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E. D. HIRSCH'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Americans have been dissatisfied with their public schools for several decades. There are many reasons for this. It is well known, for instance, that the achievement of American students, when compared with that of students from other industrialized nations, is consistently near the bottom (166-167).¹ Employers complain that many high school graduates lack even the most basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics. Colleges and universities must offer remedial work for large numbers of incoming students before they are prepared to do college level work. And an "achievement gap" in graduation rates, scores on standardized tests, class standing, etc. between whites and Asians on one hand and blacks and Hispanics on the other hand persists.

Attempts to solve these problems have been myriad. Since at least 1950 we have seen innovation after innovation, each hailed as a breakthrough or even a panacea, yet all have failed to bring about meaningful reform. The list of these innovations is very long and includes "child-centered schooling," "outcome-based education," "individual learning styles," "multiple intelligences," "cooperative learning," "discovery learning," "the project method," "the self esteem movement," "authentic assessment," and many others. Nothing, however, seems to work. Families that can afford the tuition send their children to private schools, while the practice of home schooling, the charter school movement, and the campaign for vouchers gain strength daily.

The educational establishment --- professors of education, school administrators, and officials in local, state, and national departments of education --- attribute these shortcomings to lack of money, broken homes, dysfunctional families, poverty, excessive television watching, and other external social factors.

No one has offered a more penetrating analysis of our educational failures than E.D. Hirsch, and he locates the central problem within the schools themselves. He also proposes a solution that seems at the present time the only one that offers hope for real reform. In this paper I shall first explain who Hirsch is and then present his critique of “progressive education,” now the dominant educational ideology . I will then discuss the most salient features of his philosophy of education.

E. D. Hirsch is professor emeritus of English at the University of Virginia. Early in his career he gained fame as a literary theorist. In the late 1970s his interests began to shift towards literacy and education, especially the teaching of reading. In 1980 his article “Culture and Literacy” was published,² and in 1983 another article appeared entitled “Cultural Literacy”³ which is also the title of his best known book, the subtitle of which is *What Every American Needs to Know*.⁴ In 1996 his second book on education appeared, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*.

Initially Hirsch's ideas for school reform were greeted with hostility and bitter attacks from the educational establishment. Gradually, however, as students who attended schools that had adopted his philosophy and curriculum demonstrated superior achievement, his ideas have become widely accepted.⁵ There are now over 1,000 of these “Core Knowledge” schools in the United States, and the movement is becoming a veritable revolution. As countries that once had a homogeneous population become more “multicultural,” I predict that controversies over the content of the curriculum and other problems being experienced in the U.S. will develop, and Hirsch's approach will be of great interest and value.

Hirsch argues that we cannot blame television, the breakdown of the family, poverty, racism, underfunding of schools or any other external factor for our lack of success in education.

The chief cause of our educational failures is a mistaken philosophy of education derived from Rousseau via John Dewey. This misguided philosophy, known as “progressive education,” is based on the romantic notion that each child has an innate, instinctive tendency to follow its own proper development.⁶ Hence the content of education is arbitrary; students should be allowed to study what they are interested in. Any content will do as long as students are developing the desired skills such as problem-solving, decision making, critical thinking and other “higher order thinking skills.” This is one of the fundamental dogmas of so-called progressive education, but let us try to get a better understanding of it and where and why it arose.

According to Hirsch, European Romanticism (emerging in the late 18th century) introduced two novel ideas of great moment to education. First, Romanticism held “that human nature is innately good, and should therefore be encouraged to take its natural course, unspoiled by the artificial impositions of social prejudice and convention. Second, Romanticism concluded that the child is neither a scaled-down, ignorant version of the adult nor a formless piece of clay in need of molding, rather, the child is a special being in its own right with unique, trustworthy—indeed holy—impulses that should be allowed to develop and run their course” (74). For Romantics the natural goodness of humans is corrupted and damaged by civilization. In Europe Romanticism is associated with Rousseau, Wordsworth and Coleridge, and progressive education is associated with Friedrich Froebel, Johann Pestalozzi, Maria Montessori and other less well known educational reformers. In the U.S. Romanticism brings to mind Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman and progressive education John Dewey, William H. Kilpatrick and E.L. Thorndike.

