HIRSCH'S CULTURAL LITERACY:
IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM

by

SUZANNE PRICE

A THESIS

Presented to the Division of Teacher Education
and the Honors College of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

March 1990

APPROVED: [redacted]

DAVID FLINDERS

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Suzanne Price for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

in the division of Teacher Education

to be taken March 1990

Title: Hirsch's Cultural Literacy:

Implications for Educational Reform

Approved: [redacted]

David Flinders

This thesis examines E.D. Hirsch's book, Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know as a manifesto for educational reform. Hirsch's book received much attention at its publication as society responded to the need to go back to basics in education. In many newspapers and magazines, American public education has been severely criticized for the decline in literacy in our country. Hirsch's book proposes teaching "the basics" while leaving actual curriculum decisions in the hands of local schools and communities.

The second chapter of the thesis addresses the needs of society and how these needs are met (or are not met) through public education. In a society where the divorce rate and the crime rate are both soaring,

it is not surprising that the trend in society is to return to simpler and more stable ways of living. The popularity of the back-to-basics movement in education is directly affected by the desires of society to return to simpler ways of living.

Although Hirsch's book was written to explain the purpose of his dictionary, his book went beyond a simple explanation. Hirsch proposes many changes for public education, and at the core of these changes is his notion of cultural literacy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

E.D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy has received much attention as a framework for educational reform. Hirsch claims that public education is not producing culturally literate young adults. In order to gain an understanding of what Hirsch means by "cultural literacy," his text must be given a close and critical reading. We as teachers can gain insight into current theories of educational reform through such a reading. While Hirsch's book is only one man's opinion and should be viewed as such, it is also important to recognize that many of his ideas parallel those of the "back-to-basics" movement that has gained considerable strength in America.

The first chapter of this thesis examines the social forces that help explain the popularity of the back-to-basics movement and Hirsch's theory. Looking back on better days when daily life was simpler and American values were altogether different from those of today is a strong trend in reform, be it in education, industry, family life, entertainment, or politics.

The second chapter defines cultural literacy in nontechnical terms. Although it is my interpretation of Hirsch's theory, I have tried to provide a fair and evenhanded explanation because I believe it is valuable to begin with Hirsch's theory as he intended it before looking at it more critically. (This latter task is addressed in the final chapters of this thesis.) At this point, however, I will briefly discuss cultural literacy and the two sides of Hirsch's theory as it has been critiqued in the professional journals.

"Literacy" in the context of this thesis is not merely the ability to read and write. It is the ability to read at a functioning level in society which requires individuals to have a certain amount of background knowledge to enable them to process the information at hand. On this level, reading has meaning beyond the literal level as the reader responds to the tacit implications of what is being read.

In the classroom, Hirsch's purpose is to reconnect reading with content. Hirsch contends that children need to read good literature as well as informative materials both for practice in reading and for information. As they read, children develop the "schema" they will need for further reading and learning both within and beyond the classroom. Schema are, theoretically, classifications within the human

brain. They are categories of things we use and which we keep close at hand when reading, writing, perceiving, and conversing. It is these schema that are responsible for giving us a mental picture of a chicken when we read a vague passage about a bird. Of course, my mental picture of the chicken may differ from yours of a robin as we rely on our existing schemata to interpret the information. It also follows that if the passage should mention the fact the bird is a nonflying bird, we might adjust our mental picture to a duck. As we adjust, we pull this image of the duck from the more general schema we have on birds and then go deeper for the more specific schema on ducks.

The element of culture as it forms the notion of "cultural literacy" identifies the type of background information that is essential to functioning at a productive level in American society. Hirsch's theory is based on educating American youth about America, its history and its society. According to Hirsch, the purpose of education is to produce productive American citizens.

Reviews of Hirsch's book acknowledge his argument that teachers are better off teaching content to mastery than to stick to the current trends of educational formalism. Educational formalism is a developmental approach to teaching content which dates

back to the theories of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Formalism teaches literacy as a set of skills to be mastered through practice. This kind of education employs phonics for reading instruction. Hirsch's theory emphasizes the importance of reading for meaning and advocates teaching reading for comprehension rather than for decoding skills which is the primary goal of phonics instruction.

The more critical reviewers believe that Hirsch'es idea of cultural literacy is out of touch with pluralist American life because most of the terms on Hirsch's list of "What Every American Needs to Know" are based on white, American male history and because he neglects minority contributions in the making of America. For example, critics with this philosophy advocate the need for multicultural education as a fundamental priority in public education as it teaches tolerance and knowledge of other cultures in what is increasingly becoming a smaller world. Hirsch believes that the first priority in American education is to acculturate our children to American society, which means that teaching them about America is the first priority.

To the other side of the issue are those who are largely in agreement with Hirsch. These are the back-to-basics advocates who promote the return to more

traditional forms of education. These traditionalists believe that the liberalism of the 1960's and 1970's created what is now known as the "shopping mall high school" where students are offered a smattering of many subjects "a la carte." The shopping mall high school rejects a core curriculum of good literature (conversely, a core curriculum is precisely what the traditionalists recommend) in favor of offering students a broad education that teaches a wide range of subjects with little detail.

My purpose in this thesis is to examine E.D. Hirsch's theory as it is presented in his book Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. I will explore how this theory applies to current trends in educational reform. In particular, I will address Hirsch's theory in light of the current uproar in American society over students who, upon graduation from high school, are functionally illiterate. The full implications of Hirsch's theory across the curriculum are beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, I will examine and critique for its approach to educational reform as it attempts to produce a more literate society.

This thesis is written in four chapters. The first three define cultural literacy as it is presented in Hirsch's text. These chapters then serve as the

basis for my critique of Hirsch's theory. The final chapter employs my own experiences and knowledge as a beginning teacher and as a student who has personally experienced the educational system which is now heavily criticized.

