TEACHING KNOWLEDGE:
A New Paradigm and Its Discontents

Review of *The Knowledge Deficit*, by E. D. Hirsch

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I

The fundamental point of *The Knowledge Deficit*, E. D. Hirsch's new book on the teaching of reading, is succinctly conveyed by a 1989 educational experiment in which a group of students with high reading scores, especially selected for their lack of interest in baseball, was tested against a group of low-scoring students, who were avid baseball fans. The two groups were tested for comprehension of a passage--on baseball. The reader can no doubt guess which group got the higher scores that time.

In *The Knowledge Deficit*, Hirsch recounts this experiment and draws on the work of reading researchers and theorists to construct a convincing case for the central importance of possessing "background knowledge," knowledge not explicitly presented in a text, in order to comprehend it. Reading comprehension matters greatly because, according to both common sense and statistical findings cited by Hirsch, it reliably correlates with general academic achievement and with success after school. Currently, American students do not rank high in international comparisons of reading proficiency, and, what is worse, as Hirsch documents, is that the longer they are in school the lower the ranking drops, to a depressing fifteenth out of twenty-seven nations by the tenth grade. The scores get worse after the early grades as the students are increasingly tested for comprehension and not just for "decoding," the ability to translate written marks into words.

"We need to see the reading comprehension problem," Hirsch writes, "for what it primarily is—a knowledge problem." Schooling, according to Hirsch, must supply our students with the broad knowledge—much less of baseball than of history, science, literature, and other traditional subjects—that

is requisite for understanding books, articles, and other communications addressed to the general literate public. This broad knowledge of words and of the world that authors take for granted in the reader, and that writers and speakers need to possess to be able to contribute to public discourse, is also what standardized reading tests in fact test for, Hirsch maintains, since these typically consist of passages on a variety of topics, undisclosed until testing time, for which only a good general education can "prep" the student. In or out of the exam room or the research lab, there is no such thing as reading comprehension without prior knowledge of a text's vocabulary (90% of it is the estimated minimum) and its references, and no effective education that does not impart a wide range of specific knowledge.

Readers of Hirsch's earlier work will recognize that the body of enabling knowledge he is referring to in *The Knowledge Deficit*, demarcated not by ideal criteria but by the actual intellectual demands of a given culture, is nothing other than the "cultural literacy" that provided the title for Hirsch's already classic 1987 work, and which he has ever since dedicated himself to elaborating and advocating in books, articles, and curricular projects carried out through Hirsch's Core Knowledge Foundation. (Disclosure: the author of this review is currently involved in a CKF-Shimer College collaboration to develop a graduate curriculum for K-8 teachers.)

II

That in order to read competently we must already know a great deal of what a text is about, and that we must have a broad base of knowledge to be functionally literate, is easily understood on the basis of everyday experience. Without background knowledge of the current state of American education, one might suppose that *The Knowledge Deficit* belabors the obvious. But once into the book we learn that in American schools the teaching of reading consists mostly of instruction in decoding, also called "sounding out," and in "reading strategies" such as looking for the main idea, notwithstanding measurements showing that reading strategy instruction stops yielding improved comprehension after the first few lessons. Hirsch draws an analogy of the inadequacy of technique-oriented reading instruction to efforts to build Russian-English translating computers by means of algorithms corresponding to human

language rules: the automatons stay dumb because they lack the myriad items of specific information that human brains carry around. We also learn that the federal No Child Left Behind Act, intended to improve education for all students in the United States and to narrow demographic achievement gaps, has not reduced the knowledge deficit. The Act has led states to mandate at least 90 minutes of reading instruction every school day, but, as Hirsch explains, the additional time spent on reading techniques has been at the expense of classes in geography, history, and the like, so that a major consequence of the law has been to minimize school time spent on subject matter--what you really need to understand written or spoken public discourse.

It soon becomes clear that *The Knowledge Deficit* is not so much a critique of methods of reading instruction per se, but rather a brief for confining reading instruction to what Hirsch considers its proper place in the school-day and largely replacing it with a knowledge-intensive cultural literacy curriculum. Such is the curriculum, called the "Core Knowledge Sequence," that a group of scholars and teachers led by Hirsch painstakingly compiled and sequenced in the late 80's. Three independent studies, one of them summarized in *The Knowledge Deficit*, as well as scores on state-mandated tests, do show above-average achievement in reading and other academic skills by students in schools that use the Core Knowledge curriculum.

