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A Critical Review of E. D. Hirsch's The Making of Americans

A quick review of E. D. Hirsch's book publications through the 1960s and 70s shows that his writing focused on Romantic poetry, philosophy, and composition. In the late 1980s, however, he shifted focus to education reform with the publication of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (1987) and has continued writing on the theme of core knowledge through today. In 1988, he published The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, which was updated in 2002 in the form of The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. The dictionaries were premised on Hirsch's thesis that the achievement gap is caused by a knowledge gap and developing cultural literacy is the key to closing the achievement gap. To further his point, Hirsch published The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them in 1996, The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children in 2006. Most recently, in 2016, he published Why Knowledge Matters: Rescuing Our Children from Failed Educational Theories. His 2009 book, The Making of Americans: Democracy in Our Schools, makes essentially the same argument about core knowledge as Cultural Literacy but differs from the earlier work in its emphasis on American exceptionalism.

For this project, I decided to read and review The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools because I mistakenly thought the book addressed the achievement gap between general education students and immigrant English Language Learners. In retrospect, it was the picture on the front cover of the book that led to my mistaken assumption about the book. The

picture shows three smiling elementary-aged children in school uniforms: one appears to be Afro-Caribbean, another Latin American, and the third Eastern European. As a teacher of immigrant English Language Learners (ELLs), I immediately assumed that the children in the picture were from immigrant families whose first language was not English and who primarily spoke a language other than English at home. Few books about ELLs and education reform for ELLs are written for people who do not teach ELL students.

The dearth of books about reforms in ELL education is most likely because teaching ELLs requires specialized training that general education teachers generally do not receive and most schools, districts, and states lack coherent plans for how to close the achievement gap for ELL students. ELLs are challenging to teach, especially if there are only one or two in a general education classroom. They need special language scaffolds, leveled reading materials as low as Pre-Reader to 3rd for recent arrivals, and differentiated handouts with a lot of language and graphic support. Depending on native language literacy and motivation, ELLs acquire Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) in about two years and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in five to seven years. I was interested to know how Hirsch thought a core knowledge curriculum could be applied to the teaching of such high-needs students.

The idea of a core knowledge curriculum appeals to me for two reasons. First, on a personal level, I have always been disturbed by the lack of coherent instruction ELLs receive because they come to school with vastly different academic skills and experiences. Essentially, most ELL teachers reinvent their curricula every year. I was very interested to see what Hirsch thought about the current state of ELL instruction. Second, I am a proponent of standardized curricula as a means of quality control to minimize teacher freelancing and maximize students'

access to knowledge. One challenge ELL teachers face is remediating work without lowering expectations or denying students access to higher-order thinking and rigorous work. Some teachers simply do not try to push ELL students beyond remediated work. In an effort to understand a new (to me) and alternative viewpoint in the education debate, I wanted to understand why Hirsch viewed a core knowledge curriculum as the means by which schools could close the achievement gap for disadvantaged students. If his arguments and evidence were sound, I intended to recommend the book to my Principal for a possible professional development session.

To my surprise, The Making of Americans is not about the education of ELL students. Instead, it is an extended, 188-page explanation of the social justice foundation upon which Hirsch argues for a core knowledge curriculum. Added in the mix is a healthy dose of American exceptionalism. Essentially, Hirsch argues that public education needs to return to the common schools model advocated by Horace Mann and the philosophical roots espoused by Thomas Jefferson. The goal of American education should be the assimilation of native-born and immigrant children into the political life of the country and, according to Hirsch, this goal is only achieved by Americanizing children in public schools. According to Hirsch, "competence brings community. To equalize opportunity through schooling is to create competent and loyal citizens" (*xi*). For Hirsch, who consciously builds upon the intellectual and reform foundations laid by Jefferson and Mann, only citizens who are able to participate in the country's political life are truly equal. People who cannot participate due to language and cultural barriers, he argues, can never be equal because they cannot access equal opportunities or fully participate in democratic processes. Hirsch constructs his argument by making six mutually reinforcing key points. The unifying theme of these key points is American exceptionalism.

Central to Hirsch's overarching argument about core knowledge is the distinction among the public and private spheres in American life. To clarify, the private sphere is the home, the church, and wherever else people go about their daily lives without interacting with the government. In contrast, the public sphere is the Common: the court system; the town hall; the DMV; etc. According to Hirsch, the distinction between these two spheres is a hallmark of American democracy and historically it created a need for common language, common values, common assumptions, common loyalties, and common symbols in the public sphere. Without these commonalities, the public sphere cannot function properly; therefore, at the beginning of the tax-payer funded system of public education, instituted by Thomas Jefferson, public schools were seen as means by which children could be educated in common language and common knowledge required for participation in the public sphere.