Following the final chapter are endnotes. I employed use endnotes to further explain technical language which would have taken away from the substantive points being made had they been elaborated upon within the actual text of the thesis. In addition, there is a bibliography at the end to give credit to the resources which were especially useful in the compilation of the thesis.

CHAPTER II
THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

One need only pick up a daily newspaper or watch the nightly news to hear about America's public schools in decline. Dropping standardized test scores, increasing dropout rates, and school districts being sued by their graduates for failing to provide a "decent" education appear regularly as news items. Why is American public education failing? The answer remains unclear, but a major trend to remedy the situation is to get "back to basics" at both the elementary and secondary levels of education.

"Back-to-basics" is a popular slogan that refers to teaching core skills and knowledge required in reading, writing and computation. During the 1960's and 1970's, education assumed a quite different approach. Humanist philosophers and behaviorists produced convincing research indicating that children possess innate abilities in many different areas and they need only be exposed to an area of talent in order for it to develop naturally within the child.

Consequently, schools developed curricula that introduced many different subjects and topics. This is called a "horizontal" curriculum. In addition, it was also believed that children learned more and felt more successful if they worked at their own pace. Hence, "vertical" curriculum was developed wherein subjects with the same title and the same amount of credit were offered at many different ability levels or levels of difficulty.

Such diversity has been blamed for fragmented education that allows many students to slide through basic education with few skills. In response, higher education has been forced to offer courses in remediation as requirements in the first years of college because many entering freshmen lack the basic skills needed to study at higher levels.

Going "back to basics" implies a time in the past when public education offered a central core of knowledge believed best to prepare youth. In reality, many people who support this notion have no concept of how that education differed from the education that is offered today. Educators and noneducators alike are sure of only one thing: public education is inadequate to meet the needs of society. Public education did change dramatically in the 1960's and 1970's. The development of the vertical and horizontal curricula

called for team teaching, the inclusion of nongraded classes, and flexible scheduling with time off for special classes and work experience. Of course there are pros and cons to each of these policies, yet, generally speaking, the back-to-basics movement regards them as contributors to the decline of public education.

The "back-to-basics" movement in educational reform is consistent with the social trends of America as we romanticize the 1920's and pre-World War II America. Perhaps romanticizing the past is a result of a society that is disillusioned with the post-Vietnam era (the present). Families are more mobile than before and divorce is prevalent. Crime rates are still rising as is the number of the who homeless. Our society seems to be seeking older, simpler, and more predictable ways of life. The "back-to-basics" movement is especially appealing as it emphasizes uniformity and stability in public education.

One of the most widely read books on this topic is E.D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. Hirsch's notion of cultural literacy recognizes the need for greater literacy among Americans as participants in a democratic society. What began as a theoretical description behind the compilation of The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy has

been widely accepted by educators and noneducators as a prescription for addressing the ills of public education.

Although Hirsch does not attempt to propose one curriculum to be followed by all American schools, he does describe the kind of education that he feels would produce "culturally literate" Americans. It is important to note that what Hirsch means by cultural literacy involves educating American youth about America, its history, culture and values. It includes knowledge about the world only from a traditional American perspective in a historical sense. Hirsch states in his book that multicultural literacy should "not be the primary focus of national education" and "should not be allowed to supplant or interfere with our schools' responsibilty to ensure our children's mastery of American literate culture." (1)

The most essential part of Hirsch's theory is the unification of public education as it acculturates American youth into society. Hirsch emphasizes the need for public education to be consistent in its requirements and its teachings across the country. High school graduates from Portland, Oregon, and from New York, New York, should have similar knowledge about American society.

Hirsch contends that being literate (having the ability to read) goes far beyond deciphering individual words. Rather, reading is dependent on the person's ability to interpret the text being read. For example, to read an article about the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini is meaningless to the reader who has no previous knowledge about who he was and what his death means to America. This theory fits into the "back-to-basics" movement as we seek to prepare our children beyond the classroom. Having a working knowledge of the world around us is essential to becoming productive members of society. It is the goal of both Hirsch and the "back-to-basics" movement to produce literate people who are active members of American society.

As I critique Hirsch's arguments in the following chapters, it is important to keep in perspective how they relate to broad social trends. One current trend is to return to a less complicated way of living in order to add stability to everyday life. The back-to-basics movement is a part of this trend, and may or may not be effective in reforming public education. For now, it is wise for educators and others who are concerned about the viability of public education in our country to examine this movement in

educational reform since it has already gained a foothold among those who seek to reform our schools.

CHAPTER III

CULTURAL LITERACY DEFINED

What is cultural literacy? According to E.D. Hirsch, it is knowledge that is shared by the members of a given culture for effective communication and prosperity within that society. The goal of cultural literacy in our schools is to produce young adults who share with their peers a minimal core of background information. On a larger scale, the goal is to produce active members of society who are capable of greater economic prosperity and social justice for a more secure democracy. The most essential component of Hirsch's cultural literacy is effective communication that relies on a given amount of background knowledge that "lies above the everyday levels of knowledge that everyone possesses and below the expert level known only to specialists."(2)

The development of Hirsch's theory of cultural literacy was partly in response to the decline in literacy rates across America in the past decade. Hirsch proposes that literacy goes far beyond the

ability to decode words, relying upon the reader's ability to actively interpret what he or she reads. Hirsch criticizes our current educational system which employs basal readers (or developmental texts) (3) in teaching our children to read because these texts stress not information, but readablility.