III

If it is plain, as well as corroborated by research and metrics, that the ability to voice what is written is only the starting point for reading comprehension, and that it is difficult to find the main idea of a passage without knowing what it's about, how can it be that American schools, unlike those of nations with more effective education systems, are so excessively and wrong-headedly focused on teaching reading as a merely formal, abstract skill? For Hirsch, the underlying cause of the illusion that decoding and reading strategies are the way to prepare students for tests that in fact require general knowledge continues to be the one he identified in *Cultural Literacy* and in the more recent *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them* (1996). The nemesis of the teaching of knowledge is the Progressive educational establishment, which rose to power in the United States after John Dewey founded the

Teachers' College at Columbia University, and whose orthodoxies Hirsch traces to the naïve Romanticism of 19th-Century America.

Hirsch attributes the knowledge deficit and the resistance to correcting it to two Progressivist ideas in particular--"a kind of theology"-- which he calls "formalism," and "naturalism." He defines "formalism" as the notion that "what counts in education is not the learning of things but rather learning how to learn." Formalism leads to such Progressive ed slogans as "It's how to think, not what to think," to attention to "process, not product," and entails derogation of domain-specific knowledge as inessential and rapidly superseded, of facts as "mere" facts, and of acquiring them as "rote learning." Accordingly, formalist thinking privileges the teaching of supposedly general abilities like decoding and reading strategies.

"Naturalism" is the older idea that "learning can and should be natural and that any unnatural or artificial approach to school learning should be rejected or deemphasized," and deplored as "the stuffing of children's minds with dead, inert information." The "naturalist" constellation of ideas, one might add, underlies familiar Progressivist tenets like "Teach the child, not the subject" (which Dewey himself regarded as simplistic) and supports more recent phraseology such as "personal growth," and "finding your own voice."

Hirsch has deconstructed both naturalism and formalism in previous work, but in *The Knowledge Deficit* the attempt to make the former share blame with the latter for the failure of reading instruction is not quite on target. After all, decoding or "sounding out" is not so different from classroom practices that Progressive educators anathematize, in the name of natural learning, as "drill and kill." In fact. Hirsch recognizes that decoding instruction, which is both appropriate and effective in the early grades, now prevails in American schools largely because its proponents—Marilyn Jager Adams, Jeanne Chall, and others to whom Hirsch pays homage--discredited the truly naturalistic "whole language" approach.

However, if the over-emphasis on decoding and strategies cannot be directly attributed to naturalistic thinking, neither can it be said that Hirsch's view that they should be mostly replaced by

instruction in established knowledge and his skepticism about general skills is congenial to Progressive educational thought. Progressive education is "child-centered" or "student-centered," as is often said by both its proponents and its critics. Its orientation is reflected in a Bank Street College of Education statement on reading pedagogy Hirsch quotes:

> Beginning readers, too, need to learn to use their own background knowledge. Helping them activate and extend this knowledge and selecting texts that build on what they already know or understand about their world supports their attempts to make sense of what they are reading.

Hirsch comments, "It is highly inconvenient to this doctrine that research has shown a body of specific background knowledge to be necessary for reading proficiency . . . ." Progressive education not only puts the student center-stage but also seeks to restrict the role of the curriculum developer, the lesson planner, and the teacher–often renamed "facilitator"—so as to let students naturally learn "hands-on" by themselves as much as possible, letting them determine what the class talks about as far as possible, and without a too conspicuous supervision by authority. This is all relatively easy for teachers to go along with as long as development of skills and abilities is the objective, a lot of practice by the students themselves goes on, and the teacher's role is essentially to activate "what they already know." But it is much harder when it comes to the transmission of facts, terms, and concepts, which, furthermore, have not been selected with attention to what pupils may want to talk about in class. The kind of schooling Hirsch has in mind quite inevitably and visibly casts the teacher as authoritative purveyor of knowledge. The markedly hierarchical teacher-student relation that follows from stressing the transmission of content is hard to accept not just for Progressive educators or for Romantics but also for postmodernists, feminists, and the gamut of cultural formations that bloomed in "The 60's," all of which have powerfully influenced education in the United States.

