

# Me, My Sons, and E. D. Hirsch

*by Sol Stern*

After reading one of my articles about E. D. Hirsch's education ideas, someone asked me what had led to my interest in Hirsch's work. The assumption behind the question seemed to be that I had embraced Hirsch's theories after a serious intellectual quest. But the truth is more mundane and somewhat personal. I first turned to Hirsch's writing out of desperation because I was baffled by the strange educational practices I witnessed at the famous New York City public school that my sons attended from 1987 to 1997.

My kids' school, PS 87, also known as the William Tecumseh Sherman School, is located on Manhattan's Upper West Side. My wife and I were delighted when our elder son was admitted to this school because it had just been ranked by *Parents* magazine as one of the country's ten best elementary schools—public or private—and the *New York Times* profiled it as one of the few city schools that middle-class parents still clamored to get their kids into.

PS 87 had a reputation for adhering to the “progressive education” philosophy, but this didn't concern me at the time. Though I had been a journalist for over two decades, I had never written about the schools and knew little about the problems of American education. I certainly had no understanding of what progressive education would mean concretely for my children, other than the fact that PS 87 seemed committed to providing a nurturing and less restrictive environment for its students. For example, I immediately noticed that instead of sitting in rows facing the teacher, as I did when I attended the New York City public schools, the children in the early-grade classrooms sat in a circle on a rug and often worked together in groups. I was told that this was the “open classroom” reform, introduced in the 1970s. The new seating arrangement seemed harmless enough; indeed, I thought it was quite charming.

I became an active, involved parent and quickly received a crash course in the implications for learning of PS 87's progressivism. Many of the school's teachers received their training at such citadels of progressive education as Columbia University's Teachers College and the Bank Street College of Education. They were inculcated in the shibboleths of progressive education, such as “teach the child, not the text” and that all children are “natural learners.” Accordingly, the ideal teacher must now be a “guide on the side” instead of a “sage on the stage.”

Many of PS 87's teachers taught writing by a new method called “the writing process,” based on the romantic assumption that children were natural writers waiting to have their inner talents unlocked from the straitjacket of “drill and kill” traditional pedagogy. The program was



championed in NYC by Teachers College's leading progressive educator, Lucy Calkins. Parroting Calkins, our school's teachers assured parents that the traditional focus on sentence structure, proper grammar, and correct spelling had been found to stifle children's imagination. With the writing process, children could now dispense with such strictures. They were encouraged to write in journals about whatever subjects came to their mind, misspellings and all, and told by teachers that the quantity of the writing was more important than the quality. Students would edit one another's journals, with a minimum of guidance from teachers. The teacher would then "publish" each student's work—just like professional writers.

PS 87 had no coherent, grade-by-grade curriculum. Thus my son's thirty-something third-grade teacher (one of the most popular in the school) decided on his own to devote months of classroom time to a project on Japanese culture, which included building a Japanese garden. Each day when my son came home from school, I asked him what he had learned in math. Each day, he happily said the same thing: "We are building the Japanese garden." My wife and I expressed our concern to the teacher about the lack of direct instruction of mathematical procedures such as long division and multiplication, but he reassured us that constructing the Japanese garden required "real life" math skills and that there was nothing to worry about.

But I worried a lot, and even more so when my son moved up to the fourth grade. His new teacher assigned many more "real life" math problems, including one in which students were told to calculate how many Arawaks were killed by Christopher Columbus and his crew in 1492 during their imperial conquest of Hispaniola.

PS 87 seemed increasingly adrift in this way, with no essential texts that each student was expected to master. The most troubling thing I discovered about the school was how little the children were taught about such foundational subjects of our civic culture as the American Revolution, the framing of the Constitution, and the Civil War. I can still vividly recall a conversation with my younger son and several of his classmates when they were in the fourth grade. I innocently had asked the children what, if anything, they knew about the famous Union commander their school was named after. They gave me blank stares. After more inquiry, I realized that not only hadn't the children been taught about the brave soldier who delivered the final blow to the slaveholders' empire, but they knew almost nothing about the Civil War. They weren't even familiar with the terms "the Union" and "the Confederacy."