Romantic ideas contrasted sharply with earlier notions that could be said to have followed from the doctrine of original sin although similar ideas can be found in Plato

and Aristotle. The doctrine of original sin held that, because of the sin of Adam, the will has been weakened, the intellect darkened, and the emotions are no longer under the control of reason. Because all have inherited a corrupted human nature, humans are likely to take the route of least resistance and to yield easily to temptation. Also human instincts are not to be trusted. There is thus need for discipline, rewards and punishment and constant vigilance. The character of small children must be carefully shaped and molded. Hirsch believes that the rejection of these notions by Romantics and the emergence of what he calls “Romantic developmentalism” have done more damage to public education than any other single idea (79).

A second doctrine that flowed from Romanticism Hirsch calls “natural pedagogy” or “the doctrine of holistic learning.” This means that “natural (lifelike, project-like...) methods of instruction are always the most effective teaching methods” (84). As Hirsch puts it, the claim is “that the best form of learning is that which best allows the student to learn in the natural, apprentice-like way in which humans have always learned. It implicitly opposes itself to education that is primarily verbal, as well as to schooling that is artificially organized around drill and practice. By performing ‘holistic’ activities, the student, it is claimed, will reliably discover the needed learnings” (257). Here we envision small groups of children working together on a project such as designing a board game based on the life of Abraham Lincoln or using a camcorder to make a movie. The teacher’s job is to inject some history, literature, science, math, etc. whenever possible. David Mulroy, the author of a book entitled *The War Against Grammar* withdrew his children from public schools when his son’s assignment for home work in a French course was to make a dessert of mangoes and powdered sugar, a favorite dessert in

Francophone Africa.⁷ Contrast this with students sitting in desks arranged in rows listening to the teacher or studying history or civics or math or reading as separate subjects, and one can appreciate the difference between progressive education and traditional education.

A third problematic strategy advocated by progressive educators is “educational formalism.” This approach to education results from the breakdown during the 1960s of the consensus regarding what students should learn. The 1960s were a turbulent and painful period in U.S. history and to a lesser extent, perhaps, in Europe. In the U.S. the content of education became a controversial subject. Various ethnic groups wanted their cultures taught rather than the WASP culture, the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture which had been dominant previously. Revisionist historians rewrote U.S. history emphasizing alleged genocide, exploitation, colonialism, imperialism as well as racism, sexism and other evil –isms. Educators, unable to meet the competing demands of various factions, finally surrendered and adopted the position that the content of education doesn’t matter--it is arbitrary; any content will do as long as the students find it interesting and are developing the desired skills. In other words, the goals of education were rewritten in terms of skills, divorced from any specific content. Carried to an extreme, advocates of this approach included accessing information from the internet as one of the skills and held that students no longer needed to master any body of knowledge or facts. Information is to be obtained with a computer and then abstract skills are applied to it. Hirsch has shown with devastating clarity that this approach does not work because the skills in question are "content-bound" as we shall see.

These skills are also seen as tools, the “pliers and wrenches” students are to use as they become critical thinkers and life-long learners. The “tool metaphor” is pervasive in the writings and teachings of progressive educators, and it would be an “attractive educational idea” if it worked, as Hirsch says (21). He will propose “intellectual capital” as a more apt metaphor for education.

Related to this is the emphasis placed on “process” and the disparagement of content as “mere facts.” Part of what lies behind the antipathy for mastering facts, information and knowledge is the belief that facts quickly become obsolete because of progress. In addition to the obsolescence of facts, the “knowledge explosion” makes it futile to attempt to master even one field; hence the wise course is to focus on the development of skills or tools.