At the same time, the separation of church and state prevented public schools from interfering with students' lives in the private sphere (6). Hirsch traces a direct line from Jefferson's original, tax-payer funded public schools to Mann's common school movement (8) and argues that "The distinction between the private and public spheres is a founding conception… [and] the public sphere cannot exist as a democratic vehicle for everyone unless everyone is schooled to participate in it" (58). For Hirsch, participation in the public sphere is essential for equal opportunity and knowing the common language and common knowledge of the public sphere is essential for participation; therefore, the root of the inequality we see today is the result of our public schools' shift away from their historic mission and the resulting diminished access to the public sphere experienced by disadvantaged children.

Hirsch blames Dewey entirely for public education's shift away from its historic mission of citizen-making to a child-centered, anti-curriculum movement (26). He also blames Dewey for

the achievement gap that he believes stems from students' lack of common language and general ignorance common knowledge. In contrast, in Anti-intellectualism in America, Hofstadter argues that Dewey is not to blame. Instead, "The problem…arose from the fact that the concept of individual growth became a hostage in the hands of educational thinkers who were obsessed with the child-centered school" (374). He continues by arguing the Progressives who took Dewey's ideas "hostage" created an "historical effect" that distorted Dewey's original ideas and intentions.

For Hirsch, however, it is Dewey's rejection of the curriculum, which was necessary in order to have a child-centered curriculum, which is the central problem (27) and all the negative "historical effects" resulting from the hostage-takers' perversions of Dewey's ideas were inevitable because they all stemmed from the same anti-curriculum core in Dewey's thinking (36); therefore, in Hirsch's mind Dewey is the root of the problem. For evidence, Hirsch points to SAT Math and Reading test scores that start declining in 1962 and remain low through today (41). According to Hirsch, these results make perfect sense because the reorientation of public schools away from civic education to a child-centered, anti-curriculum education was complete by the end of the 1940s. By 1950, public school children were not learning a common language or common body of knowledge; therefore, they were not acquiring the knowledge they would need to be successful on standardized assessment tests. It is at this point in the book that Hirsch briefly discusses another key point in his argument, which relates to the connection of common knowledge and reading comprehension, but he does not fully explain it before making two other key points. The disjointed nature of this part of his argument makes it difficult to track because it weaves in and out of every chapter.

In addition to shifting the mission of public education away from civics, and thus undermining equal opportunity and inclusion in the public sphere, Hirsch also faults Dewey for privileging the private sphere over the public sphere (24-25). This inversion of emphasis public and private spheres in child-centered curricula combined with identity politics and the multiculturalism movement to further obscure, according to Hirsch, what should be the real terms of the debate about American identity and assimilation. For Hirsch, native and immigrant children need to be assimilated and Americanized so that everyone can have equal access to opportunities and participate fully in democratic institutions and processes. Again, Hirsch returns to a key idea: "Fundamental to this founding concept [*E pluribus unum*] is the distinction between the public and private spheres of life" (22). The private sphere, or "salad bowl," is where people are meant to retain their unique identities, linguistic differences, and religious preferences (22). In contrast, the public sphere is the Melting Pot where people are meant to communicate with each other, interact with governmental institutions, and participate in civic activities (22-23). The public sphere cannot function if people do have shared values and common language.

For Hirsch, the Progressive movement's emphasis on developing child-centered curricula translated into units of study that privileged group identity and undermined the development of an inclusive American identity. This created a foundation for identity politics and multiculturalism in public education. By arguing against a coherent curriculum on the grounds of wanting to avoid cultural hegemony, Hirsch argues that today's Progressive educators and New Left proponents of multiculturalism are just as anti-curriculum as Dewey and the Progressives of the past (61). Also, rejecting a curriculum based on the common language and common knowledge of the public sphere (because doing so further oppresses minority students by

imposing a top-down curriculum that only represents the dominant culture) works against the interests of the same disadvantaged students the reformers claim to be helping (61). By emphasizing that which makes them different, multicultural education reformers are ensuring that students learn about things that do not help them gain access to the public sphere. At the same time, their rejection of a curriculum that teaches common language and common knowledge further denies students access to the public sphere by decreasing the likelihood that they will ever learn the words, symbols, values, and concepts needed for access to opportunities in higher education and civic life.

