CULTURAL LITERACY AND TESTING

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Recently a student in an American high school was asked on a test who Socrates was. He answered that Socrates was an Indian chief. Whether this incident is apocryphal is difficult to say. It does have the ring of authenticity: One can imagine the hapless student, in desperate search for an answer, associating Socrates with Seneca, the ancient Roman philosopher and writer, then connecting Seneca to the Indian tribe of the same name.[1] In any case the story is a favorite of former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education Chester E. Finn, Jr., and has been used repeatedly to illustrate the cultural illiteracy of American students and to dramatize the urgency of restoring the nation's cultural knowledge. In fact, a formidable national reform movement has developed, aimed at improving the teaching of culture.

These ideas about public education, if carried forward, have strong implications for the school curriculum at both the elementary and secondary levels and for the content of standardized achievement tests at all levels. That is, both the content of what is now taught and tested would be changed quite substantially if the schools were to focus on cultural literacy. In this paper we will explore the core ideas of cultural literacy as expounded by major proponents of the movement, with a view to assessing the merit of these ideas and ultimately what they might mean for achievement testing.

Let us admit from the beginning that we are in favor of teaching more humanities content in the schools—myths, stories, history, literature—and of employing concepts and methods of investigation derived from the humanities in areas of social concern, pursuing what has been called "mixed genres" (Geertz, 1980; cf. House, 1979; 1982). Although we are professional educators, our own undergraduate training was in the liberal arts—English, Russian history, and psychology—two of us graduating Phi Beta Kappa from highly regarded universities. Having said that, however, does not mean we necessarily endorse all the ideas espoused by cultural literacy proponents. We hope, rather, to examine rigorously the main ideas of the movement and to assess their implications, as we were taught to do.

The phrase "cultural literacy" was popularized by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. in his book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, a 1987 best-seller which sold more than 200,000 copies in hardback. The book has been lauded by top government officials as critical to the future of American education and lambasted by scholars as "educational trivial pursuit." In 1988 Hirsch published a sequel, *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, at a development cost of $500,000, a promotion budget of $200,000, and an initial printing of 200,000 (McDowell, 1988). His organization, the Foundation for Cultural Literacy, also has been developing special tests (*New York Times*, July 5, 1988).

Another highly influential book about cultural literacy, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987) sold more than 650,000 hardback copies, a phenomenal number, and Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn Jr.'s *What Do Our 17-Year Olds Know?* (1987) has also enjoyed popular success. All of these books have been published by trade rather than academic publishers, and all have received considerable media attention. It is safe to say that a noteworthy educational reform movement is in progress.

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[1] The Seneca were the largest tribe of the Iroquois confederacy, and the term Seneca is derived from *Sennecaas* (pl.) in turn derived from the Mohegan *A'Sinnida*, a translation of the Iroquois *Oneniute* meaning "people of the outstanding stone." The derivation of this term is an interesting reflection of the blending of cultures, classic, non-Western, and contemporary, that lies at the heart of the dispute about cultural literacy.

Although all of these authors advocate cultural literacy, their views are rather different when examined in detail. In this paper we shall focus primarily on the ideas of E.D. Hirsch, Jr., the intellectual founder of the movement, and Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., who have been especially active in developing tests. Allan Bloom's work, while interestingly different from the others, is focused upon higher education, and for the sake of space we shall forgo an analysis.

The Cultural Literacy Movement

E.D. Hirsch, Jr., an English professor at the University of Virginia and the author of several highly regarded scholarly works, has spent the past ten years formulating his views as to the causes of the national decline in literacy, his efforts funded in part by the Exxon Education Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, especially when William Bennett was president. Hirsch's first essay on the topic was published in the *The American Scholar*, the Phi Beta Kappa journal, in 1983. There he attributed the long decline of national test scores to cultural fragmentation, a morass he called upon the schools to ameliorate through curriculum revision aimed at developing a coherent, shared body of knowledge. In the beginning Hirsch was vague about prescribing the school curriculum, believing that the curriculum can "be vague enough to leave plenty of room for local choice regarding what shall be studied in detail, and what things shall be touched on just far enough to get us by" (p. 166). This lack of specification, he thought, permitted a compromise between prescription and pluralism.

In this first article Hirsch seemed aware of the political undertones of his message: "The big political question is whether we want a broadly literate culture that unites our cultural fragments enough to allow us to write to one another and read what our fellow citizens have written" (p. 167). He called for specific guidance and leadership at the national level to establish cultural literacy. Soon his theme of cultural fragmentation found a large audience. Journalists, curriculum reformers, policy makers, and scholars responded to his message.

His message was warmly received by various curriculum reformers. Several national studies and commission reports incorporated the concept of cultural literacy in principle, if not in name. In *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*, Ernest Boyer declared, "The second curriculum priority is a core of common learning to extend the knowledge and broaden the perspective of every student" (1984, p. 94). "During high school all students should move toward cultural literacy. They should discover how language is part of a culture, probably the most important part" (p. 96). And in the influential *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*, Anderson et al said, "People of the U.S. need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess levels of skill, literacy and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life. For our country to function, citizens must be able to reach some common understandings...Education helps form these common understandings" (1984). These reformers may have meant something different from Hirsch's cultural literacy but they invoked the concept nonetheless.

Perhaps the most ardent supporter of cultural literacy has been William Bennett, U.S. Secretary of Education from 1985 to 1988. During his tenure Secretary Bennett delivered a number of speeches heralding cultural literacy as it relates to all aspects of a student's life. Bennett suggested that English and history courses could be helpful in shaping moral character (1986). In March, 1986, the U.S. Department of Education published *What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning*, an effort overseen by Chester Finn, Jr., the Assistant Secretary for Research and Improvement. *What Works* asserted, "Cultural literacy not only enables students to

read better and gain new knowledge: It enables them to understand the shared heritage, institutions, and values that draw Americans together" (p. 71).

About this time, however, Hirsch appeared to be somewhat unnerved by Secretary Bennett's interpretation of cultural literacy. In an article entitled "Cultural Literacy Does Not Mean a List of Works," Hirsch said,

> There must have been a stylistic fault in *Cultural Literacy*, the essay...because...Bennett inferred from it that my ideas imply a canon or a common national curriculum. But since writing that essay I have published several further essays on the subject of cultural literacy that make it emphatically clear that this is not the implication of my ideas. Secretary Bennett now grasps that point, and he doesn't cite my work anymore to support a national cause (Hirsch, 1986, p. 1).

Bennett, for his part, continued to propose specific courses and lists of works that should be taught in elementary and secondary schools, as well as universities. (See his elementary school list in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 14, 1988.) And in his 1987 book Hirsch himself became more specific about his proposed curriculum reforms and what information a culturally literate person should possess. He proposed the development of a national curriculum by a distinguished commission of educators and public leaders whose job it would be to develop a model grade-by-grade sequence of core information based on a "national vocabulary," and he included an extensive list of the content of such a vocabulary, about six thousand items in all. The method of presentation of these items would be left to teachers, he said. But publishers and educators should work together to sequence reading materials for grades K-8, in Hirsch's view, and Hirsch's own Foundation for Cultural Literacy developed tests of general knowledge. He had great expectations for such a reform:

> I hope that in our future debates about the extensive curriculum, the participants will keep in view the high stakes involved in their deliberations: Breaking the cycle of illiteracy for deprived children; raising the living standards of families who have been illiterate; making our country more competitive in international markets; achieving greater social justice; enabling all citizens to participate in the political process; bringing us closer to the Ciceronian ideal of universal public discourse—in short, achieving fundamental goals of the Founders at the Birth of the republic. (Hirsch, 1987, p. 145)

The media were attentive. *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* usually presented the views of Hirsch and his supporters—Secretary Bennett, Albert Shanker, William Honig, Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn—in a positive light. The *Christian Science Monitor* reacted in a middle-of-the-road fashion, and the *Wall Street Journal* seemed not favorably disposed towards Hirsch, Bennett, Ravitch, or Finn. Articles about Hirsch's book also appeared in such popular magazines as *Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, People Weekly* and in special interest publications as *NEA Today, Education Digest, Commonweal* and *Christian Century* (See Appendix A). Writers in these magazines wondered about Hirsch's definition of culture, criticized his lack of understanding about transmission of culture and social class, and questioned the relationship between social disruptions and test score declines.

The Phi Beta Kappa journal, *The American Scholar*, which had published Hirsch's original article, followed with other articles by Hirsch and his supporters (Hirsch, 1984; Ravitch, 1984, 1987). But with this one important exception, the reviews in the scholarly journals were overwhelmingly negative. Some questioned

Hirsch's confusion of facts with knowledge (Warnock, 1986); others feared that cultural diversity would be lost (Edwards, 1987). There was concern about the possible formulation of a national text list or a core curriculum which might become elitist and exclusive (Infantino, 1986; Kraft, 1988). Hirsch's definition of culture was branded "impoverished" and an impediment to "culture making" (Winterowd, 1987).

Others questioned the pedagogy that would result from cultural literacy (Roemer, 1987; Johnson, 1988; Newman, 1988). Yet others stressed the conservative nature of the cultural literacy movement (Scholes, 1988), and suggested that cultural literacy should be removed from a discussion of economic productivity (Greene, 1986). A few scholars took issue with the assault on Hirsch, labeling the attacks on him intellectually shortsighted and politically inept (Scott, 1988). (The literature on cultural literacy is voluminous, and even though we have surveyed a large number of articles for this paper, we cannot keep up. For a compact collection of responses relating cultural literacy to the issue of general education in America, see Westbury & Purves, 1988.)

In addition to Bennett and Finn, another powerful supporter was Bill Honig, California's highly visible Superintendent of Public Instruction. In an interview with William Raspberry, Honig discussed several suppositions from his book, *Last Chance for Our Children* (1985), including the ideas that literacy is based on what is brought to a particular reading and that in an era of rapid technical change a renewed emphasis on traditional education is important because it preserves and builds upon the best of what has already been learned.

The State Education Department of California prepared and administered new tests in history and literature and adopted a "History-Social Science Framework," authored primarily by cultural literacy advocate Diane Ravitch (California Department of Education, 1987). This latter development pressured textbook companies to "focus on literacy in ethics, civics, democracy, economics and geography" since California requires state approval of textbooks and accounts for 10% of national sales (*Christian Science Monitor*, 1988). In 1988 California, under Honig's leadership, approved new reading textbooks for its 3 million elementary pupils. These reading anthologies consisted of classic works in their original rather than abridged form and included classic works by Aesop and Mark Twain. What impact these moves by the largest "adoption state" would have on the curricula of other states and national textbooks remains to be seen (Wilson, 1988).

In 1987 Ravitch and Finn published their interpretation of the results of the new history and literature assessments conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Ravitch & Finn, 1987). Ravitch and Finn had initiated and helped develop the new tests, with assistance from E.D. Hirsch, Jr., and funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities when William Bennett was head. Their interpretation of results also captured front page attention.

In general, the concept of cultural literacy had the backing of some policy makers and an important segment of the national press, but most teachers and professors at the secondary and university levels did not endorse the concept. In fact, advocates Ravitch and Finn reported that the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Council for the Social Studies denounced the idea of cultural literacy as the "nationalization of knowledge" (Finn & Ravitch, 1988). The cultural literacy movement appeared to be a "top down" educational reform supported by top policy makers and the media but not by the average educator/teacher or by most scholarly, professional associations.