The readability of a text is based on average word length and difficulty of the vocabulary within the text. Readability has nothing to do with the topics presented in the basal reader, and basals are often criticized for lacking information relevant to the education of their audience. Hirsch argues that children would find more success in reading if they were allowed to read for their own enjoyment as well as for information that would help acculturate them into society. It follows that more children might enjoy reading which would in turn improve the reading performance of students.

Further, the argument holds that the more children read, the more information they learn. And the more information they can acquire, the better prepared they are for further reading as it helps them to understand the text beyond the surface level of merely reading the words to get through the assignment. Hirsch contends that improving our national literacy is of utmost importance, and will be greatly supported by

teaching students in the early grades from texts with cultural content rather than from basal readers that focus on process.

One can deduce that the background information needed to become culturally literate does not take care of itself. It must be taught. This assumption is supported as Hirsch goes on to elaborate the primary responsibility of public education: acculturating students so that they may become productive members of society. Acculturation and equal opportunity in education are basic to Hirsch's notion of cultural literacy.

These essential elements are part of a much broader proposal for the reform of public education. Consider, for example, the Paideia Proposal.(4) Put forth by the Paideia Group in 1982, this proposal is based on equal educational opportunity for all children in American society. The Paideia Proposal seeks to unify public education for the benefit of democratic society. It advocates students' rights to participate in the "general economic welfare and to expect a decent standard of living with enough free time to make a good life for themselves." (5) It also advocates that the welfare of society is dependent on continued progress in all fields of scholarship including the arts and sciences. As members of society, we are able to make

such contributions only if we are culturally literate. Cultural literacy tells us what has been and what needs to be done in our country. E.D. Hirsch's cultural literacy as it applies to educational reform fits directly into this broader, more utopian proposal.

The Paideia Proposal is utopian as it advocates that people (young and old) educate themselves solely for the love of knowledge and for the good of the democracy. The proposal neglects individual differences among students as it calls for a uniform core curriculum across the country.

Hirsch's theory offers much more specific (and perhaps workable) suggestions for educational reform than does the Paideia Proposal because Hirsch's goal is to make changes in the current state of education. The Paideia Proposal seeks to describe education as it should ultimately be pursued by society. Further, the Paideia Proposal describes the attitudes people ought to possess about education.

It is not my intention to critique the Paideia Proposal, but only to place Hirsch within that proposal as both theories strive for a society in which the average citizen is a literate, interested, and active participant. Both agree that American economic prosperity and its position as a leading world nation depend on public education's ability to produce

culturally literate Americans. Both would also agree that education is not solely derived from school and that an important key to educational reform in this country is dependent on participation of the families of all students, as well as of other social institutions.

Hirsch's cultural literacy means teaching students concepts, names, phrases and dates which are relevant to acculturation. Hirsch's definition does not include multicultural education such as teaching students about other cultures' values and traditions. Although there is much evidence supporting multicultural education as it teaches tolerance and perspective in an increasingly culturally interactive world, Hirsch argues that mastery of national culture and its language is of first priority in educational policy.

Hence, by cultural literacy Hirsch does not intend to include "world knowledge" as one might think of it. Multicultural topics are appropriate to teach only when they are essential to the understanding of American culture, and then they should be taught from the American perspective. For example, students should know where Iran is geographically and who the Ayatollah Khomeini was. However, according to Hirsch, the topic need not include concepts from Iranian culture to help them understand the Iranian people.

Hirsch feels that we are able to learn about other cultures only after we have mastered our own culture and language. In fact, Hirsch's opinion of multilinguism is especially defiant as he states that "multilinguism enormously increases cultural fragmentation, civil antagonism, illiteracy, and economic-technological ineffectualness." (6) However, Hirsch is not opposed to biliteracy as long as there is proficiency in the national language.

Cultural literacy, according to Hirsch, exists at a certain level in every society. When we speak with each other as Americans, we automatically assume a certain amount of knowledge that results from living in the same society. For example, it is safe to assume that anyone over the age of 17 knows something about the United States' involvement in the Vietnam war. We would not necessarily assume the same knowledge from a Russian citizen of the same age, unless the Russian had studied American history or had been in the United States. Certainly, this person's knowledge would differ significantly from the knowledge of the American. Hirsch considers it important for us as a society to be able to predict what others know.

Moreover, it is Hirsch's opinion that public education is producing young adults who know very little about a lot of things. Hirsch blames the 1960's

and 1970's fragmented curricula for this lack of background knowledge. At present, high school graduates are ill-educated, one could argue, in American history and literature. Many are unable to identify the era of the carpetbagger or the meaning of absolute zero. Furthermore, most are uninterested in improving on the knowledge they have after leaving high school. Consequently, Americans are often apathetic to the world around them. (Poor voter turn out is an example of this apathy.) Part of Hirsch's basic argument is the need for improving public awareness. It is not only "good" to know about the Second World War (who was involved and what happened), but it is also imperative as this knowledge keeps it from happening again. If we lose sight of historical lessons such as this, we are bound to repeat history.

The dictionary that Hirsch and co-authors created aims to educate the American public so that we are able to have shared knowledge for effective communication. The dictionary is composed of those areas of knowledge that its authors feel writers of all public information and literature in America should be able to assume their readers possess. Further, the dictionary is based on the theory that reading ability and learning ability are closely allied. Both depend on diversity of prior knowledge. As we read, we learn about more

things. But in order to learn about new things, we must be able to relate the new to what we already know.