Associated with this anti-intellectualism is the antipathy progressive educators have for drill, practice, and hard work. The mantra here is “Drill and kill.” The implication is that drill and practice kill “the interest and joy children have in learning” (250). Hence the practice of memorizing the parts of speech, the multiplication tables, the continents of the world, capitals of countries and important historical dates has fallen by the wayside. Progressive educators seem to see the study of history as simply the memorization of facts. Hence history has been merged with civics and economics into “social studies,” an allegedly more holistic way to deal with all three fields. This, however, has resulted in a serious decline in mastery of basic facts, especially in history.

Given what we have seen thus far, it is not surprising that progressive educators have reservations about tests, especially objective, standardized tests. As early as the 1920s “...tests were repudiated for belonging to a ‘factory model’ of education, for introducing competition where it does not belong, for denying the individuality of

students' talents and interests, for degrading education by encouraging passivity, mindlessness, and triviality, and for sending the wrong messages about what is valuable in education and in life." (177). To these objections several more have been added recently: "...that objective tests have helped cause our educational decline, that they are unfair to minorities, and that they injure social justice" (177).

Progressive educators also rejected the "transmission theory of schooling" which holds that passing down to the younger generation the wisdom, values, and technology of the tradition is the primary purpose of education. According to Hirsch in the 1920s and 1930s progressive thinkers associated the "transmission theory of education" with a "decadent and static Europe" and their theory with a "vibrant, forward-moving U.S" (270).

The educational establishment has also rejected the teaching of formal grammar on the grounds that knowledge of formal grammar is not only useless but can be detrimental to students' ability to write. How did such a bizarre notion arise? According to David Mulroy, the story begins with Charles Fries of the University of Michigan whose 1952 book, *The Structure of English* "lent weight to the false belief that modern linguistics had discredited traditional grammar." This mistaken notion was picked up by the National Council of Teachers of English and subsequently promulgated in three publications, one in 1963 dealt with composition and "stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even harmful effect on the improvement of writing." A second official resolution issued in 1985 stated that "the use of isolated grammar and usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the

improvement of students' speaking and writing and...that [the organization...] urges the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage the teaching of grammar rather than the improvement of writing." A 1991 article on "Grammar and Usage" as interpreted by Mulroy, proclaims that "the teaching of traditional grammar is not just useless but pernicious."⁸

Finally Hirsch criticizes progressive educators for two related practices. First they place too much credence in the results of their own research and their own allegedly empirical studies. Secondly, while they read each others publications, they neglect mainstream research which has repeatedly contradicted the findings of those in the field of education (129-143).

How does Hirsch respond to this list of beliefs and practices I have given, and what does he propose in their stead?

It is quite obvious that Hirsch considers Romantic notions about human nature and about childhood naïve and unrealistic. He favors a more Augustinian view and in fact tells the well known story from St. Augustine's *Confessions* about the young Augustine and his friends stealing pears. He concludes that Augustine considered human nature perverse and corrupt from birth. "The aim of education is not to follow human nature but to correct it, to set it on a path of virtue... to give one's fallen natural instincts free rein would beget a life of greed, selfishness and crime" (73). Hirsch writes that

the aim of civilization, and by consequence of education, is less to follow nature than to guide it toward humane and worthy ends. This is of course an antique principle, [and] not just a Western one. It reflects the accumulated wisdom of many cultures in many lands. In the annals of recorded thought, European

Romanticism, with its (alas) powerful influence on American culture and education, has been a post-Enlightenment aberration, a mistake we need to correct. (77)

How exactly a society can replace deeply embedded Romantic notions with more realistic ones is not immediately evident. One would think that the study of history, even the study of the history of the twentieth century with the Holocaust, the millions who died under Stalin and Mao, and other atrocities would be sufficient to disprove belief in the innate goodness of humans, but it hasn't happened yet. Certainly a secular equivalent of the doctrine of original sin would be useful. Meanwhile, as far as reforming education is concerned, it may be that it can only be done one school at a time.