For Hirsch, the way to address the achievement gap is to undo the address the achievement gap Dewey created by shifting the mission of public education back to creating citizen-making. Competent citizens can access more economic and educational opportunities and fully participate in democratic processes. Had Hirsch stopped there, his book would not be so controversial but he went further by privileging American citizenship over other forms of citizenship. American schools should make American citizens, according to Hirsch, because our exceptionalism makes us better than other countries. It is his belief in American exceptionalism that will cause some readers to stop reading at this point in the book. It is worthwhile to stay the course, however, and see how Hirsch ties together all the threads of his argument.

Hirsch makes the most controversial claims in Chapter 3, “Transethnic America and the Civic Core,” when he says (65):

> It is uncontroversial that schools in a democracy have a duty to help form competent citizens… But take the next step. We don’t live in France or China. It is a duty of American schools to educate competent *American* citizens – hence my theme: *The Making of Americans*. For the past fifty years we have tiptoed around the idea that the schools should form Americans. Child-centered theories of education have focused more on individual formation than on citizen-making. More recently, identity politics has emphasized membership in subgroups over participation in

> the larger national community and has viewed traditional goals like assimilation and Americanization with suspicion…"

Clearly, he believes the emphasis should be Americanization and citizen-making that reinstates the needs of the public sphere into the curriculum of public schools. Importantly, Hirsch believes that participation in identity-based groups should not be discouraged or replaced, it should be relocated to the private sphere and, as a result, be handled very differently in school curricula. He unapologetically advocates for the creation of American citizens, not global citizens, based on a firm belief in American exceptionalism (65). Hirsch's strong belief in American exceptionalism is what makes this book even more controversial than his basic premise that students should receive basic instruction in core knowledge. Needless to say, critics of American exceptionalism will have a heyday attacking Hirsch for this book, which will no doubt relegate his argument about the connection between citizenship and social justice to the sidelines.

The concept of Americanization is controversial, according to Hirsch, because it has been conflated "militaristic jingoism" and debated by "triumphal patriots" and "critics of narrow nationalism" (65-66). By returning the mission of public education to citizen-making, and reinstituting a curriculum that teaches students the common language and common knowledge of the public sphere, Hirsch argues disadvantaged students will gain access to equal opportunities and democratic processes. Before this can happen, however, he says that "we must confront the difficult issue of citizen-making with more forthrightness.... [,] clarify the 'American' part of the school's responsibility… [, and] rediscover some basic agreements about the United States and its ideals…" (67). In order to accomplish this three-part task, Hirsch says we must look to Abraham Lincoln for guidance. Hirsch argues Lincoln's conception of democracy as a "secular religion," also called civil religion, should form the basis civic education in our public schools (68). Lincoln's civil religion emphasizes abstract, universal principles like justice, liberty, and

equality. For this reason, Hirsch says, it should be amenable to both the Left and the Right. Further, because of its emphasis on universal equality, Lincoln's "civil religion is antagonistic to racism, sexism, jingoism, [and] injustice" (90). Finally, for the aforementioned reasons, it is incomparable to the "narrow nationalism and militaristic flag-waving" of Nazi Germany (91-91). For Hirsch, the ultimate goal is to engender an "emotional commitment" to American democracy and this can only be achieved through an Americanization process based on Lincoln's concept of civil religion.

The final controversial point Hirsch makes is that students need to receive direct instruction in the two things that will give them "the keys to the kingdom," or access to the public sphere: Standard English and standard knowledge. The mere fact that Hirsch acknowledges the existence of Standard English and then proceeds to say that non-standard English should *not* be taught is interesting because it so blatantly flies in the face of politically acceptable pedagogy. Hirsch does not stop there, however. He argues that reformers who oppose teaching Standard English inadvertently work against the interests of the disadvantaged students they are trying to help by denying them access to the public sphere.