Previously learned knowledge which has been stored in the memory is called a schema. It is an abstract concept which defines knowledge as it is organized by the human mind. Schema theory holds that as we learn about things, we assimilate the new knowledge into what we already know. For example, upon seeing a Great Dane, we assimilate the new knowledge of this large breed into our existing schema about dogs. Depending on the individual's previous encounters with dogs, the information about this new breed could be assimilated as an outrageously large dog with long, thin legs and short hair if the person was previously acquainted with only small dogs. If the individual had prior experience with larger dogs, the person might assimilate the new knowledge by comparing it to other large dogs such as thinking it larger than a golden retriever and smaller than an Irish wolfhound with very short hair, long legs and a slight build. Notice how the two assimilations differ as the person knows more about large dogs. In the latter case, the knowledge being assimilated is more specific and much more meaningful to the learner. This is a good example of how learning ability is greatly dependent on existing knowledge.

Likewise, reading ability is dependent on prior knowledge in the same way as learning ability. The more diverse the background, the more meaningful the text will be to the reader. Someone who knows little about the Ayatollah Khomeini and Iran will not assimilate the news of his death in the same way as an individual with even a little knowledge of the hostage crisis of Jimmy Carter's administration. Effective communication between reader and writer always depends on the implications of that which remains implicit. Hence, reading ability and learing ability are affected by background knowledge.

The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy attempts to provide its readers with a survey of the background knowledge that its authors believe is basic to effective communication between Americans. The dictionary is divided into twenty-three sections which help readers assimilate any new information into their existing schema on topics ranging from "The Bible" to "Business and Economics." Sections include: four covering American and world history, two sections on politics, two on geography, five on the sciences and technology and individual sections covering literature, philosophy, proverbs, mythology and the fine arts.

Within each section, individual entries are in alphabetical order and include a brief description or

summary of the topic. For example, in the section on "American Geography" the entry for Des Moines reads:

> Des Moines (duh-MOYN) Capital of IOWA and largest city in the state.(7)

The entry is only a general description that most anyone would know. The authors do not include statistics such as the size of the city or its exact position within the state because this goes beyond the background knowledge of the common person who has probably never been to Des Moines, but has an idea where Iowa is in the United States. You can see how the entry itself depends on some prior knowledge of United States geography as the entry would be less meaningful if the reader had no concept of where Iowa is located among the fifty states. Further knowledge about Iowa as a farming state would also add more meaning to this entry.

In his bock Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know, Hirsch goes beyond describing cultural literacy and the theory behind the compilation of the dictionary. Specifically, he describes the practical implications of his theory for educational reform. The next chapter will focus on these implications. The discussion will also include commentary on the

practicality of his suggestions as workable solutions for the immediate future.

CHAPTER IV

APPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL LITERACY

Getting back to basics in education means going back farther than merely to the 1940's or the 1950's. According to E.D. Hirsch, it means going back to two basic proposals from the turn of the century. The key to applying Hirsch's theory of cultural literacy in today's schools requires applying these two contrasting proposals in a complementary way in the best interest of individual students and society.

In 1893, The Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies stressed an integrated curriculum (8) which included more scholarly subjects such as English, mathematics, and the natural and physical sciences. These subjects were not taught in isolation, and hence course content overlapped. Although the proposal was written at a time when only the most capable or socially elite completed high school, the notion that every student should receive the same education should not be rejected as impossible now that a high school diploma is obtained by the

majority. The idea of equal opportunity in education is highly democratic and deserves to be included in any proposal on educational reform.

The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education, published in 1918, rejected the 1893 report. The Cardinal Principles recognized seven fundamental aims of education in a democracy:

1. Health
2. Command of fundamental processes
3. Worthy home membership
4. Vocation
5. Citizenship
6. Worthy use of leisure
7. Ethical character

This proposal had its origins in European romanticism and American pragmatism. Based on the theory that every child is a unique individual with interests and aptitudes to be developed at his/her own pace, the most essential element of this proposal was to ensure the development of a positive self-concept so that learning could be optimized. Hence, the horizontal and vertical curriculums were developed to better meet the needs of all students.

Also inherent in this proposal was the theory that education should provide its students with knowledge that is directly applicable to their own lives at the time of the learning. It follows that students should be grouped into classes based on their interests, abilities and lifestyles. This is referred to as

"tracking" in education and is directly reflected in the development of horizontal and vertical curricula.

It seems that if America had not strayed from the 1893 proposal from the Committee of Ten, we would be teaching more content to our students and would have avoided the problems of the full-service high school. However, according to Hirsch, both proposals have strong points. The 1893 proposal was correct in placing the emphasis of the curriculum on academics within the basic subject areas. The 1918 proposal was revolutionary in calling for flexibility and variety in education. Today, it would be ideal to combine these two proposals so that American schools could accomodate the special needs of each student, respond to the needs of the community, and teach the basics so that all students possessed working knowledge of the world around them.

Hirsch does not prescribe a core curriculum to be followed by every school across the nation. Instead, he proposes that every school in American public education should share common goals in what they teach, but their means for achieving these goals should be varied and adaptive to their students and community. Hirsch defines a successful school program as two curricula that are interdependent on each other. These are the extensive and intensive curricula.

The extensive curriculum teaches cultural literacy. It teaches a wide variety of information critical to literacy in American culture, but limits the amount of detail taught in these subjects. The extensive curriculum can be taught in more traditional schools that employ direct instruction (9) or it may be taught in more progressive schools with less formal settings and inquiry-based instruction. (10)

The intensive curriculum encourages a fully developed understanding of a subject. It differs from the current curriculum in today's schools in that the subjects the students may choose to study are not humanistic, but largely academic. In this way, Hirsch identifies with the proposal of the Committee of Ten. Thus, Hirsch aims to preserve students' ability to choose their classes while eliminating classes within the vertical curriculum that satisfy requirements while teaching very different things to different groups of children. For example, Hirsch contends that high schools should require every sophomore to read two Shakespearean plays. Which plays they read is up to them and the teachers who teach that subject. In addition, references should be made within the class to many of Shakespeare's plays so that the extensive curriculum is taught. If the extensive curriculum could be taught within the intensive curriculum, this

"catalog" of information would have more meaning and would therefore be better remembered.