In September, 1988, Secretary Bennett resigned from office, and along with University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom, set up a nonprofit foundation, the Madison Center, to promote the study of the classics of Western thought (*New York Times*, September 15, 1988). Whether Bennett's successors in high office would continue to promote cultural literacy was not known. In any case, Hirsch's plea for curriculum revision has obviously received support from many quarters, as well as substantial opposition. Cultural literacy, if acted upon, has immense implications for the school curriculum, as well as for the content of standardized achievement tests.

The Concept of Cultural Literacy

In his original 1983 article Hirsch contended that there was no doubt that our national cultural literacy had declined. The chief culprit was the pluralism of the school curriculum, he asserted, which had diluted the content of the traditional English and history courses. Educators, afraid of attacks by minority groups accusing them of cultural imperialism, had promulgated a content-free curriculum focused exclusively upon formal cognitive skills, he thought. "Literacy is not just a formal skill; it is also a political decision...Literacy implies specific contents as well as formal skills" (Hirsch, 1983, p. 162). This essential "canonical knowledge" Hirsch labelled "cultural literacy." "Although I have argued that a literate society depends upon shared information, I have said little about what that information should be. That is chiefly a political question" (p. 167).

In his view the United States was becoming so fragmented as to lose its coherence as a culture. He proposed a National Board of Education which would define broad lists of suggested literary works for the schools to teach. Barring such a national curriculum board, other organizations such as philanthropic foundations or national associations should provide recommendations, including a lexicon of words and phrases that high school graduates should know and which could serve as a guide to instruction. Only the Scholastic Aptitude Test provided such guidance at the moment, he thought. "Is the Educational Testing Service our hidden National Board of Education? Does it sponsor our hidden national curriculum? If so, the ETS is rather to be praised than blamed" (p. 168).

Hirsch later retreated from this position somewhat: "There must have been a stylistic fault in "Cultural Literacy," the essay cited by Warnock, because both he and Bennett inferred from it that my ideas imply a "canon" or a "common national curriculum...this is not the implication of my ideas...The common background knowledge required for literacy does not depend on specific texts" (Hirsch, 1986, p. 1). One might forgive Warnock and Bennett for their misinterpretation because "lists of literary works" seems quite close to "specific texts." Perhaps the point Hirsch was trying to make was that "canonical knowledge" may be arrived at through a number of ways, only one of which may be by reading a set of prescribed texts (Hirsch 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988). By contrast, other major advocates within the cultural literacy movement, such as Bennett and Bloom, have been adamant about prescribing particular texts.

Hirsch's full rationale for his position was presented in his 1987 book: "The civic importance of cultural literacy lies in the fact that true enfranchisement depends upon knowledge, knowledge upon literacy, and literacy upon cultural literacy" (p. 12). In his view, reading requires background or "world knowledge"—cultural literacy—and this background knowledge is national in character rather than local or international. The false doctrines of cultural pluralism and educational formalism are preventing our national culture from being taught, and the schools must teach our specific national cultural content in the early grades.

There are four major strands to Hirsch's rationale. First, reading literacy depends upon background knowledge, and, similarly, getting along in society

depends upon cultural literacy (i.e., knowing the culture one lives in). Second, modern industrial nations depend upon the development of homogeneous national cultures. Third, traditional American pluralism does not preclude the necessity for conformity to the national culture. Fourth, education has fallen victim to romantic formalism and misguided pluralism which has led to a diluted school curriculum and consequent cultural fragmentation. The solution is to reestablish the national culture as the core of the curriculum. Hirsch concludes his book by presenting a list of terms that comprises the national culture and which should be taught.

In the first argument Hirsch relies heavily upon research conducted by Richard Anderson and his colleagues at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois. In brief, this research demonstrates that specific background knowledge, called a "schema," is critical to reading a given text. For example, in a study often cited by Hirsch, Americans reading about an American wedding understand the text much better than East Indians do, and East Indians understand the text about an Indian wedding much better. Hence, reading ability depends upon preexisting knowledge. The work by Anderson and his colleagues is highly regarded within the educational research community and is leading to significant changes in reading instruction in the schools.[2]

This research is Hirsch's first major argument for cultural literacy. There are problems, however. Hirsch draws conclusions somewhat beyond the research studies: "What distinguishes good readers from poor ones is simply the possession of a lot of diverse task-specific information" (p. 61). It is one thing to say that background information plays an important role in reading, consistent with the research, and quite another to say that such specific information is everything, which the research does not.

One of Hirsch's major examples calls his generalization into question. He says that master chess players recognize and employ chess schemata to organize and guide their play, which seems reasonable. However, it would seem highly unlikely that teaching a list of chess terms and concepts to chess novices would transform the novices into master chess players. Whatever chess schemata consist of, surely they are not simply lists of chess terms. Rather the novice must learn by playing chess extensively and studying it intensively. The knowledge of the master entails much more than lists of specific knowledge. That is, schemata are different from a list of terms that might indicate cultural knowledge.

Hirsch's argument is by analogy: Reading ability is to reading schemata (as chess playing is to chess schemata), as succeeding in life is to cultural literacy (cultural schemata). But the analogy does not hold very well, particularly when cultural literacy is defined as simple knowledge of a list of specific terms. What one might reasonably conclude is that reading ability is dependent in part on reading schemata, and that chess playing is dependent on chess schemata, and that knowledge of a list of specific terms may help one do well in society but that cultural knowledge is neither necessary nor sufficient for doing well. Our own opinion is that cultural knowledge is extremely desirable to have but that it is not necessary to success, as that term is normally understood. The fact that the upper social classes have it in general and the lower classes do not is a relationship of correlation, not of cause and effect. So, in our judgment, Hirsch pushes his argument too far, although we would agree that cultural knowledge helps one interpret the world.

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[2] Hirsch's own empirical studies, which he reports in his book at some length, leave something to be desired in terms of experimental design compared to those of the more experienced educational psychologists at the University of Illinois. Because of a lack of experimental controls, Hirsch's studies are open to a number of interpretations, only one of which he draws.

National Culture

The second strand of Hirsch's rationale is a historical, anthropological argument regarding the criticality of a national language and national culture for the development of a modern industrial nation. A modern nation must have both a single national language and a *homogeneous* national culture, he asserts. Hirsch first develops an argument for the necessity of a national language, essentially a case for standards: "Inside a national border, education helps to keep the national language stable by holding it to standards that are set forth in national dictionaries, spelling books, pronunciation guides, and grammars" (p.71). It seems that modern industrial societies do indeed require their citizenry to be literate, but that the nations also deliberately "fix" their national languages is more contentious. The fact that British, Australians, and Americans understand one another may have more to do with the pervasiveness of the mass media than with national governments establishing language standards and holding their citizens to them.

Hirsch's analysis of how language has become standardized is rather idiosyncratic. In his view, there is an international vocabulary, a national vocabulary, and a local vocabulary. The national language must be standardized by central authorities imposing a particular dialect upon the general population in an arbitrary manner. "The fact of a common standard is much more important than the intrinsic character of the standard chosen" (p. 79). And regardless of the character of the accepted standards, such as the notorious inconsistency of English spelling, "It is much better to stick to them, whatever their intrinsic drawbacks" (p. 81). This idea that we must always accept what we are given runs throughout Hirsch's work.

Hirsch also seems to equate national language with written language, as opposed to oral dialects, though he discusses written and oral language interchangeably at times. Finally, and most importantly, "But in many other respects national languages are distinct from oral dialects. Among several distinctive features that make them unique linguistic phenomena, ...one...is especially significant for the subject of this book: every national language is a conscious construct that transcends any particular dialect, region, or social class" (p. 82). National languages are the province of all the people of the country and do not disadvantage those from particular non-standard dialects, in his view.

From this idiosyncratic view of how national languages develop, Hirsch then takes a key intellectual leap: "What may be less obvious is that every national culture is similarly contrived. It also transcends dialect, region, and social class and is partly a conscious construct" (p. 82-83). He posits a "national culture" development analogous to national language development. "For nation builders, fixing the vocabulary of a national culture is analogous to fixing a standard grammar, spelling, and pronunciation" (p. 84). In other words, the national culture must be fixed, homogeneous, and arbitrarily imposed for the good of the nation, just as the national language must be.

His primary historical example is Blair's *Rhetoric.* Hugh Blair, holding the first professorship in English, established in 1762 in Scotland, "where instruction in English national culture was felt to be needed," published his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Letters* in 1783. Blair's *Rhetoric* subsequently became the standard of English cultural content through its 130 editions, according to Hirsch. Thus Blair was the first definer of cultural literacy for the English national culture, and his *Rhetoric* the first dictionary of cultural literacy "for use by provincials like the Scots and colonials like the Americans" (p. 85).

Hirsch points out that Blair's original cultural "list" (his index) contained material not only from England but from Greece, Rome, and Europe. Hirsch also notes there are no Scottish poets included since "Blair and his public implicitly

understood that his job was to introduce his students and readers to the specific tradition that they needed to know if they were to read and write well in English" (p. 85). In fact, Blair's list does not contain any Scottish names at all. For example, David Hume is not included, even though his direct English empiricist predecessors Berkeley and Locke are included. Not including one of the most influential philosopher of modern times is a striking omission, and that omission can hardly be because of the language: Hume wrote in English, and in fact we are still reading him today.

Hirsch contends that the establishment of a national cultural vocabulary is arbitrary. But there is nothing arbitrary about Blair's original list. Blair simply excludes anything Scottish, and such exclusion can hardly be accidental or a judgment of quality. Blair's cultural list is political. What Hirsch ignores is the historic context of Blair's *Rhetoric* and the establishment of the first professorship of English in Edinburgh. After many centuries of bloody warfare the English had finally defeated the Scots in 1745 at the Battle of Culloden. The English then moved to subdue the country intellectually and culturally, as well as militarily and economically, as they did rather successfully with all their colonies. At this time Scotland was not a province of England, as Hirsch would have it, but a defeated country upon which the conquerors imposed their regime—and their culture.

Hirsch's use of Blair and Scotland as his major example of the formation of national cultures is a strange choice, and one which contradicts his contention that the formation of a national vocabulary benefits all people of whatever origins, regions, or social classes. One would think that the pulling away of Americans from British cultural domination in the 19th century would be a better argument for the formation of national cultures, and that Emerson's "American Scholar" would be a better exemplar than Blair's *Rhetoric*. Hirsch seems to have an uncanny way of supporting establishment positions even when they existed several centuries ago.

Hirsch does indeed cite an example of the formation of American national culture—Mason Weem's creation of the myth of George Washington and the cherry tree. Hirsch is quite approving of this total fabrication, but we confess that we are bothered by authors manufacturing untrue stories about famous personages and presenting them as the truth, even if in Hirsch's view, "Weems deduced that the public needed a domesticated Everyman whose life would serve as a model for American youth" (p. 89). McGuffey later introduced his own version of Weems cherry tree myth in his *Reader*, which influenced many generations of young minds. No doubt Hirsch is correct in asserting that this is how some pieces of national cultures originate, but is it all right to make up facts if the cause is a good one? Apparently, Hirsch thinks that it is.

