she or he will get ahead in school. However, by raising the question of core knowledge and its relationship to

* *Historical and Cultural Atlas*, p. 137.

critical thinking in the context of schools, Hirsch has done us a favor. Those of us who believe that learning is more than memorization must also examine the question of what should be the core content of a curriculum that promotes democratic thinking and gives children tools and understanding that will help them confront inequity as they try to make a decent life for themselves. It is not enough to be concerned with process and to focus exclusively on critical analysis, experiential learning, personal sensitivity, and creative expression, as some progressive educators do. As educators we must also examine what knowledge our students need to have in order to survive and thrive. Surely at some point they must learn the Bill of Rights—not merely memorize it as Hirsch might have it, but know intimately the ways in which those rights are theirs and the ways in which they must be defended or be lost. They must know the Constitution, critically, but section by section as well. They must also know enough of our common history and creative life to be able to place themselves in the whole. How much content must be contained in the core and when it should be taught is a difficult but necessary question for us to confront. That it should be taught critically and with a respect for the student's person and thoughts as well as for differences in culture, gender and class, is beyond question for me. Process and content must be merged into a thoughtful and critical pedagogy. Moreover, we must go beyond this common core and consider other cores of knowledge that are essential for specific groups of students. Girls and young women must learn women's history; African-American youngsters must learn history from the perspective of the strengths of their people. The same is true of Latino, Asian, and European-American students. All students must become comfortable with multiple narratives—their own and other peoples'. As educators, we must move toward creating a common composite narrative that approximates the complex and too often painful history of our nation. Fairness in education can only emerge from such diversity.

Just as we as a nation are still struggling to achieve a democratic society, we as educators are still struggling to understand what education in a democracy should look like. To settle on a core curriculum, as Hirsch is trying to do, is inherently unjust. To eliminate content and focus solely on critical process is to foolishly deny the importance of knowledge, history, and literature. The struggle to weigh process and knowledge in a way that respects the diversity of our society and counters the inequities that are perpetuated through schooling is perhaps the central unaddressed question of current debates about educational reform. What we might come up with is a continually emerging and self-renewing curriculum, with a constantly evolving and shifting core and a critique informed by student voices and the voices of their communities—that is, with a curriculum that is part of the struggle to make a democracy out of the United States.

It is important for people who are concerned with making sense of the debates about political correctness at colleges and universities to look at the debates about curriculum content in the schools. Expressing racist and sexist ideas to children is not looked upon as harmless, neutral, and a matter of a teacher's academic freedom. Imagine a person who preaches racism to first- and second-graders trying to defend that stance by accusing parents and school district personnel of limiting his or her academic freedom. Imagine the same teacher accusing parents and community members of rigid political correctness because they refuse to allow their children to be exposed to racist and sexist ideas. If the issue weren't so serious, the person would be laughed at. It is damaging to students, insulting to communities, unprofessional, and immoral to be teaching racism or sexism to children.

What is pejoratively called "political correctness" by academic reactionaries at universities is simply considered to be morally right and personally sensitive in the context of public schools. It is in the public schools where we are most likely to see major changes in sensitivity and awareness over issues of race, ethnicity,

and gender. It is also where university educators should look for models of a broader, more democratic, though equally demanding, curriculum that provides an accurate account of what our society has been and a vision of what it might become if its democratic ideals are taken seriously.

Creative Maladjustment and the Struggle for Public Education

It is very difficult for me to throw out things that evoke memories or stories and so, over the last thirty years, I have amassed a collection of my students' writing and art. Recently I came upon a portfolio of pastels done by children in my first public school class in 1962. There was Sara's delicate copy of a Modigliani portrait, done in browns and oranges; a blue and white drawing of Moby Dick jumping out of the sea, done by Hugh Lee on black construction paper; a hand with an evil eye, drawn by Carlos M.; and Gloria's frightening lion's face with knife slashes all over it, whose title, "All cut up," is written in red crayon over the pastel.

I remember buying the pastels for my class and letting the students draw, paint, or sketch all afternoon. They could also play chess, dominoes, and checkers, read with me, write poems and books, or listen to music and build clay models if they cared to. Those afternoon activities were my way of warding off chaos and, at the same time, getting to know and occasionally help my students personally. It took me a while to realize that these activities were not diversions but at the center of decent education. No one in the school seemed to mind, since my students stayed in the room and we left everything clean and neat at the end of the day.