With reference to natural pedagogy, Hirsch's comments deserved to be quoted in full:

The Romantic idea that learning is natural, and that the motivation for academic achievement comes from within, is an illusion that forms one of the greatest barriers to social justice imaginable, since poor and disadvantaged students must be motivated to work even harder than advantaged students in order to achieve equality of educational opportunity. It was Antonio Gramsci, that wise spokesman for the disadvantaged and disenfranchised, who wrote that the gravest disservice to social justice entailed by Romantic theories of education is the delusion that educational achievement comes as naturally as leaves to a tree, without extrinsic motivation, discipline, toil, or sweat. (214)

Concerning what I referred to earlier as "educational formalism," Hirsch states more bluntly than is his wont, "The idea that school can inculcate abstract, generalized

skills for thinking, ‘accessing,’ and problem solving, and that these skills can be readily applied to the real world is, bluntly, a mirage. So also is the hope that a thinking skill in one domain can be readily and reliably transferred to other domains” (143). And again he reports that “There is a great deal of evidence, indeed a consensus in cognitive psychology, that people who are able to think independently about unfamiliar problems and who are broad-gauged problem solvers, critical thinkers, and life long learners are, without exception, well-informed people” (144).

Some cognitive psychologists have approached the study of critical thinking by comparing the different ways experts and novices solve problems. Others have focused on the accuracy and inaccuracy of problem solving. Both approaches have led to the same conclusion: “...the almost universal feature of reliable higher-order thinking about any subject or problem is the possession of a broad, well-integrated base of background knowledge relevant to the subject” (152). Hirsch concludes,

...the picture of higher thinking skills as consisting of all-purpose processing and accessing techniques is not just a *partly* inadequate metaphor---it is a totally misleading model of the way higher-order thinking actually works. Higher thought does not apply formal techniques to looked-up data; rather, it deploys diverse relevant cues, estimates, and analyses from preexisting knowledge. (153)

There is thus no escaping mastery of subject mater.

Hirsch believes that the notion that getting an education amounts to acquiring skills or tools must be replaced with another metaphor, that of “intellectual capital” which simply means knowledge plus skills. This notion comes from sociology and is in harmony with the common sense notion that, just as the more money one has, the easier it

is to make more, so the more knowledge one has, the easier it is to acquire more.

Children from families in which parents read stories to them, in which current events are discussed over the dinner table, and vacations, visits to museums and art galleries are a regular feature of family life, arrive at school with a good deal of intellectual capital. On the other hand children from culturally deprived backgrounds start school with a distinct disadvantage. According to Hirsch, this deficit can be remedied and is remedied in other nations that have a content-rich curriculum in the early grades (20 and 276, note 9).

Regarding the obsolescence of facts and the “knowledge explosion,” no one denies that a “knowledge explosion” has taken place in the natural sciences and in their offspring, technology. There has, however, been nothing comparable in the humanities (literature, history, philosophy, etc.) or in the social sciences. No one is writing better stories today than Homer’s epics, the narratives of the Hebrew scriptures or the parables of the New Testament. The tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides are performed hundreds of times around the world each year. No one is writing better histories than Thucydides (ca. 460-400 BCE). Whether there has been progress in philosophy is debatable, but one thing is clear: Plato’s *Republic* is the most widely read text in philosophy and political science. In literary criticism Aristotle’s “Poetics” is as relevant today as it was in the fourth century BCE. Anthropologists have gathered much interesting data from around the world, but do we really understand human nature better than Plato, Aristotle or St. Augustine did? There is change in the humanities and social sciences, if not progress, and new works must be added to the curriculum, but there is a core of works that doesn’t change much. These are the works every educated person should be familiar with.