At the core of Hirsch's proposal for reform is reading instruction: "Reading is the principal subject in elementary schools and retains a high importance in middle school and junior high."(11) According to Hirsch, reading instruction should begin with basic instruction in phonics for the development of simple decoding skills. These decoding skills are not used to decode words beyond the children's vocabularies, but are used in beginning reading to decode meaningful words from meaningful texts.

By meaningful texts, Hirsch points to good literature and "informative" books (non-fiction). The basal readers currently used in primary reading instruction contain many narratives whose meaning and relevance to the children's needs in education is questioned, not only by Hirsch, but by educators across the nation. Hirsch proposes eliminating those texts and creating new ones that contain much stronger factual information and traditional lore as opposed to the narratives now present in these texts, most of which center on human emotion.

Also included in the currently-used basal readers are single chapters from well-acclaimed literature. Hirsch considers the use of an entire literary work

much more valuable than small excerpts to the students. Of course, teachers ought to be selective in their choices of literature as many works require a great deal of time to pursue.

Hirsch advises teachers to pay attention to the new titles that appear in their bookstores. A good balance of up-to-date and traditional literature is best. In choosing good literature, Hirsch's advice is to pay close attention to content and subject matter. The literature a teacher chooses should tie into the topics taught in the classroom, which, of course, should lead the children directly to cultural literacy. Hence, while it is important to study good literature for pleasure, it is the aim of the instruction to teach appreciation and recognition of certain literary styles and authors.

Another important point in developing a reading list in accordance with Hirsch's theory is to include many selections that contain factual information. Non-fiction works are often neglected in the basal readers and are an important aspect of teaching cultural literacy.

Hirsch's suggestions for changing the basals are not new. This topic is often at the center of any debate on reforming education to produce literate youth. However, the debate comes to an abrupt halt

when the question is raised concerning who (or what group) has the right to determine the content of the revised readers.

Hirsch solves the problem by offering a compromise between educators and publishers by giving both groups equal responsibility. Each group would develop its own conceptions of the national vocablulary as it is taught in public schools. Once the proposals are complete, representatives from each side would present the ideas of their group. These representatives would then reach an accord about the contents of the revised readers. Hirsch contends that the agreement need not specify anything about how the material is actually taught in the classroom, but would set forth a coherent sequence for its development.

Another approach concerning who shall determine the sequence is to convene a distinguished group of educators and public leaders to develop a grade-by-grade (K-12) model. Hirsch's idea can be extended to support regional committees instead of a single national committee nationwide in order to meet the needs of the varying communities across our country while unifying the nation's schools in cultural literacy.

Hirsch also proposes administering three tests on the national level to determine the success of this new

curriculum. This idea is patterned after Britian's O- and A- level exams. These exams normalize the extensive curriculum of that country which promotes the teaching of some degree of common information throughout Britain. Hirsch's tests would be given at the fifth, eighth, and twelfth grades to test the agreed upon knowledge from the three stages of schooling. The use of the tests, however, would be left entirely to the discretion of the state and local administrations.

Classrooms which are developed in accordance with Hirsch's philosophy would be based on a core curriculum established by the administration and interpreted by the classroom teacher to meet the needs of his or her students. The children themselves in such a classroom would not determine the content of their curriculum by the nature of their needs as individuals. (This is the type of classroom that Hirsch identifies as a product of the 1960's movement to liberalize education by letting the children work at their own pace on material which is relevant to their individual needs.)

In addition, the classroom that strives for cultural literacy would certainly not employ basal readers as we know them today. Such a classroom would most likely be classified as a whole language classroom. Currently, whole language is used in many

private schools including the Montessorri schools. A curriculum that is based on the whole language approach to reading instruction acquaints its students with many types of literature which are integrated across the curriculum into units of instruction. For example, students in a whole language classroom studying the presidents would read informative books about the political parties. Likewise, a math lesson might teach the students about the number of electoral votes needed to win the election as a problem in percentages.

This classroom would not engage in activities such as cooperative learning where students teach each other and work together to solve problems. Rather, this classroom would be a mastery learing classroom which relies on direct instruction in teaching each concept to mastery. Every student would be required to learn each lesson to mastery before going on. This concept illuminates a discrepancy in Hirsch's theory, however. Hirsch does not subscribe to ability grouping or letting children proceed at their own paces. (This is one of the problems that led to the fragmented curricula of the 1960s and 1970s.) But while ability grouping is criticized for its tendency to fragment the curriculum, it is easier for a teacher to do than is keeping a class of twenty-five children together at

all times. Perhaps Hirsch's theory calls for more reform than merely reform in content.

It seems Hirsch idealizes European policies in education. In which case, testing young children to determine their destinies as physicians or clerks is what is called for in Hirsch's proposal. This notion seems absurd in a democratic society. Children ought to have the freedom to choose their occupations. However, according to Hirsch, by labeling children slow, average, and talented, we are already determining to a great degree much of their future. Once labeled "slow," most often the child performs within the expectations of the "slow" group. Rarely do children move beyond what is expected of them, and therefore these labels are often more undemocratic than would be a test that determines the child's future based on his achievement as of the fifth grade.

Beyond the classroom, Hirsch has a few things to say about the American family. Hirsch cites studies that point to the harm in watching too much television. The television has replaced reading as a leisure-time activity in the home. Children no longer play neighborhood games for fun until dinner time. Most are inside passively watching television. It has also replaced much of the conversation at mealtime as more and more Americans eat dinner in front of the t.v.