IV

Hirsch's affirmation of knowledge-intensive, teacher-controlled education amounts to a paradigm shift in the education world, though it is also a return to old-fashioned practices, and can also be seen,

from a hostile standpoint, as reactionary. As might be expected, Hirsch draws a great deal of flak (for an example of the worst that Hirsch has to put up with, see the blog review of *The Knowledge Deficit* by Bill Ayers, of Weather Underground fame, at billayers.blogspot.com). The most common criticism, that Hirsch is an apostle of ethno-centricity, of curricular dominance by "dwg's" ("dead white guys"), is also the charge that is most easily countered. Perusal of the Core Knowledge curriculum reveals that eighteen of the 81 major topics (excluding topics such as "Spatial Sense" and "The Seven Continents") in the History and Visual Arts subsequences pertain entirely to cultures and civilizations other than the West. The proportion of personages who are not "dwg's" in the Sequence is hard to quantify, but it is anecdotally comparable to that of courses and curricula that seem to escape charges of Euro-centrism. And it is noteworthy that the multi-cultural offerings in the Hirsch-Core Knowledge curriculum are distinguished no less than the Euro-centric ones by richness of specific content. As Elizabeth Tometich, a novice teacher, recently put it at a Core Knowledge national conference:

> I learned about Native Americans when I presented Kindergarten History and Geography. Granted, I had already been trained in how to be tolerant, pluralistic, and to embrace other cultures. I had been told to celebrate Native Americans and to make sure I taught students about them. I don't know how they wanted me to do this since all I knew about Native Americans was that they lived in tepees and hunted buffalo. . . . Learning [from Core Knowledge teaching materials] is so much richer than multiculturalism or salutes to diversity. Respect comes from knowing, not from having a week of celebration.

Hirsch's multi-cultural curriculum follows logically from his educational principles. Cultural literacy, in contemporary culture, requires that readers know about historically bypassed groups and persons that are by now common counters in public discourse. But this rationale is different from the more political one that has informed multi-cultural studies over the last decades: to bolster the standing and self-perception of various suppressed or marginalized "identities." For Hirsch the way to really help minority students is not identity politics but greater integration into the existing culture. Teaching focused on correcting the knowledge deficit, Hirsch argues, would be especially beneficial to disadvantaged children. The gap in reading and general academic achievement between them and advantaged students,

which, like the international gap, widens as schooling proceeds, can be narrowed, as data on French minority pupils shows, by knowledge-intensive education:

> Breadth of knowledge is the single factor within human control that contributes most to academic achievement and general cognitive competence. In contradiction to the theory of social determinism, breadth of knowledge is a far greater factor in achievement than socioeconomic status. The positive correlation between achieved ability and socioeconomic status is only half the correlation between achieved ability and the possession of general information. . . . This little-known and quite momentous fact means that imparting knowledge to all children is the single most effective way to narrow the competence gap between demographic groups through schooling.

One does not, however, have to be a political multiculturalist, a victim of ed school indoctrination, or a child of the '60s to have misgivings about a knowledge-transmission, teacher-centered—"sage on the stage"--model of education. Its critique did not originate at Columbia Teachers' College or even in the Romanticism of Rousseau's *Emile*, which Hirsch singled out as a kind of lapsarian sin in *The Schools We Need.* Both "naturalism" and "formalism" are inseminated in the most ancient and most famous of passages in philosophy of education. In the *Meno*, Socrates teaches what we would now call a demonstration class in which he gets an illiterate slave boy to find the answer to a geometrical problem, without imparting any knowledge on him and only, as Socrates underscores, by asking him questions. The philosopher attributes the boy's achievement to "recollection," not of lessons taught to him, but of a knowledge that we are all born with, which is elsewhere in the Platonic corpus spoken of as knowledge of "Forms." Indeed, the main stream of Western educational philosophy—including such "Great Books" authors as Augustine, Erasmus, and Montaigne—can, for better or worse, be regarded as "Progressive," in the sense that it has kept looking for ways to minimize teaching in the form of a one-way transmission of material; to draw as much as possible on the "recollection", "experience," or "natural understanding" of students; and, in short, to get them to educate themselves as far as possible. The teacher, wrote Erasmus, "will also in a sense become a boy again that he may draw the pupil to himself."