Hirsch is steadfast in his belief that not only is the national culture difficult to change but that it is wrong to attempt to do so. "Rapid, large-scale change is no more possible in the sphere of national culture than in the sphere of national language. It is no more *desirable* or practicable to drop biblical and legendary allusions from our culture than to drop the letter s from the third person singular (p. 91, emphasis added)." Not only can one not do it but one should not do it. Hirsch is profoundly conservative on this matter. However, again his own examples give him difficulty. Did not the English introduce large-scale change in both language and national culture in Scotland—and rather successfully? Did not Weems deliberately introduce myths about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln into American culture in such a way as to instill certain values into generations of American school children, and, in Hirsch's own opinion, do so successfully and desirably? Hirsch's stated position on the immutability of culture is contradicted by his own examples. His actual position seems to be that it was possible and desirable to make such cultural changes in the distant past but that we cannot and should not

do so in the present. We must passively accept the culture others have manufactured for us.

Pluralism and Diversity

Where does this imposition of national culture leave our vaunted American tradition of pluralism? Hirsch is clear about this: "...the brute fact of history in every modern nation has been the increasing dominance of the national culture over local and ethnic cultures" (p.97). More prescriptively, "It is for the Amish to decide what Amish traditions are, but it is for all of us to decide collectively what our American traditions are, to decide what "American" means on the other side of the hyphen in Italo-American or Asian-American" (p. 98). How shall we decide what American culture consists of?

To resolve this problem, Hirsch divides the public culture into three parts: our "civil religion," which includes value commitments to freedom, patriotism, equality and other core values, as well as supporting rituals and myths; the "culture proper," which includes the politics, customs, and legends that "define and determine our current attitudes and actions and our institutions" (p. 103); and the "vocabulary of national discourse," which includes the value-neutral language and cultural terms through which we engage in discussion about the culture proper and which is synonymous with cultural literacy. The distinction here is similar to that between a language and the ideas expressed in that language.

In Hirsch's view only items in the culture proper, the ideas themselves, should be argued. The national vocabulary is merely a convention that enables us to communicate with each other and is not subject to dispute. Why would one argue about vocabulary terms in English? Also, the national vocabulary has an "inherently classless character": "Nor does the national vocabulary reflect a coherent culture of a dominant class or other group in the same way that a local dialect does. It is primarily an instrument of communication among diverse cultures rather than a cultural or class instrument in its own right" (p.104). "Neither in origin nor in subsequent history have national languages been inherently class languages. It is true that after national dictionaries were formulated, the standard languages were more likely to be acquired by people who were rich enough to be educated than by poor people. But the distinction is one of schooling, which we have made universal, not of economic or social class" (p.106). Throughout his book Hirsch takes great pains to repeat again and again that cultural literacy has nothing to do with social class.

If it just so happened that some people acquired the national language, what about its content? Is it an adventitious, eclectic mix from all the various peoples who have inhabited America? Well, no. "By accident of history, American cultural literacy has a bias toward English literate traditions. Short of revolutionary political upheaval, there is absolutely nothing that can be done about this" (p.106). If the ruling classes or social elites did not impose this national vocabulary, how did it emerge? "History has decided what those elements are" (p.107).

And the emergence of this national vocabulary has nothing to do with merit: "It is cultural chauvinism and provincialism to believe that the content of our vocabulary is something either to recommend or deplore by virtue of its inherent merit....The specific contents of the different national vocabularies are far less important than the fact of their being shared. Any true democrat who understands this, whether liberal or conservative, will accept the necessary conservatism that exists at the core of the national vocabulary...." (p.107). Apparently, then, we are not to decide what "American" means after all; it is already decided for us. In short, the national cultural vocabulary emerges from an agentless historic process, has

nothing to do with intrinsic merit, is unattached to particular social classes or subcultures, is non-political, and cannot be changed deliberately.

Frankly, all this is difficult to believe. First of all, the division of culture into three parts again is based upon an analogy with natural language and has no clear anthropological or sociological basis. Apparently, it is Hirsch's own invention. The national cultural vocabulary in fact differs from natural language vocabulary in important ways, even though Hirsch portrays the process of development as evolving naturally in the same way. Secondly, natural language itself is often political and closely allied with social class. The development of English itself through the Angles, Saxons, and Normans is proof of the great influence on language by the ruling classes.

In modern times the dialect employed by the BBC is the Cambridge-Oxford dialect of the British upper classes, and the same is true for written English. It is hardly accurate to portray this connection as accidental, since whether one obtains an Oxford or Cambridge education is not an accident but very much linked to social class. The current feminist attack upon pronoun gender usage is another contemporary example of the politics of language. In fact, examples of the political implications of language usage and their association with particular social classes, ethnic groups, and regions are simply too well known to belabor the point.

Third, cultural content itself is even more political and allied with social class than is natural language. Hirsch himself recognized this in his original paper published in 1983: "Literacy is not just a formal skill; it is also a political decision....Literacy implies specific contents as well as formal skills" (Hirsch 1983, p.162) "....although I have argued that a literate society depends upon shared information, I have said little about what that information should be. That is chiefly a political question" (p.167). By the publication of his book in 1987, however, he had decided that cultural literacy is not political and that one should not argue about it since it could not be changed—nor should it be, since it was "inherently conservative." By declaring it non-political, Hirsch hoped to remove it from debate, while at the same time obviously arguing the issue himself.

Again there is a curious contradiction in Hirsch's argument. In his view the national cultural content cannot and should not be changed since it evolves in natural ways outside deliberate influence—yet if this is so, why is Hirsch writing a best selling book about it and founding a movement? His own example, as well as his cited historic examples, belie his explicit argument. All his own efforts are directed towards establishing a particular cultural content as defined by his "list." If there is no intrinsic merit in any cultural content, why not allow the mass media or the schools as they currently operate to determine the cultural content of the nation? Why bother at all if the national vocabulary cannot be changed and the content doesn't matter? Hirsch's stance is inherently contradictory.

Both natural language and especially cultural content are in fact highly political, as evidenced by the explosive political nature of bilingual education, official English referenda, and controversies over standardized test performances, which determine access to educational institutions and better jobs. The daily headlines are full of reports of political encounters over such disputes. And they are political precisely because they are allied with the fortunes of social classes, ethnic groups, and races. In reality, it is not that these issues are non-political, as Hirsch suggests, but rather that Hirsch has a particular political position that he presents as non-political.

Schooling

Hirsch focuses his reform agenda on the public schools almost exclusively. "But we should direct our attention undeviatingly toward what the schools teach rather than toward family structure, social class, or TV programming. No doubt, reforms outside the schools are important, but they are harder to accomplish" (p. 20). In his view the primary role of the schools is "acculturating our children into our national life" (p.110), and cultural fragmentation is the fault of the schools: "The decline of American literacy and the fragmentation of the American school curriculum have been chiefly caused by the ever growing dominance of romantic formalism in educational theory during the past half century. We have too readily blamed shortcomings in American education on social changes (the disorientation of the American family or the impact of television) or incompetent teachers or structural flaws in our school systems. But the chief blame should fall on faulty theories promulgated in our schools of education and accepted by educational policymakers" (p.110). According to Hirsch, educators mistakenly believe that reading is based upon formal skills when in reality it is based on cultural knowledge. The real reason low-income students are deficient in reading is because they lack cultural knowledge. Cultural deprivations and family inadequacies can be overcome through cultural knowledge.

According to Hirsch, these incorrect educational theories began to be implemented when the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education of 1918 replaced the 1893 Committee of Ten recommendation of a traditional humanistic education. Social adjustment replaced subject matter. The origins of these destructive ideas were Rousseau's romanticism and Dewey's pragmatism, both focusing upon the romantic concept of "natural human growth." Unfortunately, these ideas were accepted by educators and translated into curricula for individual differences and vocational education, thus implicitly accepting the permanent stratification of economic and social positions. Tracking and learning-by-doing, as opposed to book learning, came to dominate American education. According to Hirsch, these educational principles led to replacing history with social studies as a subject of study, and they culminated in the extreme romantic formalism of the 1960s.

What can we make of these ideas? It seems rather preposterous to blame all the ills suffered by lower class children upon educational theories taught in the schools of education, thus excluding such powerful social influences as poverty, unemployment, family dissolution, crime, and the media. Hirsch again reveals his conservative political orientation: these social institutions cannot be changed; only the schools are at fault. We are also skeptical about the contention that Rousseau's ideas are the source of all the trouble in American education and indeed American society. *Emile* was an influential book, but that is a long reach indeed. Hirsch's real intent here is to blame the Progressive Education movement for pernicious influences on education, the Progressive movement being a favorite target of conservatives over a number of years.

We leave the historical arguments for others to worry about and agree that Hirsch does have a valid point about the excesses of "educational formalism," the idea that literacy is a set of techniques that can be developed through coaching and practice. He is correct that literacy involves knowledge of something, some content, that the learner must know, and that the content itself is important to the learning and the learner. Content matters, and not just skill. We think he is correct that educators and psychologists have often lost their way in developing reading skills by having students practice abstract context-free skills. Having students memorize suffixes is not the way to learn to read.

In our judgment Hirsch is also correct in castigating the educational tracking system in which lower class students are shunted into vocational tracks where they have lessened opportunity to acquire academic knowledge necessary for admission to higher education and the best jobs. American education has had such a sorting mechanism in place for many decades, as Hirsch indicates. The idea of abolishing such a tracking system and allowing all students to acquire the same knowledge is an excellent one, it seems to us, and a surprisingly egalitarian one for Hirsch.

What content should all students learn? Hirsch advocates an "extensive" curriculum that covers the subject matter all Americans need to know, plus an "intensive" curriculum that investigates particular works in detail and that is adjusted to individual interests and abilities. The extensive curriculum (Hirsch's list) will provide what we share as a culture, he believes, and the intensive curriculum will provide coherence and intellectual depth. However, it is the extensive one that Hirsch's book is all about. Textbooks should convey the national cultural vocabulary, especially for young children. If students do not acquire this national vocabulary by tenth grade, they can rarely make up the loss, according to Hirsch. Schools should abandon romantic formalist ideas like "critical thinking" and "higher order skills" which denigrate facts. Facts and skills are inseparable.

The List

What then are the essential cultural facts? Hirsch and two colleagues compiled a list of the core contents literate Americans should know: "...it should be possible to reach a large measure of agreement about what the common reader knows" (p. 135). The list was submitted to one hundred consultants outside academia and published as the appendix of the 1987 book, with a revised list of 6,000 terms published in the 1988 paperback edition. The list itself is supposed to represent a high school level of literacy, to be descriptive of what cultural literate Americans actually do know rather than prescriptive about what they should know, "to represent but not to alter current literate American culture." The admitted exception is scientific literacy because Hirsch and his colleagues thought that scientific knowledge needed enhancing. (It is not stated how this need was determined.)

The list was deemed to be nonpolitical because schools "have a duty not to take political stands on matters that are subjects of continuing debate" (p.137). While a national core curriculum based upon such a list is neither desirable nor feasible, "an agreed-upon, explicit national vocabulary should in time come to be regarded as the basis of a literate education" (p.139). Publishers and educators should reach an accord about both the contents of the national vocabulary and a sequence for presenting it, in Hirsch's view. Method of presentation would be left to teachers. A group of educators and public leaders might even develop a model grade-by-grade sequence of core information based on the list.

General knowledge tests should also be developed, perhaps at grades five, eight, and twelve. Such tests based on the list and dictionaries of cultural knowledge would be less arbitrary than the SAT because the SAT verbal is essentially a vocabulary test whose makers have never defined the specific vocabulary on which it is based. Hirsch's Foundation for Cultural Literacy was at work on such tests. Only a few hundred pages of information stand between the literate and nonliterate, between dependence and autonomy. In response to those who might object to such a list, in Hirsch's view they are really objecting to spreading literacy itself.