However, Hirsch does not blame television for the state of literacy in our nation. He admits that it is "the intellectual equivalent of junk food" and it often infringes on the time once spent on homework.(12) But Hirsch also admits that television watching is acculturative. One important note that needs to be included here is to acknowledge that not all television is good and not all of it is bad. According to the report of the Commission on Reading, the benefits of television turn negative if one views more than ten hours each week.(13) There is evidence that supports the value of educational programs such as dramatizations of novels or the news. These types of shows encourage further reading and learning. Examples of programs that are unlikely to have any educational value are obvious to any parent. However, in addition to monitoring the quality of programs to be viewed, the prudent parent will also limit the amount of t.v. the children watch.

Hirsch does not prescribe a certain set of strategies for instruction. He leaves this up to individual schools and teachers. Further, he does not suggest setting curriculum standards such as time requirements for teaching content. The individual states and school districts are recognized as responsible to their communities' needs and values.

The only requirement from Hirsch's theory is the successful integration of cultural literacy into our public school system and the production of youth from our public high schools with some common knowledge whether they are from New York City or Eugene, Oregon. Hirsch understands how fruitless it would be to propose a standard curriculum for every public school in the United States.

CHAPTER V

CULTURAL LITERACY AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM

On the surface, Hirsch's arguments for educational reform seem uncontestable. This is because Hirsch is careful in his criticisms of the current state of education not to blame individuals or even groups for what has now proven to be a failing system. Likewise, Hirsch realizes that to prescribe a remedy for the ills of public education in the form of a detailed curriculum would be fruitless. Hirsch's heart seems to be in the right place as he favors local control of public education instead of a national doctrine to be followed by all public schools in America. Hirsch's arguments are also likeable because they are based on equal opportunity in education for the good of the democracy.

But the identification of cultural literacy as the first priority in public education is lacking. While Hirsch appeals to the national trend to go back-to-basics, his theory does not meet the needs of this movement. Most people, educators and noneducators

alike, would agree that teaching our children to read is one of the first priorities of education. Hirsch's theory extends this belief by stating that in order to read well, the reader must incorporate a certain amount of background knowledge to interpret the selection in a meaningful way. So far, so good.

Hirsch further idenitfies this information background information in the dictionary containing the topics of true cultural literacy. This list of items is indeed challenging, even for the educated. And for those of us who have attempted to challenge ourselves to come up with the meanings of some of these items, we begin to doubt our own education as it is quite a challenging list! Hirsch identifies the list as a compilation of information that the high school graduate should know.

The dictionary is also a topic of debate. Titled "What Every American Needs to Know," Hirsch's list must be arbitrary as no one list can identify the knowledge that every American needs to know. For example, if we were to compile a list of the one hundred greatest books, nearly everyone would agree that The Bible and The Origin of Species ought to be amoung those listed. But the further we proceed down the list, the more difficult it would be to agree on which titles were to be included and which were to be excluded. The

dictionary has the same problem: it lists McGovern and not Mondale. Why? Perhaps the dictionary is more arbitrary than Hirsch and his collegues concede.

Another major point of Hirsch's argument is the need to ensure that all high school graduates from across the nation graduate with a certain amount of shared knowledge. Hirsch's answer to this complicated issue is to teach a national vocabulary. It is his belief that a shared national vocabulary among all high school graduates encourages effective and harmonious exchanges despite personal, cultural, and class differences. He neglects to deal with the issue of who shall determine this national vocabulary and what form it will take in the school curriculum.

Hirsch does insist that the information taught in public schools be closely linked to acculturating our youth into American society and that it be taught imaginatively. First, denying the value of multicultural education in this age of technology severely limits the capabilities of our students to live in the world today. Second, to teach imaginatively implies that the students are actively engaged in the learning. This is possible only when the learning has meaning for the students. The learning must be directly applicable to the lives of the students in order for them to actually possess the

information being taught. Motivating students to learn requires teaching students to see how the learning is relevant to their own lives. Not always will the items listed on Hirsch's list for cultural literacy have much intrinsic interest for a ten year old. Hirsch does not address the issue of motivation in light of the information he proposes we teach.

The next item of concern centers on those children in our classrooms whose first language is not English. According to Hirsch, they must learn to speak our national language as well as or better than their own. (The failure to do so results in cultural fagmentation and civil antagonism, asserts Hirsch.) But what about the notion of the American "melting pot"? Hirsch's theory rejects the importance of foreign language and culture as it teaches us tolerance and develops a sense of identity otherwise unattainable without comparison across cultures.

Hirsch makes two assumptions. First, he contends that justice and prosperity in any society depend on a high level of universal literacy. Second, he believes that schools are responsible for reconstructing and maintaining the social order. Both of these assumptions are not supported by any research. For example, are literate people more moral than illiterate people? And are literate people more concerned with

justice? As for the social order, schools most often mirror society. The social order is the responsibility of the adults of society. Schools provide a simulation of that order to acculturate children to be productive members of society.

I do not believe that the content of public education is the real issue in educational reform. While there is a need to return to the basics of academia, the greater need is to change the national attitude about learning. Although the Paidiea Proposal is highly utopian, it comes closer than Hirsch does to addressing the foremost problem in America: apathy.

For instance, Hirsch identifies illiteracy as the root of the problem of poor voter turnout. In his opinion, the public is threatened by manipulation from the media because they are ignorant of the real issues. Hirsch believes people do not know the issues because they do not possess the background information needed to understand the issues at hand.

