Equal Knowledge

Common curriculum would benefit the poor—and democracy

The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools

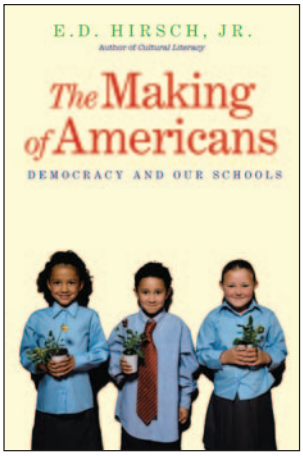
By E. D. Hirsch Jr.

Yale University Press, 2009, $25.00; 261 pages.

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

E. D. Hirsch has contributed what is to me the most persuasive idea of the past half century on how to improve the performance of American education. It is a simple idea, but has large implications. These were first spelled out in *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, in 1988, and explicated further in subsequent works. In his new book, *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools*, Hirsch presents this simple and powerful idea again. This time it is supplemented with new research, along with a backward look at the ideals guiding the development of American public education and how we have moved away from them in recent decades. Hirsch, a professor of English literature at the University of Virginia—his first books were on Wordsworth and Blake—became interested in the problem of teaching reading to young pupils, who would in time become his students at the college level. Rather than involving himself in the technical question of how to teach reading, he argued that students couldn't become competent readers because they knew less and less of the simple and necessary information that surrounded what they were reading, the context that any writer has to assume is shared by his readers. Hirsch's term for the missing knowledge was "cultural literacy."

His energy in presenting this idea has been matched—surprising in a tenured professor in a major research university—by the enormous work, with colleagues, of spelling out, grade by grade, in detail, what students must know in a variety of fields if they are to be competent and understanding readers. He gives as an appendix to this new book the "History/Geography thread" of the curriculum developed by his Core Knowledge program for kindergarten and 1st and 2nd grade. It seems remarkably comprehensive and demanding to this reader. Hirsch has also created a system of Core Knowledge schools to teach this curriculum, and a Core Knowledge Foundation for research on American education. He is committed to the value of a common curriculum, which some nations have and which the United States once had, remarkably enough, despite the absence of any dictates to establish it. When so many young students, primarily from disadvantaged homes, move from school to school, a common curriculum would have clear and great advantages in permitting continuity in their education.



"This book," he tells us, "concerns itself…with overcoming low literacy rates and narrowing the achievement gaps between demographic groups but places those themes within the broader context of the founding ideals of the American experiment, which have been a beacon to the world and ourselves." We may hear an echo in these words of a subject that once played a larger role in American education, civics, but Hirsch is rather more concerned with the role of a common system of public schools in educating a citizenry to the level necessary to maintain a democracy. The founders, as many have pointed out, looked to a common education as one of the strongest supports of the new republic.

Hirsch is well aware of the whiff of conservatism involved in invoking the white male founders and a common curriculum, and protects himself by invoking the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci, who argued for the education of the working man to the level of the bourgeoisie if the hegemonic system that maintained capitalism was to be overcome. A common education to a high level is necessary to any effective public action, whether we dub it "Right" or "Left."

A common curriculum is not a necessary implication of "cultural literacy," but it comes into the picture if an entire populace is to be raised to a minimum level of literacy. It is also the best way to avoid one of the most damaging divisions in a society, that between the prosperous and the poor. Hirsch insists that raising the level of achievement in American education will not increase this division, but rather will mitigate it. He notes that in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) assessments, countries "with the highest verbal scores are also the ones that have most effectively narrowed the equity gap between groups of students. The highest achieving countries are Finland, Canada, Ireland, Japan, and

Korea, and these are the very countries that show the least variation in eighth-grade performance between advantaged and disadvantaged students."

Much of Hirsch's discussion of what he sees as the decline of American education in the past half century centers on a critique of "progressive" education. Progressive education came in many forms, but one thing has been clear from its origins: those children who did not come from educated and middle-class homes would suffer, because the background knowledge that came from being raised in these homes, of hearing a wider vocabulary and reference to a large range of events, facts, and objects was not available to them, and was also not being taught systematically in progressive schools. This mattered somewhat less for mathematics, where the home environment provides little foundation: it mattered decisively for reading, and all the subjects dependent on it. This was not the only factor that explained the backwardness of the disadvantaged. But I am convinced, as Hirsch is, that it was an important one.

Hirsch ends his book with a number of photographs: of a standard columned and pediment-fronted American school of the twenties or thirties, of the grand-columned building of the New York State Education Department. Following these images are pictures that will be unfamiliar to most of his readers, but are very familiar to me: the collegiate gothic City College of New York, its Great Hall, and the huge mural of "The Graduate" in it. As an alumnus of City College, I was touched: why these? Because of the "spirit of aspiration and equality [that] animated the creation in 1847 of the Free Academy (later City College) in New York City. The college's founder, Townsend Harris, proclaimed: 'Let the children of the rich and the poor take their seats together and know of no distinction save that of industry, good conduct and intellect…'" Hirsch makes clear with this conclusion that he is promoting his great idea, whatever its conservative implications, primarily to advance the interests of our democracy, by raising the level of competence and facilitating greater equality.

Nathan Glazer is professor emeritus of sociology and education at Harvard University.