Hirsch's list then specifies the national cultural vocabulary, the knowledge that all Americans should know by tenth grade and preferably sooner. According to Hirsch, one does not have to know much about the terms on the list but rather just a smattering of information about each item. For example, one does not have to

know much about Socrates but should have at least a vague idea who he was. This is extensive knowledge. If one studies particular Platonic dialogues in detail, that is intensive knowledge, and not the type of knowledge required by the list.

What then is on the original list? A great many proper names of Anglo American origin, many English literary terms, a surprising number of foreign phrases, many cliches, and only a few historical dates. Included in the A's are ad hominem, Spiro Agnew, alfresco, annus miribilis, Aristophanes, Ask not what your country can do for you, auf Wiedersehen, Augean stables, John Audubon, Auschwitz, and Jane Austen. Included in the B's are the Battles of Britain, Bunker Hill, Concord, Gettysburg, Hastings, Lexington, Marathon, Midway, Stalingrad, the Bulge, Waterloo, and Yorktown, but not the battle of Sand Creek.[3]

The original list is short on athletics, health, entertainment, social science, and military terms. It systematically omits terms associated with the sixties, such as the Age of Aquarius, the Beats, the Chicago Seven, counterculture, Bob Dylan, Alan Ginsburg, Howl, Jack Kerouac, One Dimensional Man, Students for a Democratic Society, We Shall Overcome, and Woodstock. It omits certain political terms such as Amnesty International, ERA, Greenpeace, Haymarket Square massacre, IWW (International Workers of the World), the Internationale, Jack London, nothing to lose but your chains, nuclear winter, and John Reed. It omits certain writers such as Henry Miller, Ezra Pound, Sam Shepherd, and John Steinbeck. It omits ethnic terms such as Black Elk Speaks, the blues, Harlem Renaissance, soul (music, food), and omits certain music terms such as the blues, Billie Holiday, punk, reggae, rock and roll, while including Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, and the Beatles. It omits social science terms such as Margaret Mead, Thorstein Veblen, weltanschauung. It omits health terms such as AIDS, carcinogenic, Lamaze, and stress.

Of course, any list will omit some terms that should be included: it is the systematic exclusion and inclusion of certain terms that biases the list. One cannot help but think that unacknowledged criteria of propriety, acceptability, and politics were operating, perhaps only implicitly, when the original list was constructed. After all, this is supposed to be a list of what educated Americans do know, not what they should know (or should forget). But of course the list is transformed in reality into a prescription of what should be taught. Hirsch's subtitle after all is "What Every American Needs to Know," not what they do know.

In 1988 the paperback edition of the book was published, and Hirsch deleted and added terms to the list, for what he claims was a net increase of 343. He says, "The deletions are few, totaling only about twenty-five, e.g. "Edict of Nantes" and "Occam's razor," and "other items that were questioned by several readers independently" (Hirsch, paperback preface, 1988, p.xi). Hirsch seems a bit confused on the deletions, his numeracy perhaps not as good as his cultural literacy. In fact, more than 300 items were deleted from the original list, including such terms as Spiro Agnew, art deco, civil liberties, Ralph Ellison, El Salvador, Jerry Falwell, Milton Friedman, ghetto, Barry Goldwater, Guatemala, Gulf of Tonkin, Lee Iacocca, Jeffersonian democracy, Edward Kennedy, Henry Kissinger, George McGovern, Ferdinand Marcos, Linus Pauling, Nelson Rockefeller, penis, phallus, Shylock, scrotum, sperm, Gloria Steinem, testes, vagina, Thornton Wilder, William Butler Yeats, and Wounded Knee massacre. Apparently Hirsch has forgotten that a number of controversial political figures and terms were removed from the list, as well as terms referring to human reproduction. Does one detect a very politically conservative discrimination at work here?

Some of the omissions appear to be oversights: Atlantic Ocean, Austria, Cinderella, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mediterranean Sea, Poland, Rome, Turkey, Tel

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[3] Our analysis of Hirsch's original list owes much to Debra Lund.

Aviv, and Mt. Zion. It cannot be that these terms are too common because such items as America and Mississippi River are on the list, as well as many foreign countries as familiar as these.

A great number of terms were also added: Hank Aaron, AIDS, Aberdeen, Addis Ababa, Alas poor Yorick, Alzheimer's disease, Amazing Grace, Maya Angelou, Armenian massacres, bile, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ralph Bunche, Archie Bunker, Al Capone, Cato, CD (both), Chernobyl, concentration camp, Hernan Cortes, Crazy Horse, Bing Crosby, Demosthenes, Bob Dylan, Donald Duck, Dostoevsky, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Amelia Earhart, Essay on Liberty, Federal Republic of Germany, Ella Fitzgerald, Freedman's Bureau, Anne Frank, William Lloyd Garrison, Marcus Garvey, herpes, Kenya, La Fontaine, John Lennon, John L. Lewis, Bob Hope, Langston Hughes, I am the very model of a modern Major-General, Kenya, large intestine, La Scala, Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Metamorphosis (Ovid & Kafka titles), Carrie Nation, New Right, Nisei, Queen Elizabeths I and II, Queen Victoria, Chief Sequoyah, Junipero Serra, Frank Sinatra, B.F. Skinner, Jimmy Stewart, Shirley Temple, Trail of Tears, Uganda, Woodstock, Andy Warhol, John Wayne, Zambia.

Hirsch expanded the list to include more terms referring to minorities, women, blacks and native Americans. On the other hand, both the Wounded Knee and Sand Creek massacres are missing, even though the Armenian massacres are included, which, horrible though they were, presumably would be much less familiar or relevant to Americans. The explanation probably lies in the fact that Governor Deukmajian, the Republican governor of California, is of Armenian descent and has insisted that the Armenian massacres be taught in the California school curriculum. The native Americans have no governors of large states and only one congressman. So their massacres, which are actually an integral part of United States history, are not necessary for Americans to know. What all this means is that the contents of such a list, even the revisions, are political.

Some terms from the sixties have also been added. The inclusion of some writers and artists and the exclusion of others must simply reflect the tastes of Hirsch and his colleagues. Apparently Gilbert and Sullivan, Kafka, and Durer are popular while Yeats, Sergeant, and Mahler are not. The deletion of terms with sexual references is compensated for by the inclusion of terms for sexually transmitted diseases. In spite of claims to the contrary, there do seem to be definite political biases creeping into the revision. Such a list of cultural terms can never be value neutral as Hirsch claims. The best one can hope for is that he list reflect different sides, that it be impartial. Hirsch has still not managed such balance.

Testing for Cultural Literacy

In 1987 Diane Ravitch, an educational historian, and Chester E. Finn, Jr., the ubiquitous former Assistant Secretary of Education, extended cultural literacy into standardized achievement testing. They originated, helped develop, and interpreted new national 11th-grade tests of history and literature, which were administered through the National Assessment of Educational Progress. These tests were intended to measure what students in American high schools actually know about history and literature, rather than relying upon anecdotes and casual observations.

Ravitch and Finn are both strong cultural literacy advocates, and E. D. Hirsch, Jr. helped define the content for the literature test. In their book Ravitch and Finn present a much simpler rationale for cultural literacy, as opposed to Hirsch's elaborate, complex arguments. In contrast to Hirsch, Ravitch and Finn assert simply that knowledge of history and literature leads to a number of intellectual and moral virtues, their ideal being the cultivated person, as opposed to the "cultural

barbarian" the society is now producing (Ravitch & Finn, 1987, p. 13). They argue that humanities content has been de-emphasized in favor of skills training, and that history and literature should be emphasized much more in the school curriculum than is currently the case.

The Content of the Tests

To prepare the national tests, Ravitch and Finn assembled two committees of five persons each, plus themselves, Ravitch and Finn serving on both committees. How these committee members were selected is not specified; some members were historians, some English professors, and some high school teachers. Hirsch himself served on the literature committee. These committees met for three days at NAEP offices in Princeton, N. J., and defined content that "students of this age might reasonably be expected to know" in the areas of U.S. history and literature (p. 24). They wrote objectives and multiple-choice test questions, which turned out to be far more difficult than they had anticipated.

The history committee encountered a problem as to whether there was in fact a common body of historical knowledge that all students should know. "But several hours of animated discussion eventually led to a consensus that there *are* fundamental elements in American history and a few key points in world history that most young people should know." "...the history content reflects what is commonly in state curricula and textbooks" (p. 25). The literature committee had a more difficult time defining the content to be tested. The first problem was whether to test what was currently being taught in the schools or what should be taught. Since the committee deemed much of what was taught as being not worthwhile, it decided to test for what *should* be taught, in the opinion of the committee, which meant that much of the content selected was not now being taught in high schools.

The committees reluctantly accepted the multiple-choice format for their tests and an exclusive focus on recall of facts. The history objectives were then circulated to 59 historians and social studies professionals, and the committee assigned weights to the six major chronological periods covered to determine how many test items would be distributed to each period. How the weighting was determined was not revealed. By contrast, the literature committee selected literature "widely recognized by literate people today," that had withstood the test of time, and that received frequent reference—in others words, the "core literary culture." This committee also distributed its objectives to 39 reviewers and assigned weights among literary genres, their overall organizing theme.

The NAEP staff then gathered the objectives, the sample test items, and items from previous tests, developed many more test items, and administered these to a small sample of 17-year-old students. The items were rewritten and administered to a nationally representative sample of students in spring of 1986. The final national assessment consisted of 141 multiple-choice questions in history and 121 in literature, as well as a number of background questions. The results from this test administration form the basis of the Ravitch and Finn book.

The first thing to be said is that the content on the national assessments of history and literature is not the same as that on Hirsch's cultural literacy list. A few items will illustrate the differences:

Which of the following was NOT addressed by New Deal legislation?
___*Agricultural price supports*
___*Labor unions*
___*Social security*
___*Restrictions on immigration*

The New Deal is included on Hirsch's list, but the knowledge required to answer this question is far more detailed than Hirsch's concept of cultural literacy as superficial knowledge would suggest. Or again,

The Missouri Compromise was the act that
___*granted statehood to Missouri but denied the admission of any other new states*
___*settled the boundary dispute between Missouri and Kansas*
___*admitted Maine into the Union as a free state and Missouri as a slave state*
___*funded the Lewis and Clark expedition on the upper Missouri River*

In fact, the Missouri Compromise is not on Hirsch's list at all, and this question again requires more detailed knowledge than simple familiarity with the Missouri Compromise would suggest. The same is true of many items on the literature assessment.

Two authors who are known for their well-crafted stories set in the American South are
___*Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Conner*
___*Louisa May Alcott and Katherine Anne Porter*
___*William Saroyan and and Truman Capote*
___*Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis*

Neither Welty nor O'Conner are on Hirsch's list, nor if they were could this information be considered "superficial knowledge" that every American should know. This is rather detailed information that one might expect literature majors in universities to know. Or,

Billy Budd, "Benito Cereno," and "Bartleby the Scrivener" were written by
___*Washington Irving*
___*Herman Melville*
___*Jack London*
___*James Fenimore Cooper*

Again, these are hardly Melville's best known works, not the sort of thing one might expect every high school junior to associate with Melville. In fact, on another item 61.8% of the students knew that "Captain Ahab's obsession in Moby-Dick is a desire for revenge." Furthermore, Jack London is not on Hirsch's list at all, although Irving and Cooper are. In short, even though Hirsch was a member of the literature committee, the knowledge tested is significantly different from that on his list. Of course, many of the items are on Hirsch's list (e.g., the dates of the Civil War). Generally speaking, though, the information required on the national assessment tests is more detailed than the list suggests.