Erasmus, Montaigne, and other pre-modern writers on education challenged what has been the default assumption about the young until surprisingly recently, that they are simply imperfect beings who must be first be tightly swaddled---a practice that horrified Rousseau—and subsequently tormented into

learning their lessons by Dickensian schoolmasters unsparing of the cane. Now, of course, the defaults have changed. In the United States, the disciples of Dewey succeeded in making the still-embattled Progressive thinking he had inherited the only show in town in the Teachers' Colleges, where it congealed into orthodoxy, and was thereafter radicalized into Neo-Progressivism in the wake of the 60's (for a full account see Diane Ravitch's *Left Back*). It may be taken as universal law that any discourse, however intelligent at its origin, will, if it goes unchallenged long enough, eventually generate fatuous versions of itself. Thus were begotten such over-the-top student-centric phenomena as radical schools where children were taught nothing they did not ask to be taught; classrooms where protection of the pupils' "self-esteem" strictly regulates the teacher's presentation of knowledge, which could otherwise make them feel ignorant; students who are offended by Socratic questioning and denounce it as manipulation; and apprentice teachers who say things like "I liked how she didn't correct the students" (quoted by Heather McDonald in *City Journal*).

But these and other Progressive-fundamentalist excesses do not invalidate the precepts of the classic educationists, or of Dewey, or Piaget, and it's common-sense, at least since the days of Mr. Murdstone, that students of all ages should be enlisted in their education. Hirsch does not deny any of this, but neither does he address, or at least directly address, the issue that seems inescapable if one is proposing a return to a teacher-directed, knowledge-transmission model, and that is the issue of autonomous learning. And it is not self-evident how in Hirsch's kind of classroom children can be more than passive recipients of information. Can kids really like learning, or learn at all, when they are not, as the Progressive adage has it, "learning to do by doing"? The short answer would be to point, going outside of Hirsch's text, to the widely attested enthusiasm of children in Core Knowledge classrooms. More theoretically, it could be said on Hirsch's behalf that the problem of student collaboration and buy-in need not be approached from a Progressive standpoint, that is, with the assumption that education is force-feeding unless power relations between teachers and students are leveled. As Hannah Arendt and Michael Oakeshott had to remind us, in all education, training, and schooling there is, ineluctably, a passing on of information by the elder generations to what the Greeks called "the new ones," and the

hierarchical nature of this intergenerational transaction can at best (or worst) be disguised or evaded. From the perspective of what Hirsch writes, the way to respect kids and get them to like school, without evading the responsibility to lead them (implied etymologically by the word "educate"), is to appeal to their curiosity. In particular, schools might take up one of Hirsch's major recommendations in *The Knowledge Deficit*. He proposes, not for the first time, that vapid "Dick and Jane"-style readers be shelved as soon as students are competent decoders, and that they move on, as the Core Knowledge Sequence does, to fare such as Norse Myths, Eskimo songs, and historical accounts, in other words, to texts that actually have something to say to students about the world and human existence (which, Hirsch recommends, should be read aloud to them even before they're good at decoding). It's interesting that in American education the affirmation of students' entitlement to "respect" and "empowerment" has proceeded apace with the dumbing down of what they're given to read (and, what comes to the same thing, the censoring of controversial content out of textbooks).

V

Difficulties in embracing Hirsch's ideas also arise from his repudiation of "formalism." To be fair, Hirsch considerably moderates his critique of it in an appendix to *The Knowledge Deficit.* But before we reach the last three pages of the book, he often seems to oppose the teaching of any formal or abstract way of processing knowledge, anything aimed at "learning to learn," or anything that smacks of shortcut to the patient accumulation of knowledge. "Reading and critical thinking," he writes,

> . . . are completely dependent on factual knowledge . . . they are not content-independent, formal skills at all but are always based on concrete, relevant knowledge and cannot be exercised apart from what psychologists call "domain-specific" knowledge. The only thing that transforms reading skill and critical thinking skill into general all-purpose abilities is a person's possession of general, all-purpose knowledge.

The heavy salting of the passage with "completely," "at all," "always," and "only" seems like going too far. To be sure, "critical thinking," and its cognates denoting content-independent intellectual abilities--"problem-solving skills," "higher-order skills," "metacognition,"--have come to cover, and cover up, a

