E.D. Hirsch makes a new push for focusing in early grades on subject matter, not learning styles

By Glenn C. Altschuler  |  September 27, 2009

In February 2008, after she'd had her 15 minutes of fame on “American Idol,” Kellie Pickler appeared on the Fox TV game show, “Are You Smarter Than A Fifth Grader?” She wasn’t. Asked to name the European country whose capital is Budapest, Kellie was stumped. “I thought Europe was a country,” she stammered. When she was told the right answer, Pickler was nonplussed: “That’s a country? I’ve heard of Turkey. But Hungry?”

For three decades, E.D. Hirsch Jr., a professor of Education and English literature at the University of Virginia, has argued that “child-centered” and “how to” pedagogical theories have produced the “cultural illiteracy” for which Pickler is the poster girl. Using scare slogans such as “lock-step education” and “rote memorization,” and exploiting “identity politics,” he has pointed out, progressive educators since the 1930s have discredited a subject-matter curriculum as reactionary, authoritarian, and elitist. The results, by almost all measures, have been catastrophic.

In “The Making of Americans,” Hirsch elaborates on and extends his proposals for a root-and-branch reform of US public schools. A good general education in the early grades, organized around a core curriculum, he claims, will help close the competence gap between American students and their counterparts in other countries and the equality gap between economically disadvantaged African-American and Hispanic students and more affluent whites. And it’s “the necessary foundation for citizenship, literacy, effective use of computers, and, in the new economic era, for speedy and successful job retraining.”

Based on research in cognitive studies and results from “core knowledge” schools, Hirsch’s case is clear and compelling. His book ought to be read by anyone interested in the education and training of the next generation of Americans.

Among the sacred cows he takes on is the claim, advanced in the 1970s by the National Council of Teachers of English, and still embraced by many education theorists, that students have a right to speak and write in any “dialects in which they find their own identity and style” - even if their mastery of standard American English is impeded. Whether it’s “the dialect of power,” Hirsch writes, with eminent good sense, standard English is the “great organ” of economic mobility and professional advancement.

Even more importantly, Hirsch reminds us that all communication “takes place in a context of shared, unspoken knowledge and values.” “What shocked me into school reform,” he reveals, was discovering that African-American students at a community college in Richmond could read just as well as undergraduates at the University of Virginia when the topic was roommates or car travel, but were woefully behind in comprehending passages about the Civil War. That’s why it’s a fallacy to assume that “critical thinking” - about photography, football, France, or photosynthesis - can be learned in the absence of “mere facts.”

Dismissing the question “Who will decide?” as a rhetorical ploy, not an argument, Hirsch insists that public administrators and teachers can - and have - formulated acceptable and effective core curricula (and includes one in the appendix). These curricula can accommodate change over time; they can incorporate multicultural information into history and social science syllabi.

It’s no accident, according to Hirsch, that Massachusetts, which has rather specific knowledge guidelines and challenging tests, has vaulted to the top among the states in average verbal standardized test score - without neglecting low-income students. In fact, instituting a grade-by-grade core for all public institutions is especially helpful to disadvantaged youngsters, about 70 percent of whom change schools by the time they reach third grade. When students are familiar with the context of classroom discourse, no child is as likely to be left behind.

Contending, a bit hyperbolically, that “there are no good, educational arguments against a coherent, content-specific core curriculum,” Hirsch blames a cabal of “professorial gurus,” entrenched in departments of education throughout the country, for prejudice against “commonality.” Their power to resist pressure from parents and
politicians "is a case study in intellectual monopoly within a free society."

Professors, it's true, rarely change their minds. But, in all likelihood, they'll give way if, somehow, the principle of common content in the curriculum can be de-politicized. Political liberals can be educational conservatives. The concepts of the American melting pot of shared ideas and values and the multicultural salad bowl the nation has become are not mutually exclusive concepts. They can't be, Hirsch reminds us, "if we are to have a bowl to hold the salad."

Promoting civic engagement, cultural literacy, and skills in reading, writing, and textual analysis, through a core curriculum may not be the answer to the crisis of public education in the United States. “The Making of Americans” surely demonstrates, however, that the approach could be - and in some instances already is - an answer. And we can't afford to wait. A mind, after all, is a terrible thing to waste.

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