More disturbing was what PS 87's principal at the time said when I informed him of my conversation with my son and his classmates. "It's important to learn about the Civil War," he granted, "but it's more important to learn how to learn about the Civil War. The state of knowledge is constantly changing, so we have to give children the tools to be able to research these things and, of course, to think critically."



By now, I was looking for a coherent and independent explanation of what was happening in PS 87's classrooms other than the self-serving rationalizations offered by our school's principal. I found it in E. D. Hirsch's first two education books, published during that period. After reading *Cultural Literacy* (1987) and *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (1996), I experienced the eerie feeling that without ever having stepped into our school, Hirsch was accurately describing PS 87's dominant classroom culture. His books provided critical insight into what my sons' principals and teachers were trying to do and why they were doing it. Hirsch convinced me that despite their decent intentions, PS 87's teachers had abandoned common sense in favor of pleasant-sounding instructional fads that were causing more harm than good for the school's children, particularly its minority children.

*Cultural Literacy* became a surprise best seller in part because parents around the country were beginning to ask questions about who was responsible for the lack of academic substance in their children's schools. Hirsch addressed that concern in virtually the opening sentence of the book: "[The] unacceptable failure of our schools has occurred not because our teachers are inept but chiefly because they are compelled to teach a fragmented curriculum based on faulty education theories."

The fragmented curriculum didn't happen by chance or because of professional incompetence. Rather, it was intended, quite deliberately, by the schools of education and thus deeply influenced the instructional practices in schools like the one my sons attended. It wasn't that the education-school professors favored the wrong curriculum, Hirsch insisted, but that they stood for no curriculum at all. Citing romantic theories of child development all the way back to Rousseau, the progressives argued that, with just a little assistance from teachers, children would figure it out as they went along. In progressive education jargon, the children were capable of "constructing their own knowledge."

Even more important, Hirsch showed that the most devastating consequence of progressive education doctrines is that they widened, rather than reduced, the gap in intellectual capital between middle-class children and those from disadvantaged families. "Learning builds cumulatively on learning," he wrote. "By encouraging an early education that is free of 'unnatural' bookish knowledge and of 'inappropriate' pressure to exert hard effort, [progressive education] virtually ensures that children from well-educated homes who happen to be primed with academically relevant background knowledge which they bring with them to school, will learn faster than disadvantaged children who do not bring such knowledge with them and do not receive it at school." Without this background knowledge, which can be provided only by a planned, coherent curriculum, disadvantaged children fall even further behind in the crucial subject of reading comprehension. Thus they are blocked from educating their way out of poverty. In one chapter of *The Schools We Need*, Hirsch suggested that the education reform he was



advocating—a content-rich curriculum—constituted the “new civil rights frontier.” And this was long before politicians of both parties began using that phrase.

Another chapter of *The Schools We Need* is titled “Critique of a Thoughtworld.” It describes how institutions like Teachers College created an “impregnable fortress” of ideas and doctrines, which were then transmitted to future teachers and to the parents who use the public schools. “Like any guild that determines who can and cannot enter a profession,” Hirsch wrote, “the citadel of education has developed powerful techniques for preventing outside interference, not least of which is mastery of slogan.” As Hirsch would soon discover, the ed-school professoriate was not about to accept any outside interference from the academic elitist from the university English department.

Prior to venturing into the education wars, Hirsch had trained in literary studies with the “New Critics” at Yale University, had become a distinguished professor of English literature at the University of Virginia, and had acquired a reputation as one of the nation’s leading scholars and literary critics. (His academic specialty was the Romantic poets.) Even Hirsch could not have anticipated the level of vitriol, even hatred, directed at him when he crossed the border separating the academic universities and their ed-school affiliates and dared critique the education professors for the wrongheaded training they were providing to future teachers. Like the closed thought world that Hirsch had described in his books, the progressive education establishment turned on this interloper, branding him a reactionary, an elitist, and a defender of white privilege—all this merely for suggesting that teachers in the nation’s public schools ought to be offering their students the basic academic content and background knowledge they needed in order to become proficient readers and knowledgeable citizens of our democracy.