multitude of classroom sins. When Hirsch says (in a speech), “The only way to learn how to learn is to learn,” it’s one of those it’s-about-time-somebody-came-out-and-said-that statements. Like Hirsch’s work in general, it is powerfully counterdiscursive and thrusts at complacency. But what can such a statement mean that will stand up to scrutiny? True, no amount of learning “how” to think is going to make it possible for anyone to say something intelligent about something he/she knows nothing about, but it is certainly possible to make an unintelligible, unconvincing, or downright stupid statement, in spite of possessing abundant information, because one has neglected to clarify terms, provide support, or consider objections—which are formal, general procedures typically taught as “critical thinking.” Hirsch is right when he observes that a student who knows about hiking, for example, doesn’t need reading strategies to get the main idea in a passage on hiking. But what about passages for which readers do not have the relevant background knowledge? No acquired core of knowledge, however well chosen, however indispensable, can spare the reader from eventually having to deal with such passages, in college or elsewhere. On such occasions, meta-reading handbooks such as Mortimer Adler’s *How to Read A Book* can come in handy. The theoretical basis for a wholesale elimination of instruction in metacognitive skills would have to be a resurrection of the epistemology of John Locke in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, according to which “ideas” or units of knowledge clump together by themselves, and that is sufficient for the progress of understanding. Hirsch’s anti-formalist analogy of computers with sophisticated algorithms that are nevertheless inept because they lack specific knowledge can be turned against him. A program without data is useless, but data without a program is just as useless. Educators should take Hirsch’s exposition of the value of domain-specific knowledge to heart, but without forgetting that schooling must also prepare students to deal with texts for which they will *not* have sufficient “background knowledge,” and to assess ideas that may be outside the bounds of even the broadest cultural literacy. Otherwise they will revert to a narrowness symmetrical to formalism: teaching what but not how to think.

For those who are not dismissive of modern and postmodern thought, knowledge is itself an issue. Hirsch keeps invoking “knowledge,” in all his work on education, so that the word, evaded in Neo-

Progressive discourse, begins to function as Hirsch's trademark along with "Cultural Literacy." But one will look in vain for signs that he recognizes that "knowledge" is a philosophically contested term—a recognition that it would seem is nowadays demanded by cultural literacy itself, since even the hard sciences have embraced uncertainty. Thus Hirsch is susceptible to the kind of interrogation that John Dewey directed against Robert Maynard Hutchins in journal exchanges between them in the 1930's. Today, as the reader keeps coming across "knowledge" in Hirsch's text, the elephant on the page is the set of theses upheld by Michel Foucault (as misunderstood and maligned by conservatives as Hirsch by liberals) and other Postmodernists: that knowledge claims are always problematic, that knowledge, or knowledges, emerge within history and are therefore always *somebody's* knowledge, that knowledges, or discourses, being symbiotic with institutions, necessarily promote some interests and displace others. If all this is so--and Nietszche could be brought in for support—then there is no transcendent or transhistorical touchstone for deciding what should be taught to "the new ones," and advocates of this or that course of studies should candidly declare their partisanship, or take the position that education is not philosophy—in the word's original sense of "love of wisdom"--but only a mechanism for integration into a given society.

This last conception closely approximates, or is identical with, Hirsch's view of education and its purpose. His constant invocations of "knowledge" can mislead one into supposing he is an epistemological absolutist or idealist, but Hirsch is as distant from the idealism of Hutchins as Dewey was, and no less antipathetic to those who would turn the classroom into a nursery of revolutionary cadrés. Hutchins believed that education should be a pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and wanted it to have no truck, at least till grad school, with professional preparation. Paolo Freire, the Brazilian exponent of liberation pedagogy, much read and revered by Progressives in the United States, derided education for social integration by analogizing it to a "banking" system in which the bits of knowledge the student acquires are like "deposits" into an account that will eventually purchase a successful position in society. Hirsch, in *The Schools We Need*, substituted "cultural literacy," the phrase that brought him renown, with "cultural capital," in what seems like a pointed and deliberate allusion to Freire. But the

earlier term, “cultural literacy,” if unpacked, already implies a more modest and conservative, and also more relativistic, idea of what schooling is supposed to provide than the “Great Books” and “Great Ideas” nomenclature of liberal educators like Hutchins and Adler. Hirsch claims nothing more than that cultural literacy is the knowledge requisite for public participation in a speech community or society. His main argument for it is not primarily philosophical or theoretical, but rather that kids need all that knowledge to have real power in our culture, and that minority kids need it all the more. Hirsch is a lower-case “p” progressive.