How then was the content of the history and literature assessments defined? Ravitch and Finn say that the history assessment consists of material found in United States history high school textbooks. To test this assertion we selected every fifth one of the history items listed in the appendix of test items and chose three commonly used high school textbooks to see if these facts were included: Ginn's *America's Heritage*, Scott Foresman's *Land of Promise: A History of the U.S.: to 1877* (vol. 1) and *from 1865* (vol. 2), and Prentice-Hall's *History of the Republic: the U.S. to 1877* (vol. 1) and *The U.S. from 1865* (vol 2). These three texts are the ones adopted by the state of North Carolina. (The actual items and complete results of this analysis are found in the Appendix B).

About 93% of the history test items were found in at least two of the high school textbooks. Of the 29 items sampled the only items not found in all three textbooks were "A cause of population movement in 1800s was reasonable land prices" and "Before 1800 most immigrants came from northern and western Europe," each found in only one textbook; and "Magna Carta is foundation of British Parliamentary system" and "Plessy vs. Ferguson decision approved racial segregation," each found in two textbooks. The other 25 test items were found in all three texts. So indeed the history test items were selected from that which is commonly taught. However, this raises a problem for Ravitch and Finn's interpretation of the history results—if the material is being taught, why don't the students know it? Ravitch and Finn never really address this issue.

The definition of the literature content is not quite as clearly defined. The literature committee decided to test for what it thought should be taught, the "core literary culture." The result was a list of works and authors one might find in literature anthologies designed for Advanced Placement literature classes, everything from Beowulf to James Joyce, with a heavy emphasis on British and American literature. There is also strong emphasis on the Bible, Greek and Roman mythology, and a few ancient Greek authors. This content is supplemented with minority and women authors. Occasionally, one will find a Continental author like Dante or Ibsen. Mostly, though, the literature content consists of authors from the mainstream Anglo-American canon.

In summary, the history domain tested consists of whatever is included in standard United States history textbooks (at least the authors indicate no other selective screens), and the literature domain consists of the major authors and works of the Anglo-American corpus supplemented by Greek mythology and the Bible. This by no means constitutes the entire historical and literary world but these are rather large domains. We comment in passing that in interviewing three historians about what should be taught in history, we did not find consensus among them the way Ravitch and Finn did. In our view achieving consensus among seven people over a three-day weekend is rather different from attaining consensus among a large number of American historians and high school history teachers.

In fact, we found from interviews with nine high school history teachers that they emphasize quite different content than do the historians. The high school teachers value character traits such as good citizenship more highly than factual content. These two groups do not agree with each other, nor do they frequently agree among themselves. The assumption of consensus is an assumption. (See House et al, 1987, for a report on interviews with historians, political scientists, social studies educators, and teachers as to what should be taught and tested in high school social studies.)

Standards and Judgments

In their interpretation of the national assessment results, Ravitch and Finn are scathing: "If there were such a thing as a national report card for those studying American history and literature, then we would have to say that this nationally representative sample of eleventh grade students earns failing marks in both subjects" (p. 1). On the 16 history clusters the authors assign 11 Fs, and on the 13 literature clusters they assign 9 Fs. How did the authors arrive at these dismal grades?

> We—and the learning area committees that designed the objectives and approved the test items—expected that students would be able to answer the great majority of the questions on the history portion; with only a few exceptions, they are questions about people, places, events, and trends that are included in the most

> widely used textbooks in American history. Nor, with few exceptions, are the questions difficult. Judged by these expectations, which we think reasonable and by no means demanding, the national average of 55 percent on the history portion is a shameful level of performance. (p. 201)
>
> Our expectations were not as high for the literature assessment, because we were not sure what students read in their English courses. We recognized that some of the questions pertained to authors and works that had probably not been encountered by many students....But when we saw the results we were surprised to discover that only a small minority of the students recognized other authors who we thought were firmly established in the high school curriculum....Even more surprising was the poor performance of many students on simple questions of general knowledge, such as those drawn from biblical or mythological literature. It sometimes appeared that the only common threads in students' knowledge may be those provided by movies or television, via their translations of literary themes into the popular culture (p 201).

Ravitch and Finn decided that most students should answer most of the test items correctly. They decided that less than 60% correct on an item or cluster or subject was failing, that 60 to 70% correct was a D, 70-80% correct a C, 80-90% correct a B, and above 90% correct was an A. Since the national average for the history test was 54.5% correct and 51.8% correct for the literature items, American students had failed these subjects badly. Ravitch and Finn considered these standards rather generous on their part, their rationale for grading being that these percentages are how teachers grade in their classrooms. Unfortunately, teachers are not good exemplars when it comes to grading practices, and it is surprising that Ravitch and Finn followed teacher practice here when they condemn it almost everywhere else.

Ravitch and Finn's grading procedures and judgments are seriously flawed. First, one must consider the domain of knowledge that is being tested. It is not the domain that Hirsch himself cites as necessary for cultural literacy. Hirsch's revised list consists of about 6,000 items for history and literature and everything else that one needs to know to be culturally literate, which includes a good deal more than those two subjects, such as music, art, and popular culture. In history Ravitch and Finn expect students to know nearly all the factual content in the current United States history text books, or, in their words, "the great majority" of these facts since these test items represent the content of the history textbooks.

How many facts are in a history textbook? To obtain a rough estimate we counted the number of facts on three pages, excluding graphs and charts, of one of the texts, *Land of Promise*, averaged the number of facts per page, and multiplied by the number of pages in the book. By our estimate there are roughly 23.2 facts per page in this 594-page book—approximately 13,780 facts in this U.S. history textbook. This is a crude estimate and no doubt factual density would vary from book to book. Nonetheless, it provides a rough idea: there are a lot of facts (See Appendix C for our analysis).

In order to obtain a grade of a solid B in history by Ravitch and Finn's standards, students would have to know 85% or about 11, 713 facts. Not just some students would have to attain this standard but *all* students would have to average this figure. Ravitch and Finn contend that this is "reasonable and by no means demanding" but we judge this to be a demanding standard for all students to achieve and rather unreasonable.

Hirsch's requirement for cultural literacy is much less demanding—superficial knowledge of 6,000 terms for history, literature, and everything else. Hirsch's entire dictionary of cultural literacy itself reportedly has only 15,000 entries. For a small number of terms it might make sense to require that all students know a high percentage, given the limited domain the terms are drawn from, and assuming that one even wants such a list. But surely not all the facts in a U.S. history book are terribly important. This is not to say that Ravitch and Finn are incorrect when they express shock at certain items that all students should know. Their strongest case for cultural illiteracy is made when they present test items such as the following:

When was the Civil War?
___Before 1750
___1750-1800
___1800-1850
___1850-1900
___1900-1950
___After 1950

It is indeed shocking to learn that only 32.2% of the students got this item right. Most of us would agree that this is something all Americans should know. (This is one of the few dates on Hirsch's list.) On the other hand, it is not shocking to discover that 70.2% of the students can locate Great Britain or 87.7% can locate Italy on a blank map of Europe. Nor is it shocking to discover that only 37.8% of the students know that New Deal legislation did not deal with restrictions on immigration or that only 43.0% know exactly what the Missouri Compromise did. (Neither Italy nor the Missouri Compromise are on Hirsch's list.) These are a few of the thousands of minor facts in history textbooks, and surely students should not be expected to know all these facts. Certainly, they do not need to know all these facts to get by in society.

Nor is it shocking that only 14.4% of the students know that Flannery O'Conner and Eudora Welty wrote well-crafted stories set in the South. Neither of these authors are on Hirsch's list, and furthermore this test item represents detailed knowledge of them. We agree that it is distressing that only 39.7% of the students recognize and only 21.1% say they have read John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath.* This title is on the list but the author is not. As Ravitch and Finn themselves admit about the literature selections, these are often materials that students have not been exposed to by 11th grade, though perhaps they should have been. However, it is difficult to believe that all students should have the level of detailed knowledge represented by many of the test items.

Ravitch and Finn have used Hirsch's standard that there are terms every American should know, but they have failed to select the domain of knowledge that cultural literacy presupposes. They have designated much larger domains to master. By their definition cultural literacy consists of the ability to recall most of the facts in the history textbooks and a high percentage of the authors and works in Anglo-American literature. When teachers in classrooms use the traditional percentages to determine grades, they have good reason to believe that their students have had the opportunity to master the facts they are asking, usually having just taught the material at the level of detail tested for.

There is nothing wrong with asking how much students know about all the facts in the history texts—provided that one does not then apply inappropriate standards. Professional test makers, who actually constructed most of these test items, intentionally ask questions that are difficult in order to differentiate student's degrees of knowledge from one another. In other words they do not ask only questions that they expect everyone to answer. And the official NAEP interpretation of these test results is quite different from that of Ravitch and Finn:

"In general, the results for both history and literature suggest that the majority of students have at least some knowledge upon which they can build. Although lack of student knowledge about some historical topics is a matter for serious concern, about two-thirds of the questions were answered correctly by more than half the eleventh graders. The performance on the literature assessment was slightly lower, perhaps in part because some of the questions asked were about specific works and authors not included in the curriculum until after the junior year in high school, if at all" (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1987, p. 3).

About specific areas they say, "Only 38.3 percent of the students appeared familiar with the contents of *Common Sense*, 40.1 percent knew the purpose of the Federalist Papers, and 36.8 percent knew why the Articles of Confederation failed. These findings are discouraging and would seem to indicate that many American school children are not learning important names, dates, and places" (Applebee et al., p. 10). These judgments confirm Ravitch and Finn's interpretation. On the other hand, "Similar to the items on which students did well, those on which they did poorly also reflect a range of authors, from Blake and Bunyan to Ibsen, Joyce, and Conrad. Each of these items, however, seems to reflect knowledge of a very specific aspect of an author or work. In fact, students' poorest performance sometimes occurred in response to items that reflected less familiar aspects of the same topics on which they did well....Other titles and authors that gave students particular problems may reflect the fact that the assessment was administered to eleventh-grade students, many of whom will not study world or English literature until their senior year, if ever " (p. 12).

In short, one must take account of both the content and the difficulty level of the test items when making judgments about the level of knowledge. In assuming that students should know a high percentage of items on the tests, Ravitch and Finn did not do this. The NAEP report itself presents a more balanced portrait, and not one that is particularly comforting. In conducting assessments the cultural literacy advocates must either define a critical set of terms, as Hirsch attempted to do, or they must look upon such knowledge as being open ended (i.e., one can know more or less about the vast contents of history and literature and then examine individual items to see how important such knowledge is).

Test Format

Ravitch and Finn accepted the multiple-choice format for assessing history and literature rather reluctantly, and we wish to bolster their reluctance. They say, "Critics have complained that the concept of cultural literacy encourages superficiality, since it places emphasis on *knowing about* rather than on knowing. This assessment, readers will find, is occasionally guilty of the same charge. We too would prefer an essay examination that determined the depth of students' understanding of historical issues and literary works. We hope the testing agencies will soon develop additional ways to assess knowledge and not rely so exclusively on multiple-choice questions, whose defects we make clear in our analysis of the test results" (Ravitch & Finn, 1988, p.21-22). We certainly agree with this.