Hirsch came under fierce attack by education progressives for his theory of reading comprehension as well as his elitist presumption that a white male college professor should decide what American children should learn. Critics often lumped him together with the three “killer Bs”—(William) Bennett, (Allan) Bloom, and (Saul) Bellow—whom liberals loved to hate at the height of the 1980s culture wars. Because Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* appeared just above *Cultural Literacy* on the best-seller lists for most of 1987, many commentators paired the two writers as conservatives agitating for a return to a more traditional, elitist education.

In 1997, the journal of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the organization representing the nation’s education professors, published an unprecedented attack on Hirsch’s work by a progressive educator named Walter Feinberg. Feinberg’s 8,000-word broadside also unintentionally illuminated what progressives believed about the purpose of American schooling. “Hirsch minimizes a history of racial and gender bias as factors in differential educational and economic achievement,” Feinberg wrote. “He dismisses complex theories of social class



reproduction, and he demotes the importance of pedagogies that encourage the construction and negotiation of meaning across communities of difference. He insists that teachers and the texts are the proper bearers and students the proper recipients of meaning and refuses to understand the importance of meaning as a negotiated product in a multicultural society.”

Since Hirsch supported traditional, content-based education and a rich curriculum, one has to admit that he was guilty as charged. But there’s the rub. In this one paragraph, Professor Feinberg powerfully confirms Hirsch’s description of the fecklessness of the ed schools. When I read this essay, I finally understood exactly what my sons’ teachers at PS 87 were up to. Instead of directly teaching students about the American founding and the Civil War, they were “negotiating meaning across communities of difference.”

Fortunately, Hirsch wasn’t deterred by the education professors’ postmodernist babble and their attacks on him as a racist. He continued exposing the utter lack of empirical and scientific validity to the progressives’ pedagogical principles. Hirsch had spent the better part of the decade since *Cultural Literacy* mastering the findings of neurobiology, cognitive psychology, and psycholinguistics on which teaching methods best promote student learning. The scientific consensus showed that schools could not raise student achievement by letting students construct their own knowledge. The pedagogy that mainstream scientific research supported, Hirsch showed, was direct instruction by knowledgeable teachers who knew how to transmit their knowledge to students—the very opposite of what the progressives promoted. In *The Knowledge Deficit* (2006), Hirsch cited the overwhelming scientific consensus supporting his theory linking the amount of background knowledge acquired by students to their level of achievement in reading comprehension. And he reemphasized that this was the great social-justice issue in American education: that the only way for the schools to narrow the racial achievement gap was to provide a grade-by-grade curriculum, stressing content knowledge.

*The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools* (2010), the most recent of Hirsch’s quartet of education books, deepens his argument that a content-rich curriculum is also essential for citizenship in our ethnically diverse democracy. The Founders relied on the common schools and a common curriculum for teaching the virtues that would keep the new republic intact. They believed that the schools must create virtuous, civic-minded, and knowledgeable citizens. The best way to do that was to teach the same grade-by-grade curriculum to each child. Thomas Jefferson even proposed a common curriculum, so that children’s “memories may here be stored with the most useful facts from Grecian, Roman, European, and American history.” Citing such statements by the Founders, Hirsch writes: “The school would be the institution that would transform future citizens into loyal Americans. It would teach common knowledge, virtues, ideals, language, and commitments.”



Hirsch's description of the Founders' educational views is reverential and elegiac. Well into the nineteenth century, America's leaders believed passionately that the schools' main task was "the making of Americans." He refers here not only to the millions of immigrants arriving throughout the nineteenth century but also to the native-born from different regions and religions, who needed common schools and a knowledge-based curriculum as the means of acculturation into the "common language community" of the new country.

Tragically, the Founders' republican values are not in good hands in the world of education today. Few classroom teachers-in-training learn that the purpose of schooling in America is to create knowledgeable, civic-minded citizens, loyal to the nation's democratic institutions, as Jefferson dreamed. Rather, in their ed-school courses, they are often taught that it is acceptable to use the classroom to undermine those institutions and the Founders' ideals and turn children into champions of "social justice," as defined solely by the education professors.