VI

Whatever objections and qualms capital “p” Progressives, Neo-Progressives, multi-culturalists, revolutionaries, and champions of Hutchins-inspired liberal education may have about what Hirsch is saying will surely come to a head when they approach the end of *The Knowledge Deficit* and discover, in a section appropriately entitled “Thinking the Unthinkable,” that Hirsch is not only proposing knowledge-intensive, teacher-controlled, pragmatically-oriented schooling, but means to have it instituted as a---gasp!—national K-8 curriculum. Even among readers sympathetic to Hirsch’s ideas the prospect of a nation-wide uniform grade-school education, though long in effect in France and other countries, will immediately dredge up nightmare scenarios of totalitarian indoctrination into ideological conformity. Since Hirsch protests the “monolithic” thinking in America’s schools of education, and has long had the part of the voice crying in the wilderness, it may be surmised that even he cannot be altogether comfortable with the idea of a single national system of education.

Hirsch’s argument for a national curriculum is, again, pragmatic and in the register of what will best serve students when they become full citizens and join the workforce, He contends that in a society that is increasingly fragmented as well as increasingly mobile, the tradition of state and district control of schools severely undermines education. The pernicious effect of vague and incoherent local learning standards is compounded when youngsters are moved around from district to district and school to school—which, as Hirsch documents, happens more frequently among the poor. The result is both

repetitions of subject matter and gaps, loss of any semblance of sequenced learning, missed courses and even terms, and time wasted in mere initiation of the student into different school systems.

Hirsch realizes that "localism," as he calls it, is supported in both red and blue states. Conservatives, for instance, may fear "that a government curriculum would force-feed children 'abominations' like *Heather Has Two Mommies*." He is sensitive enough to the concerns of conservatives and liberals to note that what he has in mind would entail only "between 40 and 60 percent" common content (current Core Knowledge schools have considerable curricular leeway). He rightly points out that localism does not by any means prevent indoctrination, political or religious, of students by individual schools and teachers, and adds that debate over what is to be included in a curriculum would actually be more robust if carried out openly on a national scale. He reassures us that when he and his colleagues developed the Core Knowledge Sequence they pondered not only "When [in which grade] shall we teach the *Mayflower* ?" but also "Shall we teach the *Mayflower* at all?" Most important, Hirsch explains that the criterion for inclusion in the national curriculum would simply be, as for the Core Knowledge curriculum, whether an item of knowledge can be regarded as "taken for granted in talk and writing addressed to a general literate audience," on the basis of as objective an assessment of its usage as possible.

Hirsch's postulation of an objective and ideologically innocent criterion for determining whether something should be taught recalls an article written by the social theorist Max Weber early in the last century. Weber urged his colleagues to carefully distinguish, when lecturing to students, between material properly in the domain of political and social science, and their private opinions. By now it is difficult to look back on Weber's prescription for preventing the inculcation of mere opinion on students without thinking it naïve, or to believe that education for cultural literacy or any kind of education can escape fostering some politically consequential values at the expense of others. True, in postmodernist arguments that objectivity is impossible, it is often forgotten that at least making an effort toward objectivity makes a great deal of difference. But there's no way around it that by collectively committing themselves to a particular brand of education, Americans would be foreclosing at least some of their

possible futures. Will teachers, parents, legislators, and citizens countenance a nationally controlled school system based on an educational philosophy they may not like, that has the potential of turning out generations of dangerously similar minds, and that can only be challenged with access to the national forum--if it can be shown that the alternative is worse for the kids?

In the final analysis, Hirsch's case in *The Knowledge Deficit*, as in earlier books, rests on recalling educators to a responsibility that none of them, however much they may want present-day America to change, can ignore with a clear conscience: the responsibility to prepare the young to deal effectively with the social world that is already here and awaiting them, to teach them literacy--in the Hirschian or the narrow sense--to help them "make it." "The culture-changing idealists," Hirsch writes, "have oversimplified how the job of changing the culture can best be done, and have placed the burden of their ideals on the backs of disadvantaged children." Before Hirsch, Columbia sociologist Amitai Etzioni called into question the ethics of attempting to turn schools into instruments of social change and in effect using children as subjects in utopian experiments. But even if one takes the view that, for the common good, tomorrow's better society must get started in today's schoolroom, there doesn't seem to be much chance of children maturing into an effective vanguard of transformation if they don't learn enough to comprehend newspaper and magazine articles. As the more thoughtful student revolutionaries used to say in the 60's, "You can't fight capitalism if you don't know what capitalism is." For some time, the American system of education has not been doing a very good job of teaching what capitalism and many other things are. Some will see Hirsch's work and proposals as a reactionary move to take control of the schools and achieve victory in the culture wars. Others will conclude that if the current system produces minds that are not empowered but confused and ignorant, while dooming the disadvantaged to poverty and failure, then the victory would be just.