They assert that the important understandings are, "But can they make sense of what they see and hear? Do they have the perspective to separate what is important from what is trivial? What is durable from what is ephemeral? Can they interpret the significance of the day's news? Are they able to discern patterns in trends and events? Are they capable of introspection? Can they relate their experiences to universal themes that have been explored by great writers through the ages? These are only a few of the potential benefits of the study of history and literature" (p. 202). We absolutely agree and only remark that not one test item in either the history or literature assessment does any of these things.

By stressing knowledge of particular facts the cultural literacy advocates risk making education into a rote memory exercise in which students passively memorize lists of terms to prepare for multiple-choice tests. This is not merely an idle possibility. Recent studies on the effects of large-scale testing demonstrate that teachers will teach to the test if enough pressure is put on them to do so. We prefer to see teachers teaching and testing for the kinds of intellectual skills that Ravitch and Finn advocate in their finer moments, and not have students passively memorizing lists of terms.

It is true that students must know content, but that does not mandate testing for straight factual recall. Ravitch and Finn disparage the type of achievement test item in which the student is presented with a passage and then asked to answer questions about it: "A better test, in our view, would not simply retreat behind the neutral facade of content-free skills, of questions that ask students to analyze a passage they have never seen before or to fill in a missing word" (p.245). There is no reason why the passages presented to the student must be content-free. They might contain dense historical or literary content and still require the student to think, analyze, and criticize, even within the multiple-choice format, though such items can never replace the quite different intellectual task of constructing an essay.

It seems to us that developing such intellectual capacity in teaching and assessment necessitates students writing essays, actively engaging in the culture, creating as well as learning. Active participation and learning, not passive reception, is the mark of democratic education. Students could write about important historical documents, perhaps absorbing and criticizing them in terms of past and current social realities. Even though Hirsch denigrates critical thinking, it is difficult to envision how a democracy can survive without it. Of course, critical thinking must be within specific content, about particular and important things.

What is taught and how it is taught are not value neutral but rather convey strong messages about what is important. We need to develop critical thinkers, active participants in democratic government. This is the content truly critical to our society. Sometimes the cultural literacy advocates seem to agree with the notion of active citizenship, and at other times they seem to prefer a passive, receptive citizenry complacent within the cultural tradition, a country of cultural consumers rather than cultural producers. It is important that the history and literature taught be true history and literature and not biased interpretations that present distorted views of the past, and that the content be presented in such a way that it can be critically examined by an independent citizenry.

Behind the Scores

Unlike Hirsch, Ravitch and Finn do acknowledge that many factors outside the schools affect learning and test scores. Family background is the strongest outside factor, although they coyly call this "parent education (or the knowledge, values, and priorities for which it is the proxy)." Ordinarily, parent education is considered a proxy for socioeconomic class, which confers differential social, economic, and educational advantages. Ravitch and Finn's use of the term implies only differences in family values. Apparently, their interpretation is that those with lower test scores are culturally deficient, a main theme of Hirsch.

With a designated mean of 285 for both tests, the mean scores for students of parents who graduated from college are 297.7 in history and 297.6 in literature. However, the scores for "urban advantaged" are 301.1 and 301.4 in history and literature, compared to 262.0 and 265.2 for "urban disadvantaged." In other words, the type of community in which one lives makes as much difference in the scores as parents' education. Having reading material in the home accounts for somewhat less spread in the scores. In fact, living in an urban advantaged community produces the

highest score, higher than being in the academic track, white, the college education of one's parents, or how much homework one does.

"Urban advantaged" and "disadvantaged" are terms that Ravitch and Finn choose not to use at all and scores they choose not to report, even though these are regular reporting categories of the national assessment. Instead, Ravitch and Finn emphasize parent education as the primary causal factor rather than social and economic inequalities. Stressing cultural deficiency as the cause of poor school performance, as opposed to economic inequality, is a major theme of many cultural literacy advocates and indeed of the political neoconservatives. Of course, all these factors are closely intertwined, but we think that parent education and the type of community one lives in are most accurately interpreted as indicators of social class. Most certainly the scores of urban advantaged and disadvantaged should be reported and given consideration, as they are in the official NAEP report. Not to do so suggests some strong ideological biases.

Ravitch and Finn do much better when reporting subgroup analyses of scores of Black students. They show that although the overall Black scores are 263.1 and 267.5 (about two-thirds standard deviation below the White scores in history and one-half standard deviation below in literature, and a few points above the Hispanic scores in both cases), that Black students in favored circumstances do quite well. For example, the highest Black scores are those from students in "suburban" communities (urban advantaged?), with next highest from those in Catholic schools, and then those whose parents graduated from college. Even though they use "suburban" as a category in this situation, Ravitch and Finn do not mention scores for Black students from "urban disadvantaged" communities, which one would expect to be quite low, perhaps even lower than those from rural communities (246.1 and 252.9, respectively).

Ravitch and Finn strike a more egalitarian stance when they discover that a sizable proportion of the top students on these tests are not in the academic tracks of the high schools: "Though it is surely impressive that a quarter of the Black students in the top quartile of the history assessment have made it there despite being enrolled in the general or vocational track, it is likely that the school programs in which they find themselves are not making the maximum use of their mental abilities" (p. 139). In fact, among all students, fully 22% in the top quartile of the history scores come from families where neither parent went beyond high school. "Their performance on assessment places these students in the top quartile among eleventh graders, but they are not much more apt than the average student to be planning to attend a four-year college...." (p. 140-141).

Most of these students are from blue-collar families, of course, and Ravitch and Finn see this as "...a stunning reminder that the tracking system may be shunting some talented youngsters into educational career paths less challenging than they are capable of" (p. 142). So it is. Furthermore, 25% of the top quartile students are enrolled in nonacademic tracks. We interpret these findings as social class forces, diminishing the life chances of these students in subtle and complex ways.

Another phenomenon that Ravitch and Finn emphasize, contrary to Hirsch, is the obviously strong influence of television. Watching television beyond three hours a day is associated with substantially lower scores, and Black children watch much more television than White or Hispanic children. Fewer than 12% of all children say that their families have any rules at all about watching television. Apparently, television watching is almost completely unsupervised in American society, and, Hirsch notwithstanding, this is a serious impediment to education that must be addressed in some fashion. At least Ravitch and Finn recognize that many

other social forces are at work depressing the cultural knowledge of these children, not just the dead hand of Jean Jacques Rousseau.

In spite of our disagreements with the way that Ravitch and Finn have interpreted the national assessment data, we concur with their main conclusion that students are not learning history and literature the way they should. And we agree with many of their recommendations about how to improve the curriculum. We agree that more history should be taught in context, with more original documents including narratives and journals, and more geography. We agree that better quality literature should be taught and that children should somehow be drawn away from the television and into a book. We agree that more time should be devoted to reading good literature and in writing, and much less time devoted to drill and grammar exercises. And more careful attention should be paid to the quality and accuracy of the textbooks.

We strongly agree that the humanities should be taught to everyone and not just the students in academic tracks and that this argues against tracking students at all. The tracking system functions essentially to shunt students into different life opportunities, however honorable its intentions, and is the remnant of a stratified society in which poor and minority students are not offered the same opportunities as the upper social classes. Alternatives to the tracking system are not easy to achieve, but they are necessary.

We agree that teachers who teach history and literature should be well versed in those subjects, but we do not think that this means they must have a degree in those areas, as opposed to a degree in one of the social sciences. Throughout Ravitch and Finn's book, and Hirsch's as well, there seems to be an underlying animus against the social sciences which usually appears as remarks in passing. No doubt the humanities have been squeezed in the school curriculum, particularly by the social sciences and by the study of current events. Some of the cultural literacy campaign can be seen as a reaction against this intrusion.

However, making history and literature mandatory every year in the school curriculum, especially where "social studies" and "language arts" are now taught, and declaring those trained in the social sciences to be unfit to teach are not the ways to proceed. It should be noted that Ravitch and Finn based their entire book upon a social science survey, one they could have used some help interpreting. Two of Hirsch's major arguments for cultural literacy are based upon work in educational psychology and social anthropology. Even those disliking the social sciences are forced to use them. The social sciences are here to stay, and some better accommodation must be made with them. We prefer the "blurred genres" approach in which concepts developed in the humanities are used in the social sciences and vice versa (Geertz, 1980). It is inevitable that the social sciences will find their way into the school curriculum because they are too influential in modern life not to do so. The humanities actually offer ways of understanding the natural and social sciences and other events not available within those disciplines themselves.

One of the many deficiencies of Hirsch's list is that it does not contain enough of the social science terms that have become standard in everyday life. The national assessments of literature and history, on the other hand, only begin to touch upon content necessary for modern democratic citizenship (e.g., concepts like democracy, separation of powers, politics, interest groups, pluralism, and so on). These are concepts that political scientists agree are necessary for American students to know. Some of these can be taught in history, no doubt, but something more on the order of civics and government classes are also necessary, and the people to teach these classes cannot be trained solely in history.

We are also opposed to Ravitch and Finn's idea of opening the teaching profession to anyone with a degree in history and literature. Having a degree in a content area is highly desirable in our opinion, and it has been required at our university for some time, but it does not make the person a competent teacher. Knowledge of content is necessary but far from sufficient. Such a move would also lower the quality of teachers entering the profession in the long term because it would reduce salaries, as the theory of segmented labor markets suggests.

We are also strongly opposed to the idea that universities should require students to "demonstrate a high degree of knowledge and proficiency in these subjects before entering college," if this means that students must pass some kind of proficiency test in these subjects. This is exactly the kind of impediment that prompts minority students to fear cultural literacy, barriers that put them at an additional disadvantage. The people who have best access to cultural knowledge are those from urban advantaged neighborhoods; those from the disadvantaged neighborhoods have the least access, as indeed the national assessment results indicate. Setting up such criteria for admission to college means that the white upper classes will get into the better schools and obtain the best jobs, while the minority and underclasses will be refused admission and be forced into the worst jobs. If this recommendation simply means taking a certain number of history and literature courses in high school, that is a far more acceptable alternative for minorities and the poor because at least they can compete on more even terrain.

In conclusion, we certainly agree with Ravitch and Finn's main point that history and literature should not be taught only to the elite, it should be taught equally to all students. We add emphatically that it should not be taught in such a way as to be used against the interests of the poor, the minorities, and the disadvantaged, as it has been so often in the past, too often with the complicity of scholars in the humanities.

Conclusions

Teaching more cultural content in the schools is an attractive idea. The idea that current texts and materials are deficient from a humanities content perspective seems reasonable. More myths, literature, history, and many other changes proposed by the cultural literacy advocates make sense. We leave open for the moment the question as to whether and how the content of standardized tests should be changed to assess cultural knowledge.

Cultural literacy is not an intellectual ability akin to reading literacy. It is one thing to say that people have or need more cultural knowledge and something different to assert that there is a skill or set of skills like the ability to read that enables one to succeed in society. Knowledge is indeed necessary in both cases, and probably schemata as well, but these two things entail rather different abilities. Hirsch extends the analogy of cultural literacy with reading literacy too far. We suspect that there are quite a number of knowledge schemata in history, literature, and writing that enable one to do any number of things, but probably not a coherent set of schema for cultural literacy. Cultural literacy is highly successful as a slogan but its referent in the real world is obscure.