In reviewing Hirsch's education writings, I was struck by an essay he published in March 1989 in the *New York Review of Books*. The reason this article caught my attention was its title, "The Primal Scene of Education." As my fellow writers know, choosing the title of an article is usually an afterthought, more often than not left to the discretion of the editor. I don't know if Hirsch composed this particular title, but it became one of those rare literary occasions when the title of an article conveyed a meaning and an implication even beyond its content. For Hirsch, the "primal scene of education" was, of course, the classroom. He meant it in two ways. First, it is in the classroom that the progressives' utopian fantasy that children can construct their own knowledge finally meets up with reality. The goal of raising poor children's academic achievement can be achieved only through the direct teaching of content knowledge.

Second, and equally important to Hirsch's project, the classroom must also be viewed as the primal scene, the ultimate test, for all education *reform* schemes. Just two years after he had ventured into the education debates, Hirsch was suggesting that school reformers who merely stressed structural changes and financial incentives within the education system were missing an important element—the fact that all reform schemes must ultimately be judged by whether they produce good instruction by the teachers in the classroom. "The effort to develop a standard sequence of core knowledge is, to put it bluntly, absolutely essential to effective educational reform in the United States," Hirsch wrote. "Amid the other improvements that may occur...the inherent logic of the primal scene of education itself still remains."

In the *NYRB* article, Hirsch recounted his conversations with a group of college deans at an academic conference from whom he "heard a chorus of anecdotes about the declining knowledge and abilities of entering freshmen. American colleges and universities at their best are still among the finest in the world," Hirsch wrote. "But in many of them the educational level of incoming



students is so low that the first and second years of college must be largely devoted to remedial work. In the American school system, it is mainly those who start well who finish well. Business leaders and the general public are coming to recognize that the gravest, most recalcitrant problems of American education can be traced back to secondary and, above all, elementary schooling.”

That was Hirsch’s portrait of American K–12 education almost a quarter-century ago. Remarkably, that grim assessment still rings true today. SAT verbal scores have shown little or no improvement, and, according to the recently released NAEP long-term assessment, “average reading and mathematics scores in 2012 for seventeen-year-olds were not significantly different from scores in the first assessment year [1971].” There have been improvements in reading and math scores in the lower grades on the NAEP tests, but, as Hirsch warned twenty-five years ago, these gains aren’t significant if they disappear in high school and if students entering college or the workforce—the end product of the public school system—still need remediation in reading and writing.

Besides the NAEP and SAT data, there is additional confirmation that graduating seniors know very little these days. It comes from the countless reports by universities about the extent of remediation needed by entering freshmen, as well as from books like Mark Bauerlein’s *The Dumbest Generation*. Just before she did a(nother) 180-degree turn and decided that U.S. students were doing *well* on the NAEP, Diane Ravitch also called attention to the academic stagnation in K–12 education. “Many reports and surveys have demonstrated that large numbers of young people leave school knowing little or nothing about history, literature, foreign languages, the arts, geography, civics or science,” she wrote in *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (2010).

It is tempting to speculate how different it might have been if more attention had been paid by the K–12 education establishment and the school reform movement to Hirsch’s plea for a rich content-based curriculum. Unfortunately, school districts across the country largely ignored Hirsch’s proposed curriculum. Moreover, the nation’s school reform movement put almost all its efforts and resources into trying to introduce market incentives and competition into the school systems and ignored the curriculum issue. And in the ed schools, future classroom teachers must still search far and wide in their assigned course syllabi to find a single reference to Hirsch’s work—and yet they are required to read texts by radical education thinkers such as Paulo Freire, Jonathan Kozol, and ex-Weatherman Bill Ayers. (Freire’s Marxist tract, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has sold more than a million copies, mostly in ed-school courses.)

Yet Hirsch never lost his faith that in this democratic republic, ideas do matter and that good ideas eventually triumph over bad ideas. Hirsch is an American original and an incurable



optimist. He truly believes in the old American aphorism that if you build a better mousetrap, the world will come to your door. In the 1989 *NYRB* article, he wrote:

*When I am feeling hopeful, I imagine to myself how things might change. A few schools scattered over the country will hold their pupils accountable for acquiring an agreed-upon minimum core of knowledge grade by grade. Because classroom work in such schools will be more effective and interesting for their pupils, children will feel more curious and eager. Their abilities to speak, write, and learn will improve noticeably. Students from such schools will make significantly higher scores on standardized tests of scholastic aptitude and achievement. Neighboring schools will observe the results, and, not wishing to be outshone, will follow the lead. District and state offices will find it convenient not to resist these successful undertakings. Even the education establishment itself may in time begin to say in its hundreds of conferences and dozens of journals, which are now vigorously resisting such changes, “We knew it all the time, that was what we were trying to tell you.”*