In my opinion, the public could utilize the materials available to them to educate themselves about the issues, but most cannot be bothered. In this age of technology, television has led many of us into a state of passive resistance: everyone feels free to complain about the state of America, but few do anything to improve it. It begins in kindergarden and

reaches a climax in adolescence. Most of us do only what is absolutely necessary to get by. Furthermore, we often neglect the needs of others and our own responsibilities to our community.

It is time for parents to become actively involved with their children, to teach them and to learn from them. I can tell you that as a beginning teacher, I see and talk to some children more each day than their parents ever have in any day of that child's life. And it has nothing to do with illiteracy. Rather, it has a lot to do with morals and attitude. There is little a school can do to inspire a child to become a lifelong learner when the child's home is void of any emotional support.

Hirsch does present some feasible ideas for reading instruction, however. For one thing, phonics instruction belongs only in early reading instruction for decoding words within the existing vocabulary of the reader. It is also becoming obvious to many educators that the basal reading program has few strengths. Replacing it with informative texts and good literature is wise, but is probably unrealistic since most teachers prefer to use a reading program that has been developed in accordance with the child's reading ability and the skills that are appropriate for that level of reading. This preference has little to

do with the competence of the teacher. It has a lot to do with time. Perhaps the answer is to develop a new reading program. Hirsch is right on target with this proposal.

"Tracking" or ability grouping, however, is here to stay. Hirsch contends that tracking leads to fragmentation as the children in the lower skill groups are not exposed to as many things as are the children in the more capable groups. This is probably true. However, there are two important things to remember. The first is the need for mastery of the basic skills as a priority in education. The kids in the slower groups need more time to master these skills than do the more capable children. Consequently, a teacher is faced with the dilemma of taking the time to expose the less capable students to everything the rest of the class may work with or he or she may use class time to ensure the children read at grade level. Second, the question arises about equal opportunity for the more capable students. It seems unfair to make them wait for the slower kids to master the skills to move on as an entire class.

Tracking has its negative points as well. Studies indicate that labeling children "slow" or "capable" has definite effects on future learning. In many cases the

label greatly affects the self-esteem of the child. A child is never labeled if it is at all avoidable.

Likewise, once a child is put into an ability group, the placement should never be considered a permanent placement. Many children grow out of being slow as soon as they catch onto that fact that printed words have meaning. Children should always be given the opportunity to work toward joining the most challenging group that meets their needs as learners.

Ideally, Hirsch believes public education's first priority is to produce productive members of society who are capable of greater economic prosperity and social justice for a more secure democracy than we are experiencing today. To achieve this goal, the bottom line is to graduate students from high school who are functionally literate.

Going back to basics, Hirsch identifies the founders of our republic as they conceptualized education after the Ciceronian ideal. Cicero claimed he could explain Greek science and philosophy or anything else to his fellow Romans in ordinary Latin terms. (14) And he did. Cicero's aim was greatly admired and the Ciceronian ideal of public discourse was strong in this country into the twentieth century. Although Cicero's ideal was based on rhetoric and was largely oral discourse, Hirsch identifies reading and

writing as the discourse of our time. Hirsch also believes that "the teaching of Ciceronian literacy as our founders conceived it is a primary but currently neglected responsibility of our schools."(15)

But is the Ciceronian ideal of public discourse really being neglected or has it taken another form? That which we teach our children exemplifies our own values and needs as a society. Hence, education has changed greatly since the time of Cicero. The curriculum of the 1960's and 1970's reflected America's need to individualize education. The national attitude then emphasized personal choice and individual freedom of expression. This is what we taught in our schools. Now, we are largely unsatisfied with the state of education in America as it attempts to satisfy the values we no longer adhere to. America now romanticizes simpler days when people had a common bond and worked for the common good.

In any case, America is ready to make another change in public education. Hirsch's proposal is timely as it appeals to the current trends in America, but there is no simple remedy for the ills of education in this country.

ENDNOTES

1. Hirsch, E.D. Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. Houghton Mifflin Company. 1987. Vintage Books edition. 1988. page 18.

2. Hirsch, E.D. Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. Houghton Mifflin Company. 1987. Vintage Books edition. 1988. page 19.

3. Basal readers are one part of the basal reader program that is widely used across the United States for beginning reading instruction. The main goal of basal readers is reading comprehension. Although there are many supplementary materials included in the basal program, the basic (or essential) materials include a teacher's manual, a set of ditto masters, a student workbook, a student basal reader at the appropriate reading level, and a collection of tests. The program has been criticized because many teachers who use it do not go much beyond the basal manual and its readers. The problem with this is that the program does not offer a wide variety of concepts that are of

potential interest to the students at each level. The program is not a complete reading program.

Each reader in the program is designed for a particular reading level that does not necessarily correspond to particular grade levels. The purpose of the readers as part of the program is to improve the reading ability of the audience gradually from one reader to the next. The readers are examined for their readability which means they are assigned reading levels based on vocabulary, average word length and average sentence length. The premise of examining a reader for its readability is that longer (or uncommon) words and longer sentences make a piece of writing more difficult to understand. The readability formulas seems to be neglecting to examine the complexity of ideas presented and the pace at which these ideas are presented. Another overlooked variable in readability is how much knowledge the reader is assumed to have according to the difficulty of the text.

Basal readers are also greatly concerned with teaching students how to read. Students learn reading skills by completing exercises in identifying different types of text and sequencing events. While these are excellent activities for

students who are learning to read, the basal program is often criticized for spending too much time on these activities and neglecting to concentrate on the actual comprehension of a piece of text.

Basal readers are widely used because they are easy to use. The readers are designed to develop reading vocabulary and comprehension skills. As a series, the readers are especially easy to use as all that is required is to place the student in the appropriate reader and then follow the teacher's manual in teaching the lessons. Teachers who teach beyond the basal readers have had the most success with the program as the readers build vocabulary and the supplementary activities beyond the readers build interest in reading and knowledge of a wide range of concepts.