Formal education, culture, and literacy do play critical roles in modern industrial society but perhaps not in the way formulated by Hirsch. We agree with Hirsch about the centrality of state-supported education to modern society, but we are skeptical about the particular role assigned to education and culture by the theory of nationalism and economic development that Hirsch embraces. Hirsch interprets the theory in such a way as to make culture and education a driving force

of the industrial state. The necessity of everyone assimilating to one dominant culture by means of the educational system also raises doubts.

Hirsch's position is politically conservative in several different ways, in spite of his protestations otherwise. In Hirsch's view nothing can be done about inequalities, social class differences, social institutions other than the schools, or the dominant Anglo culture to which everyone must conform. The national culture itself is given by history and tradition, and we cannot challenge or change it, in Hirsch's view. Social harmony and economic development depend on a homogeneous culture, he asserts. The conservative nature of Hirsch's position can hardly be denied. This conservatism does not make his arguments wrong but his positions are often self-contradictory (e.g., if none of us can change the national culture, why is he leading a movement to do so?).

The list of what every American must know is politically conservative in what it includes and excludes. If one were to have such a list at all, it would have to withstand scrutiny as to its impartiality among the various races and ethnic and interest groups in America, just as standardized achievement tests do. There is among minority and disadvantaged groups a strong suspicion that such a list would function to their further disadvantage, in spite of Hirsch's assurances that their interests would be served. Their reaction to the cultural literacy movement has not been positive. A close examination of Hirsch's list reveals that it is indeed conservatively biased as it now exists. To be used as the basis for national testing, any such list must withstand scrutiny for political impartiality.

The view of culture presented is one in which an individual passively receives culture, rather than actively creates it. No doubt one must learn some cultural content before one is able to create or produce products which contribute to that culture. However, Hirsch's denigration of creativity and critical thinking in favor of rote learning leans too far in the direction of educating passive consumers of culture rather than creative producers of culture. Surely a liberal arts education should enable one to write well and think critically and not just recognize proper names from classic authors. There is nothing in Hirsch's approach that emphasizes such an active, critical role for learners. Rote learning is not the education that Socrates and the ancient Greeks would endorse.

The view of what is wrong with the poor and powerless of society is that they are culturally deficient. Why don't some ethnic groups do better in society? Because they are culturally deficient in the knowledge they possess, according to Hirsch, and they will no longer be disadvantaged when they acquire that cultural knowledge. Cultural knowledge alone allows one to succeed in society—a proposition that is surely false. In any case, the theme of cultural deprivation is repeated over and over in the United States in recent times. It is a favorite explanation of the so-called neoconservatives in explaining why some ethnic groups succeed and some fail. One can endorse teaching the poor and the powerless more humanities content without believing that they are poor and powerless because they don't possess such content or that such knowledge will substitute for jobs and influence.

In spite of our criticisms, some of Hirsch's recommendations merit strong consideration, in our opinion. Teaching more cultural content in the schools is a good idea, and this content should be taught to all students, who should not be placed into separate tracks. However, we do not think that this content should be by rote learning or consist of exactly the content specified by Hirsch. We would like to see a more active view of both culture and learning. Culture is constructed and produced by people, in our view, and is subject to deliberate modification and revision. American culture certainly has deep roots in British culture, but it is hardly a facsimile thereof. Otherwise, American, British, and Australian cultures would be

identical, which they are not. Certainly, in our history the infusion of many different cultures has produced a distinct culture that is reflected only very partially by a Shakespearean play. We should hold to the view that culture is actively produced and reproduced and is not an antique willed to us by ancestors. Most cultural literacy advocates portray culture and education as entirely too passive, not a healthy thing for a dynamic democracy.

The distinction between extensive and intensive knowledge, and Hirsch's endorsement of the extensive, means that tests over such subject matter would cover many topics at a superficial level rather than a few terms in depth. This would suggest multiple-choice rather than essay tests, not a good choice in our opinion. Tests should be on intensive learning and not just extensive learning. Cultural literacy advocates like Bloom teach one book for an entire semester. Presumably, his students would not fare well on one of Hirsch's tests, at least not because of what they learn from him. Intensive knowledge, particularly that which is produced, can be assessed best by essay tests, although there several other less expensive, intermediate possibilities worth exploring.

The content covered on the national assessments of history and literature is not the same as that on Hirsch's cultural literacy list. In defining content for the national assessments, Ravitch and Finn departed a long way from the cultural literacy list. The domains they seek to assess are far larger and more detailed. The history domain consists of all the facts contained in U. S. history textbooks, a rather large territory, and the literature domain consists of titles and authors from the Anglo-American canon, the Bible, and Greek and Roman mythology, also a rather large body of facts. Surely, knowledge of such factual detail is not necessary for communicating or succeeding in American society, a claim Hirsch makes for his much smaller list.

The consensus on content claimed by Ravitch and Finn is far more problematic than they indicate. Although they claim consensus was easily achieved within their small committees during a three-day meeting, our own work indicates that there is far less agreement among teachers, historians, political scientists, and social studies educators than Ravitch and Finn indicate, and in fact historians may not be in agreement among themselves. Procedures for defining content for national assessments must really be more rigorously handled and justified, rather than casually asserted by a few people.

The standards employed by Ravitch and Finn in their interpretation of the national assessment results are inappropriate. One cannot simply declare a certain percentage passing on tests of this kind without more substantial justification. There is no acceptable rationale for why 70% or 80% of the students should know some of the obscure facts they were asked, nor why they should know most of the facts in a U.S. history textbook. Ravitch and Finn have mistakenly applied Hirsch's standard to different domains.

Nonetheless, whatever the standards employed, some of the test results are shocking. Students should know when the Civil War occurred. There are indeed certain facts that they should know even though they can succeed in American society without knowing them. And many of the items on the national assessment tests are facts students should know. It is not apparent why students do not know when the Civil War occurred because it is most certainly in every U.S. history text. Their ignorance does not result from their lack of exposure, as Ravitch and Finn suggest, and the same can be said for all the history items. Why don't students know these things if they have been exposed to them?

Cultural literacy advocates must make a choice as to the combination of content and standards they employ. Either there is a small list of terms and facts

that all Americans must know, á la Hirsch, or there are large domains such as history and literature in which one may know more or less, but in which no particular knowledge is critical. These alternatives imply different testing strategies and standards. Of course, one could also have two entirely different types of tests or one test with two different sections. One section could ask for specific recall items, as vocabulary tests do, and the other could require more thinking.

Multiple-choice, factual recall tests are not the best way to assess humanities content. Straight factual recall is not the best way to assess learning in the humanities. Even items that present a passage for analysis are better, and it would be possible to have passages loaded with cultural content on which the students would answer questions, thus at least assessing some mental abilities other than memory. Of course, essay tests would be better yet.

In spite of a seriously flawed interpretation, Ravitch and Finn do have many good recommendations for changing the curriculum. Better texts and materials, original sources, better trained teachers, and especially the elimination of tracking are good ideas. We agree with Ravitch and Finn's basic point that history and literature are not being well taught and tested and must be improved.

On the other hand, some of their recommendations are ill-considered and would have negative results in the schools. Certainly, teachers must be better prepared in history and literature, but that does not mean that everyone must have a degree in that subject, nor that the teaching ranks should be opened to anyone who has such a degree. Knowledge of subject matter is necessary but by no means sufficient for quality teaching. We also think that Ravitch and Finn seriously misjudge the effect on teaching of having a prescribed list to teach and then having students assessed on recall of that list. How and what is assessed can have far-reaching effects. Producing passive learners does not suit a democracy.

In some aspects of the cultural literacy movement there is an antipathy towards the social sciences, and this accounts for some of the appeal to humanities scholars. The humanities, once the center of the university and curriculum, have been buffeted over the last several centuries by the natural sciences and to some degree by the social sciences. Cultural literacy promises to place the humanities at the center of the social and educational system and restore some of the humanities lost importance and glory. In our view, the humanities do indeed offer important and neglected insights, which in fact the social sciences and natural sciences are beginning to realize. However, social science bashing is not the best way to restore the humanities to their proper place, in our opinion.

The idea of cultural literacy appeals strongly to many people, in spite of the complex and often incorrect academic arguments. Most of Hirsch's elaborate arguments are questionable when examined closely. In fact, other cultural literacy advocates themselves advance quite different arguments. Most believe that study of the proper cultural content will lead to moral and intellectual virtue, an argument far removed from that of Hirsch, who calls such a position "cultural chauvinism and provincialism." However, demonstrating the inadequacy of Hirsch's ideas will not dissuade most believers in cultural literacy. They believe for different reasons.

The deteriorating economic condition of the United States, the development of a seemingly permanent underclass, and the entrance of vast numbers of non-English speaking immigrants, legal and illegal, have created a social situation in which many Americans feel threatened. The great attention paid to rising crime rates, welfare recipients, consumption and distribution of drugs, cyclical poverty, and inadequate ghetto education highlights the problems of the so-called underclass, the subject of a number of recent books. This is combined with millions of legal and illegal immigrants entering the country, most of whom are poor and non-English

speaking, and many of whom are also associated in the public mind with drugs. In addition, there is a pervasive sense of unease about the prospects of the United States slipping economically, as reflected in rising trade deficits and a stagnant standard of living. U. S. income did in fact peak in 1973. All this concern begs for an answer, and cultural literacy provides an explanation, a focus for blame, and a solution.

Cultural literacy promises a solution of traditionalism to an uneasy general public by reasserting traditional American values and by promising that this reestablishment of tradition will recapture America's economic preeminence, eliminate the underclass, and transform millions of non-English speaking immigrants into Americans. Anything that could do all these things has enormous appeal. The real question is whether cultural literacy can do the things promised. We think not. Although teaching humanities content will not solve the social ills that beset us, there are other reasons to introduce more cultural content, provided the content is consistent with democracy, the key criterion.

Even though, in our view, cultural literacy cannot possibly accomplish the things claimed for it, whether, how, and to what extent we should test for more cultural content remains an important question. Though we seriously doubt that such a thing as cultural literacy exists and functions as its advocates suggest, we do agree that more and better humanities content should be taught and tested in the public schools. However, this content should be more carefully defined and assessed than heretofore. We agree that students should know when the Civil War took place but doubt that they need to know *annus mirabilis*. Any such list that serves as the basis for testing with expectations of complete mastery should be much smaller and more carefully worked out than those proposed.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Magazine and Newspaper Articles on Cultural Literacy

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Samuelson, R. (1987, September 3). Attacking mass mediocrity. *Washington Post,* p. F1.

Sanoff, A. (1987, September 28). What Americans should know. *U.S. News & World Report,* p. 86.

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Appendix B: Facts in U. S. History Textbooks

Batchelor, J.E., & Davidson, J.W. (1986). *History of the republic: The U.S. to 1877* (vol. 1) and *The U.S. from 1865* (vol. 2). Prentice-Hall.

Berkin, C., & Wood, L. (1983). *Land of promise A history of the United States: To 1877* (vol. 1) and *from 1865* (vol. 2). Scott, Foresman and Company.

Branson, M.S. (1986). *America's heritage*. Ginn and Company.