In *Cultural Literacy* Hirsch notes that all documented societies “have used early memorization to carry on their traditions” and he further observes that “children have an almost instinctive urge to learn specific tribal traditions.”⁹ Given that a child must “learn the traditions of the particular human society and culture it is born into,”¹⁰ it would not be surprising if young children had a special facility for memorizing information, especially the myths and stories of their culture. This would be something similar to the child’s special ability to learn a language or languages. Educators should capitalize on the facility and pleasure young children take in memorizing. Adults who were required to memorize poems, stories and facts as children are usually grateful. Many things such as the multiplication tables and the basics of formal grammar are never learned if they are not learned at an early age. Progressive educators are thus doing a distinct disservice to students by opposing drill, practice, memorization and hard work.

Hirsch’s position on testing is perfectly clear. He admits that some criticisms of objective tests are valid, but he thinks the defects can be easily avoided (177). He gives four reasons why tests are necessary: 1.) Tests contribute to “excellence and fairness,” 2) Tests serve as “incentives to achievement” for both students and teachers. 3) They are useful to monitor the progress of students, and 4) They aid in evaluating “classrooms, schools, and districts” (177).

Regarding the charge that objective tests are culturally biased and unfair to members of minority groups, Hirsch’s own work in identifying a body of background information that all “Americans need to know” should render that charge baseless in the future. This body of knowledge will be described below. Suffice it to say here that Hirsch, proceeding as empirically as possible, has made explicit the knowledge that

literate people in our culture have. This is the knowledge that makes it possible for them to read with understanding and pleasure. This is the knowledge that can provide a rational basis for those who make out standardized tests and reliable guidance for those who must take them.

With reference to progressive education's rejection of the "transmission theory of schooling," the passing down of knowledge from generation to generation, Hirsch adopts "an anthropological theory of education" which is based on the observation "that all human communities are founded upon specific shared information."¹¹ "In an anthropological perspective, the basic goal of education in a human community is acculturation, the transmission to children of the specific information shared by the adults of the group or polis."¹² Since humans survive, not by instinct, but by being initiated into a cultural tradition, transmitting to the younger generation the wisdom of the tradition is a matter of utmost importance; in fact it is a matter of survival. It is a matter of survival for both the individual and the tradition since the culture will not endure unless it is handed down from generation to generation. As far as criticizing and improving the culture is concerned, intelligent and constructive criticism must be based on knowledge. To think that students can acquire critical thinking skills and then apply them to a cultural tradition they have not mastered is just the error referred to above as "educational formalism." Another point that should not be forgotten is that analyzing critically all aspect of our culture is a part of the Western tradition and has been since the time of Socrates and the Sophists.

Although Hirsch has not said much in print regarding the importance of knowing grammar, it follows from what he has said. For instance he stresses the need for standard

languages in modern industrial states.¹³ Large economic units will not function smoothly unless individuals from various parts of the nation can communicate with one another. Grammar helps form and stabilize national languages. A knowledge of grammar is also indispensable for deciphering complex sentences, texts, and great literature.¹⁴ Finally it seems preposterous to think that students who cannot analyze sentences can be taught to analyze arguments, editorials and other extended texts.

We must now examine Hirsch's positive contributions to the philosophy of education. In his 1987 book *Cultural Literacy* he made the following points:

1. Communication among citizens is essential if democracy is to work and if citizens are to participate intelligently in democratic processes. This appears to be self-evident.¹⁵

2. Intelligent communication is impossible without literacy. Hirsch assumed that high school graduates should be able to read newspapers, magazines and books written for the general public, certainly a reasonable assumption, and in fact, it is the minimum one should expect of a student after thirteen years of schooling.

3. Evidence from many quarters points to a serious decline in "communication skills" among young people in recent decades. I have consigned the statistics to a footnote.¹⁶

4. We have already seen that Hirsch argues that we cannot blame TV, the breakdown of the family, poverty, racism, underfunding of schools or any other external cause for the ineffectiveness of our schools.. It is the philosophy of progressive education itself which is to blame.

5. Reading, which is the basic skill, is not a general skill that can be developed in the abstract or in a vacuum. Being able to read differs from text to text and requires "specific background knowledge" that writers assume readers have (39-48, 58-60). This is why writers in our culture do not have to identify Jesus or Plato but must identify, for example, Jacques Derrida as "contemporary French philosopher, founder of Deconstruction" or Bruno Latour, as a "postmodern philosopher of science."