That’s what Hirsch set out to do twenty-five years ago. With the royalties from his best-selling *Cultural Literacy*, Hirsch founded the Core Knowledge Foundation in his hometown of Charlottesville, Virginia. The foundation, in turn, created a knowledge-based curriculum for elementary schools, based on Hirsch’s principles. It was then able to establish a national network of Core Knowledge schools, both charters and public schools. The network now includes nearly 1,000 Core Knowledge-affiliated schools. These schools have become the “thousand points of light” that Hirsch hoped would eventually spread the news to teachers and parents that a content-rich curriculum works better than the non-curriculum favored by progressive educators.

Though Hirsch was a liberal Democrat, he received early support for the Core Knowledge project from influential education conservatives like William Bennett, Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Diane Ravitch (at least, until she recently decided that the progressives were right after all). Another influential supporter was Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers. Shanker frequently used his weekly (paid) column in the *New York Times* to extol the Core Knowledge approach to instruction, and the AFT’s quarterly magazine, *American Educator*, frequently published Hirsch’s work. That meant that the million teachers who were members of the AFT had the access to Hirsch’s ideas that had been denied to them in their education-school courses.

The most important breakthrough for Hirsch’s ideas in the public schools occurred in 2009, when Joel Klein, chancellor of the 1.1 million-student New York City school system did something extremely rare for a public official. He admitted that he might have been wrong in choosing schools’ literacy programs from Teachers College. He then created a three-year pilot



program in which ten city elementary schools would use the Core Knowledge early-childhood literacy program. The Core Knowledge schools were matched with ten demographically similar schools using the “balanced literacy” reading program, another invention of Teachers College’s Lucy Calkins that most city schools had been using up till then. The study confirmed that classrooms using Core Knowledge far outperformed those using the Teachers College balanced literacy program. It wasn’t exactly the “gold standard” random assignment study that education researchers prefer, but a *New York Times* reporter essentially endorsed Hirsch’s reading program when she wrote that the children using Core Knowledge “outperformed those at other schools that used methods that have been encouraged since the Bloomberg administration’s early days.”

At about the same time that the results of the New York City pilot study were announced, the final draft of the Common Core State Standards was released and eventually adopted by forty-six states and the District of Columbia. There is no mention of Hirsch or the Core Knowledge curriculum in the 220-page English language arts section of the standards, but it still represents the most consequential vindication yet of Hirsch’s vision.

The text of the Common Core makes clear that the standards do not by themselves specify a particular curriculum; they merely state what children should know at the end of each grade level and the skills that they must acquire to stay on course toward college or career readiness. But here’s what the Common Core does say about the need for a coherent curriculum: “While the Standards make references to some particular forms of content, including mythology, foundational U.S. documents, and Shakespeare, they do not—indeed, cannot—enumerate all or even most of the content that students should learn. The Standards must therefore be complemented by a well-developed, *content-rich curriculum* consistent with the expectations laid out in this document.”

My colleague Robert Pondiscio says that these are the most important fifty-seven words in education reform since the publication of the *Nation at Risk* report in 1983. I agree with him. Until the Common Core, there was little chance for Hirsch and his supporters to convince education schools and school districts that the key to narrowing the achievement gap is a rich curriculum that requires teachers to transmit content knowledge to their students. Now, with the adoption of the Common Core by the states and their commitment to complement the standards with “a well-developed, *content-rich curriculum*,” there is an opening to do just that.

New York, the first state to adopt the standards, immediately chose the Core Knowledge Foundation to create the English language arts curriculum for grades pre-K–2. These curriculum materials are posted on the state education department’s website and are available for free to every school in the state (indeed for any school in the country). After a quarter-century of neglect, this is a redemptive moment for E. D. Hirsch. It’s also a great opportunity for PS 87’s teachers to relearn what they should be doing in the classroom, the primal scene of education.