Every fifth item as it appears in Ravitch and Finn's history appendix; items matched against three North Carolina state-adopted history textbooks (1986-87):

- FIND ITALY ON MAP OF EUROPE:
  America's Heritage (AH): European maps (pgs. 440 and 484)
  Land of Promise (LOP): world map (pgs. 530 and 540)
  History of the Republic (HR): European maps (pgs. 177 and 191)

- FIND AREA OF 13 ORIGINAL STATES ON MAP OF U.S.:
  AH: map of Thirteen Colonies circa (pg. 68)
  LOP: map of the Thirteen Colonies (pg. 68)
  HR: map (pg. 98)

- JAPANESE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR LED U.S. INTO WORLD WAR II:
  AH "World War II and its Aftermath" (chap. 19)
  LOP: Japan attacks Pearl Harbor (pg. 283)
  HR: Pearl Harbor (pg. 238)

- WATERGATE LED TO RESIGNATION OF RICHARD NIXON:
  AH: A President Resigns (pg. 556)
  LOP: A Presidential Farewell (pg. 527)
  HR: A Crisis in the Presidency (pg. 373)

- NAZI DECIMATION OF JEWISH PEOPLE IN EUROPE CALLED THE HOLOCAUST:
  AH: "World War II and its Aftermath" (chap. 19)
  LOP: 'Nazi Party", 'fascism', 'master race', and 'death camps' appear in text (pg. 276); 'holocaust' not in glossary or index
  HR: 'genocide' appears in italics with a definition; 'holocaust' doses not appear (pg. 301)

- CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT OF 60s FOCUSED ON EQUALITY FOR MINORITIES:
  AH: "Years of Change, Years of Challenge" (chap. 20)
  LOP: "The New Frontier and the Great Society" (chap. 18)
  HR: struggle for equal rights for Black Americans (pg. 350)

- WORLD WAR II ENDED BETWEEN 1943-1947:
  AH: How and when did victory finally come to Europe? (pg. 494)
  LOP: World War II: 1938-1945 (pg. 275)
  HR: Legacy of World War II (pg. 302)

- "SECESSION" REFERS TO WITHDRAWAL OF SOUTHERN STATES FROM UNION:
  - *AH:* "session" appears in glossary and text (pg. 287-77)
  - *LOP:* Final Crisis Brings Secession (pg. 371)
  - *HR:* "secede" appears in bold print (pg. 300)

- THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE MARKS COLONIES' BREAK WITH ENGLAND:
  - *AH:* The Declaration of Independence (pg. 103)
  - *LOP:* The Declaration of Independence (pg. 154-55)
  - *HR:* Declaration of Independence (pg. 178)

- WATERGATE OCCURRED AFTER 1950:
  - *AH:* A President Resigns (pg. 556)
  - *LOP:* A scandal Called Watergate (pg. 369)
  - *HR:* A Crisis in the Presidency (pg. 373)

- PLESSY VS. FERGUSON DECISION APPROVED RACIAL SEGREGATION:
  - *AH:* does not appear
  - *LOP:* Plessy vs. Ferguson (pg. 212)
  - *HR:* appears on a list of "Major Events" (pg. 95); also appears on page 431

- JAPAN BOMBED PEARL HARBOR BETWEEN 1939-1943:
  - *AH:* When and where did the Japanese attack the U.S.? (pg. 490)
  - *LOP:* Pearl Harbor (pg. 283)
  - *HR:* Pearl Harbor (pg. 238); "Major Events" of 1940s (pg. 283)

- U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AFTER WORLD WAR II WAS CONTAINMENT OF COMMUNISM:
  - *AH:* Uneasy Peace Turns in a Cold War (pg. 506)
  - *LOP:* policy of containment (pg. 307)
  - *HR:* A Cold War Begins (pg. 312-13); "containment" appears in index (pg. 697)

- BEFORE 1800 MOST IMMIGRANTS CAME FROM NORTHERN AND WESTERN EUROPE:
  - *AH:* does not appear
  - *LOP:* The Middle Colonies (pg. 87)
  - *HR:* does not appear

- A CAUSE OF POPULATION MOVEMENT IN 1800s WAS REASONABLE LAND PRICES:
  - *AH:* "The U.S. Reaches the Pacific" (chap. 10)
  - *LOP:* does not appear
  - *HR:* does not appear

- STALIN WAS LEADER OF SOVIET UNION DURING WORLD WAR II:
  - *AH:* "World War II and its Aftermath" (chap. 19)
  - *LOP:* Joseph Stalin (pg. 287)

HR: Joseph Stalin (pg. 294-95)

- "GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME DEATH" PATRICK HENRY
  - *AH:* Boston Tea Party (pg. 97-8)
  - *LOP:* Henry speaks against the Stamp Act (pg. 455); refer to speech that called for resistance to England (pg. 148)
  - *HR:* Henry's speech (pg. 172)

- SAMUEL GOMPERS WAS FIRST PRESIDENT OF AFL:
  - *AH:* organization of AFL (pg. 398-99)
  - *LOP:* formation of AFL (pg. 89)
  - *HR:* American Federation of Labor (pg. 73)

- AN ISSUE IN WAR OF 1812 WAS GREAT BRITAIN'S INTERFERENCE WITH SHIPPING:
  - *AH:* War of 1812 (pg. 177-84)
  - *LOP:* Freedom of the Seas (pg. 268)
  - *HR:* War is Declared (pg. 254-56)

- WOODROW WILSON WAS PRESIDENT BETWEEN 1912-1929:
  - *AH:* appears in index (pg. 415)
  - *LOP:* years in office (pg. 160)
  - *HR:* years in office (pg. 642)

- "RECONSTRUCTION" OCCURRED BETWEEN 1850-1900:
  - *AH:* map noting years of Reconstruction (pg. 301)
  - *LOP:* "Reunion and Reconstruction" (chap. 17)
  - *HR:* "The Road to Reunion (1864-1877)" (chap. 19)

- PAINE'S *COMMON SENSE* ARGUES FOR COLONIAL INDEPENDENCE:
  - *AH:* *Common Sense* and Paine (pg. 102)
  - *LOP:* except from *Common Sense* (pg. 153)
  - *HR:* 'Voice of Common Sense' (pg. 177)

- "THREE-FIFTHS COMPROMISE" IN CONSTITUTION DEFINED STATUS OF SLAVES:
  - *AH:* does not appear
  - *LOP:* Three-Fifths compromise (pg. 193)
  - *HR:* bold italics (pg. 204)

- THEODORE ROOSEVELT WAS PRESIDENT BETWEEN 1895-1912:
  - *AH:* years in office (index)
  - *LOP:* years in office (pg. 150)
  - *HR:* years in office (pg. 642)

- SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR MADE U.S. AN INTERNATIONAL POWER:
  - *AH:* Spanish-American War (pg. 422)
  - *LOP:* Spanish-American War (pg. 132)
  - *HR:* Results of the War (pg. 125-26)

- MAGNA CARTA IS FOUNDATION OF BRITISH PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM:
  - *AH:* does not appear
  - *LOP:* Magna Carta (pg. 49)
  - *HR:* Magna Carta (pg. 92)

- ABRAHAM LINCOLN WAS PRESIDENT BETWEEN 1860-1880:
  - *AH:* years in office (index)
  - *LOP:* years in office (pg. 547)
  - *HR:* years in office (pg. 589)

- JOHN WINTHROP AND THE PURITANS FOUNDED A COLONY IN BOSTON:
  - *AH:* important Puritans
  - *LOP:* The Puritan Experiment (pg. 62-3)
  - *HR:* Massachusetts Bay Colony (pg. 100-03)

Appendix C: Numbers of Facts in a History Text

Berkin, Carol and Leonard Wood. (1983). *Land of promise a history of the United States: From 1865* (vol. 2, 594 pages). Scott, Foresman and Company.

FACTS: (pgs. 316-318)

- 1950 Sen. Joseph McCarthy makes his first charges, launching era of "McCarthyism"
- 1952 Eisenhower elected president
- 1953 Stalin dies
  truce in Korea
  beginning of policy of massive retaliation
  McCarthy-Senate investigation begins
- 1954 Eisenhower reduces armed forces
  French defeated at Dien Bien Phu
  Brown v. Board of Education declares segregated schools illegal
- 1955 U.S. and Soviet Union meet at Geneva Summit
  A.F.L. and C.I.O. merge
- 1956 Montgomery bus boycott
  Federal-Aid Highway Act
  Nasser nationalizes Suez Canal
  Soviet troops crush Hungarian revolt
  Eisenhower re-elected
- 1957 Eisenhower Doctrine announced
  Civil Rights Act passed
  Little Rock crisis
  Soviets launch Sputnik
  Teamsters Union expelled from A.F.L.-C.I.O
- 1958 U.S. marines land in Lebanon
  Berlin crisis begins
- 1959 Fidel Castro wins revolution in Cuba
  Berlin crisis ends
  Khrushchev visits U.S.
- 1960 U-2 shot down over Soviet Union
- Sen. McCarthy, Republican from Wisconsin, dominates American political scene from early 1950 through 19564
- election of Eisenhower took place under shadow of "McCarthyism"
- Sen. McCarthy first came to nation's attention in February 1950 as the result of a speech he gave in Wheeling, West Virginia
- McCarthy charges 205 individuals within the State Department as being members of the Communist party
- attention paid to McCarthy by the press paved the way for his prominence in American politics

- Senate investigation in 1952 concluded that McCarthy's charges were false and malicious, however, McCarthy kept making them
- McCarthy not first individual to make charges about communist subversion in the government - but personal style fueled fear and anger felt by many Americans
- McCarthy targeted New Dealers and liberal Democrats
- McCarthy appealed to Americans by posing as an avenging private eye out to right the wrongs of the "New Deal Establishment"
- McCarthy interested in taking on what he called the "commiecrats" and "perverts" of Washington
- many Republican officials saw McCarthy as a godsend for GOP: Wisconsin Senator had put the Democrats on the defensive and for the first time since the Great Depression, Republicans had chance to seize political initiative
- because of McCarthy's accusations, thousands of government officials were driven from their jobs
- many officials were blacklisted (cut off from employment opportunities)
- some local schools tried removing *Robin Hood* from library shelves because the theme of robbing the rich and giving to the poor was "red"
- Cincinnati Reds changed their name to Cincinnati Redlegs
- new red scare called "McCarthyism" swept the nation
- "McCarthyism" was the use of unsubstantiated accusations of treason, support for communism, or "un-American" thinking
- officials of both parties were troubled by McCarthy's tactics but many went along with Senator's position
- respected and normally principled Robert Taft (R) urged McCarthy on
- Republican support of McCarthy's accusations were strong while Truman (D) in the White House; after Eisenhower elected president in 1952 Republican party began to regard McCarthy as an embarrassment
- none of McCarthy's charges were proven but his reckless accusations did a great deal of damage
- careers of many government officials, college professors, and entertainment figures were ruined or severely harmed because of the fear generated by McCarthy
- in 1953 McCarthy accused the U.S. Army of being a hotbed of communism
- 1954 - Senate began holding public hearings to examine McCarthy's charges; proceedings were televised and open to the public
- December 1954 - McCarthy was censured by his colleagues in the Senate for "conduct unbecoming a member"

- to "censure" is to publicly criticize or rebuke
- Senate's censure of McCarthy swept away much of his support and he quickly faded from public view
- in 1956 McCarthy died as a man with little influence and no respect; ignored by the public which had once feared and perhaps admired him
- as 1952 presidential election approached, Truman could muster approval rating of just 26% in the public opinion polls
- Truman's Administration was saddled with scandals, an unpopular war in Korea, and accusations of being "soft on communism"
- at home, during the last stages of the Truman Presidency the economy was growing, employment was up, and Americans were prospering