6. What readers need to know to read works written for the general public is thus an empirical question which can be answered empirically. This is what Hirsch has done, and it is one of his most important contributions. I mentioned before that during the 1960s the consensus regarding what students should know broke down. Students were thus left to their own devices with little guidance from anyone. In essence, Hirsch said, "Since educators cannot agree on what students should study and learn, let's let those who write for the public decide," that is newspaper reporters, those who write for news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* and authors of books addressed to the general public. Going through these publications, Hirsch and his associates asked in each case, "What did the writers assume that the readers knew?" or put in another way, "What historical figures, authors, events, scientific concepts, etc. did the writers not explain?" The result was a list of 5,000 items that was printed in a sixty-three page appendix to *Cultural Literacy*. Hirsch thus found a solution to the problem of content, a solution that had eluded educators for decades. Hirsch claims that his approach is descriptive not prescriptive. For instance he never says "This is what I think Americans should know" but "This is *de facto* what people in our culture who are able to read *do* know and what those who wish to be literate *must* learn." Subsequently, with the aid of numerous

teachers Hirsch divided up the 5,000 items into what should be taught in the first grade, what should be taught in the second grade, and so forth. The result is what I called before a “content-rich curriculum” organized into a carefully planned sequence in which each grade builds on what was taught in the previous ones.

Schools thus should teach the shared background knowledge that literate people in a culture have. Transmitting this inherited "wisdom of the tradition" to the younger generation has been the purpose of education in all cultures, ancient and modern, with the possible exception of our own since the 1960's.

I conclude with three observations. In spite of the gloomy picture I have painted of public education in the U.S., there are many talented and effective teachers and, many excellent schools. My assumption is that these teachers, relying on common sense, intuition, and experience, have come to ignore the theories they were required to study in schools of education dominated by progressive educators. After all, teaching is an art not a science. Secondly, it must be admitted that some of the ideas advanced by progressive educators, such as “discovery learning,” have some value. It is their wholesale rejection of traditional approaches that is lamentable and deplorable. A judicious blend of the traditional and the new is without doubt the best solution. Hirsch’s preference is for what he calls “dramatized instruction.” It is described thus: “The classroom can be formed into a little drama with a beginning, middle and end, well directed but not rigidly scripted by the teacher. The beginning sets up the question to be answered, the knowledge to be mastered, or the skill to be gained; the middle consists of a lot of back-and-forth between student and student, student and teacher; and the end consists of a feeling of closure and

accomplishment” (174). I suggest that it is in the middle part that some of the ideas of progressive education might be put into practice.

While it is too early to tell what will be the fate of Hirsch’s philosophy of education and of the movement he has initiated, my prediction is that he will go down in history as the man who did more than anyone else to expose the errors of progressive education and to recall our schools to the role they should play in society.

NOTES

1. Numbers in parentheses refer to pages in E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996). Henceforth superscript numbers will refer to other works.
2. *Journal of Basic Writing*, Winter, 1980.
3. *The American Scholar*, Vol. 52, 1983, 159-169.
4. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
5. For studies on student achievement in Core Knowledge schools, as these schools are known, see “Evaluation Data” at www.coreknowledge.org.
6. See Preface to *Cultural Literacy*, xiv-xvii.
7. *The War Against Grammar* (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2003), 12.
8. Mulroy, 5-6.
9. *Cultural Literacy*, 30
10. *ibid.* 31.
11. *Ibid.* xv.

12. *Ibid.* 16.

13. *Ibid.* 73.

14. Mulroy, 79.

15. *Cultural Literacy*, 10 –17. See 73 ff. On the need for literacy and a standard language in modern industrial societies.

16. For the latest statistics see David W. Kirkpatrick, “Literacy – Then and Now,” www.freedomfoundation.us.

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