

### Cultural Literacy: Analytical Perspective

Professor E.D. Hirsch's program to establish a national standard for cultural literacy in public schools is not elitist as critics claim; rather, it will improve the literacy of all American students. And, it will particularly benefit children of low income, disadvantaged backgrounds. This program is important, too, because it will ensure America's continued position of leadership in a global economy.

Critics charge that Hirsch is an elitist and his program of cultural literacy is designed to benefit the white middle class and not the disadvantaged. I disagree with this charge. Hirsch's concern is that American literacy is decreasing at all levels. He believes that this decrease in literacy has wide-spread, negative implications for America's ability to remain competitive in a world economy. He says, "The complex undertakings of modern life depend on the cooperation of many people with different specialties in different places. Where communications fail, so do the undertakings . . . [top executives] want to know why . . . the effectiveness of business communication has been slipping, to the detriment of our competitiveness in the world" (5). America's work place is made up of many varied cultural groups and to oppress any of them would be detrimental to the entire system.

I believe, in fact, that Hirsch has a particular concern for the impoverished and disadvantaged element of our society. This concern is evident all through his book. For example, he discusses how the *current* educational system keeps blacks and other minorities oppressed because the schools fail to teach the children "background knowledge,"—or, cultural literacy. He says that background information is essential to the learning process. That to not have this knowledge will eventually prevent one from finding adequate employment as adults, thus keeping them at the bottom of the working ladder. He claims that "pupils must possess [background knowledge] to succeed at mature reading tasks ... [If] our children were taught texts with cultural content ... much of the specific knowledge deficit of disadvantaged children could be over-come" (27). Further, he mentions that Professor Orlando Patterson, Harvard historian and sociologist, supports his ideas, and that cultural literacy will be especially important for the poor: "[Professor Patterson] was particularly concerned with the importance for blacks and other minorities of possessing this [background] information, which is essential for improving their social and economic status" (6). Professor Patterson says, "blacks will be condemned in perpetuity to oversimplified, low-level tasks and will never gain their rightful place in controlling the levers of power unless they also acquire literacy in this wider cultural sense" (11).

It is apparent that Hirsch has explored in depth the problem of inner-city illiteracy and educational deficits. He carefully explains how adding cultural knowledge to school curriculum will help the disadvantaged children, in answer to his critics' objections. Indeed, a large portion of his book is devoted to this effort. For the reasons cited, I can't agree that Hirsch is an elitist.

I believe the program Hirsch proposes should be and can be implemented in the nation's school systems. Obviously, such a radical change in the system would require the consent of parents and citizens throughout the country. Achieving this is probably the biggest hurdle. Ideally, such an effort should be done at the national level, but that may be unrealistic. The cost of such an undertaking would no doubt be prohibitive. So, it may be more efficient to convince the citizens in a particular state to implement the program, than to monitor its effects. If successful at this level, it would be easier to institute nationally—or, state-by-state.

Hirsch suggests that a list of terms and phrases that the literate people know should be drawn up and used by educational institutions. I think his suggestions for implementing the list and its corresponding dictionary are feasible and desirable. That is, to "convene a distinguished group of educators and public leaders to develop a model grade-by-grade sequence of core information" (141). Once the concept is sold to the public, I don't see a problem at this point of compiling and instituting the list and its dictionary.

An important feature of this plan is early childhood education. Hirsch says, "Preschool is not too early for starting earnest instruction in literate national culture" (27). This is especially important, he says, for the disadvantaged children. Research with children has shown that a crucial difference in reading performances between disadvantaged and advantaged fifth-graders, is the difference in their cultural or background knowledge. The disadvantaged children have an equal ability to decode and pronounce individual words, but they miss associations in content because they don't possess the background knowledge needed to put the written information in context. It's at this point in their education that they begin to be left behind permanently because reading and learning become increasingly difficult and humiliating. So, giving the disadvantaged children background information early will add significantly to their comprehension of written material.

No one doubts that America's youth is failing to acquire needed literary skills. For years, national reading tests have been telling this story. But to date, schools have not found a way to overcome this trend. It is in America's best interest economically to find a solution and to do so quickly. America's future is in the hands of her children. What they are *not* taught can be more detrimental to our future than what they *are* taught. Hirsch's plan to teach cultural literacy provides the missing information.

Hirsch's plan makes sense. It will help preserve the cultural richness of America's society and will allow the many cultural groups to communicate effectively with one another. It will give the disadvantaged children a way to break the cycle of their poverty. And most importantly, it will give back to America what she has been losing: Her strength in the world market place.