4. The Paideia Proposal is an "educational manifesto" produced by the Paideia Group. The proposal advocates equal education for all American children, the extinction of the elective system in high schools and colleges, and uniform educational standards for high school graduation across the country. The proposal seems to be a utopia of public education as it seeks to motivate students

to become continual learners in life for love of learning and the American democracy.

5. Adler, Mortimer. The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto. Collier Macmillan Publishers. 1982. p. 43.

6. Hirsch, E.D. Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. Houghton Mifflin Company. 1987. Vintage Books edition. 1988. p. 92.

7. Hirsch, E.D., Kett, Joseph E., and Trefil, James. The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. Houghton Mifflin Company. 1988. p. 380.

8. An integrated curriculum is a curriculum wherein the subjects are not taught in isolation from each other, but are taught across the content areas. For example, a classroom might be learning about seasons. The narratives they are required to read in literature would contain information on this topic. In addition, the daily time slot for science might teach about temperature or the water cycle. All the content areas contribute to the development of a larger topic.

9. Direct Instruction is a method of instructional delivery that teaches content in small segments to develop a larger concept. It often employs direct repetition from the students via learned signals

that the teacher uses to prompt his/her students to respond. Developed by Englemann and Becker, direct instruction has become widely accepted, especially for teaching lesser able children.

10. Inquiry based instruction is the opposite of direct instruction. It teaches content via questions that lead the learner from that which he already knows to a new concept which stems from the known information. Content is not directly taught in this approach. Students must use their natural abilities as curious learners to discover new concepts. It is also known as "discovery learning".

11. Hirsch, E.D. Ibid. p. 140

12. Hirsch, E.D. Ibid. p. 20

13. Anderson, Richard C. et al. Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C. 1985. p. 27.

14. Hirsch, E.D. Ibid. p. 109.

15. Hirsch, E.D. Ibid. p. 109.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Adler, Mortimer J. The Paideia Proposal Collier MacMillan Publishers. London. 1982.

The Paideia Proposal is an "educational manifesto" produced by the Paideia Group. The proposal advocates equal education for all American children which includes the extinction of the elective system in high schools and colleges and demands that every student be expected to meet the same educational standards for high school graduation. The proposal seems to be a utopia of public education as it advocates that education should motivate students to be continual learners in life on the job, at a trade school or at the university: education should encourage further education and a love of learning. In addition, the reason for education in the minds of the masses ought to be to improve on the character of the individual as he/she contributes to the democratic society. Education is not seen as a means to a good job and good living is not a materially based concept.

This book places Hirsch's ideas for reform in the larger picture of educational reform.

2. Anderson, R.C. et al. Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading. National Institute of Education. Washington, D.C. 1985.

Becoming a Nation of Readers is a well acclaimed book which was an excellent resource from which to base my argument on the need for educational reform.

3. Bloom, Allan. The Closing of the American Mind. Simon & Schuster, Inc. New York. 1987.

The Closing of the American Mind is critical of the abilities of the nation's university freshmen and calls for educational reform that is concerned with mastery of content.

4. Cremin, L.A. The Transformation of the American School: Progressivism in American Education. Knopf Publishers. New York. 1964.

Cremin's book substantiates the argument that American public education turned away from mastery of content and toward educational formalism in the 1960's.

5. Eisner, Elliot. The Educational Imagination 2nd Edition. Macmillan Publshing. New York. 1985. p. 61-86.

This book discusses curriculum goals from five different perspectives: development of cognitive processes, academic rationalism, personal relevance, social adaptation and reconstruction, and curriculum as technology.

6. Eisner, Elliot. "What is Basic in Education?" Cognition and Curriculum. p. 1-9.

This article is an excellent source for locating Hirsch within societal trends. It describes the current state of America and discusses the current trends of nostalgia.

7. Gates, H.L., Jr. 1989. "Whose Canon is it, Anyway?" The New York Times Book Review. October, 1989. p. 1, 44-45.

Gates' review of Bloom's book was useful as I reviewed the book for myself. It represents a liberal review of the book.

8. Hirsch, E.D., Jr. Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston. 1987.

This is the book that the majority of the thesis is based upon. This book has received considerable attention in educational reform and, as I see it, is representative of our national movement to get back-to-basics in education.

9. Hirsch, E.D., Jr., Kett, Joseph F. and Trefil, James. The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston. 1988.

This is the dictionary of terms that E.D. Hirsch outlined in his book. This dictionary is divided into

twenty-three subject areas which provide general definitions of the topics in that area. The definitions put the item into context and give the most critical elements of it.

10. Klingberg, S. 1988. "The Call to Reform Liberal Education: Great Books of 1987" College and Research Libraries, 49:278-283.

Klingberg's article is a conservative review of both Bloom's and Hirsch's books. It summarizes the themes of both books concisely with page references and offers what I think are accurate criticisms of both authors.

11. Powell, Arthur G., Farrar, Eleanor and Cohen, David K. The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston. 1985.

Powell's book outlines the current trend in education and addresses the pros and cons of what Hirsch calls a fragmented curriculum.

12. Shanker, Albert and Futrell, Mary Hatwood. "'A System of Pay, Autonomy, Career Opportunities'"(Text of the Carnegie Report). Education Week. May 21, 1986: 11.

This article is included the actual text of the Carnegie Report which I cited in the text of this thesis. Hirsch also cites this report.

13. University of Oregon. Graduate Teacher Education Programs Draft 2. (Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon, October 1988).

This publication is a guide to the University of Oregon's plan to implement the fifth-year program for teacher education as mandated by the State Board of Higher Education.