The main point of his argument is that American democracy in the public sphere operates by using a common language and that common language is Standard English (100-101). He directly address the charge that Standard English excludes language minorities by pointing out that "We took over from the English a language that was already standardized" as a result of British spelling books, grammar books, and dictionaries (103). The standardized language Americans have been speaking since the beginning has remained relatively stable, despite the addition of words like *app*, *Internet*, and *meme*, and has always been the common language of the public sphere (104) despite the fact that the United States lacks an official language. For

Hirsch, failing to teach Standard English is yet another means by which disadvantaged students are further disadvantaged by schools today. He says, "Children who have not been properly taught the stable, standard forms can never belong to the top tier of society. This point cannot be too strongly emphasized…" (107). Earlier in the chapter entitled "Linguistic America and the Public Sphere," he fleshes out his thinking more in a passage that is worth quoting in full (99-100):

> By refusing to teach it explicitly, we deny children a vital tool that they need to participate fully in civic activity, make their voices heard, and make their grievances felt. We limit their job prospects and economic viability and sentence them to a life of harsh judgments from members of the broader speech community about their intelligence and abilities, based solely on their inability to communicate in the standard dialect. By equating the teaching of a standard American dialect with oppression and by refusing to give students the linguistic tools they need to be full participants in society; we are in fact oppressing them.

The second part of this key point is the connection between Standard English and standard knowledge, which is that they are inextricably linked in the public sphere (113); therefore, students must acquire both in order to gain full access to opportunity.

Hirsch argues that students needs direct instruction in order to learn the body of shared knowledge that is linked with Standard English in the public sphere. He says, "As a transethnic nation, we have a greater need for an *invented* common public sphere… The medium of this public sphere is language, which cannot be disentangled from specific, commonly shared knowledge" (186). Here, Hirsch circles back to the earlier point he made about plummeting reading comprehension scores. Reading comprehension scores started dropping in 1962, he argues, because students did not have enough shared knowledge to comprehend what they were reading. In order to improve reading scores, then, schools must teach shared knowledge so that students can achieve academic success. For comprehension, a student must know 90% of the

words on a page (139). (In the professional development I have received and in my experience as a teacher of ELL students, this number is incorrect – students must know 95% of the words on the page in order to comprehend a text.) Semantic awareness, then, is the foundation of reading comprehension. The foundation of semantic awareness, in turn, is prior or background knowledge (143).

Without background knowledge, there is little basis for meaningful reading comprehension; therefore, building background knowledge is at the center of Hirsch's education reform plan. He advocates the building of background knowledge through a slow, cumulative process (143) that develops the core knowledge required of anyone for participation in the public sphere. Hirsch wants a carefully sequenced core knowledge curriculum in place in K-8 public schools. He advocates direct instruction of the curriculum and of Standard English, both with the express purpose of creating American citizens. This project must be done in common schools with a common core curriculum because "That unifying knowledge cannot be learned in our hugely diverse homes, as it is in more homogeneous countries" (186). For Hirsch, the way to achieve his goals is to have common schools adopt a K-8 core knowledge curriculum, embrace Lincoln's civil religion as the basis of civic education, reject identity politics, and fear nota return to direct instruction.

After The Making of Americans, I am generally convinced by Hirsch's overall argument about the need for a core knowledge curriculum and the need to teach Standard English, but I question several of his claims and think his goal of social justice for disadvantaged students is unattainable unless he finds a way to apply his core knowledge curriculum to secondary education. The book has several shortcomings. First, Hirsch provides very little hard data or references to research studies to support his claims. Instead, he relies on anecdotes. Next, he

talks about equal access and equal opportunity, but he never describes what he means or what those concepts look like in the real world. Finally, he unabashedly espouses American exceptionalism without, in my mind, giving truly compelling reasons to support his position. These objections are minor, however, compared to what he says about the limits of his core knowledge curriculum when it comes to children who enter school in grades 6-8 and when it comes to secondary education.

The major shortcoming of what Hirsch proposes is that it will not work unless a student begins school at an early age with a core knowledge curriculum. This is because the core knowledge curriculum is only for grades K-8. Hirsch says “Wide knowledge and a large vocabulary – the prerequisites to achievement in high school – are gradual accretions. You cannot gain them by sudden intensive incursions in the later grades. With a slow, tenacious buildup of knowledge and vocabulary in elementary school, high school will almost take care of itself” (167). To me, this statement is laughable. Not only does Hirsch say his plan only works if implemented one way, he makes no attempt to apply his core knowledge reform plan to schools who teach disadvantaged students in secondary schools. Also, I am wary of his claim that, as a result of a core knowledge education, “high school will almost take care of itself.” How will this happen? Further, a quick review of demographic statistics in New York State and New York City public schools will make clear the reason why Hirsch’s lack of reform plan for secondary school students is highly problematic.

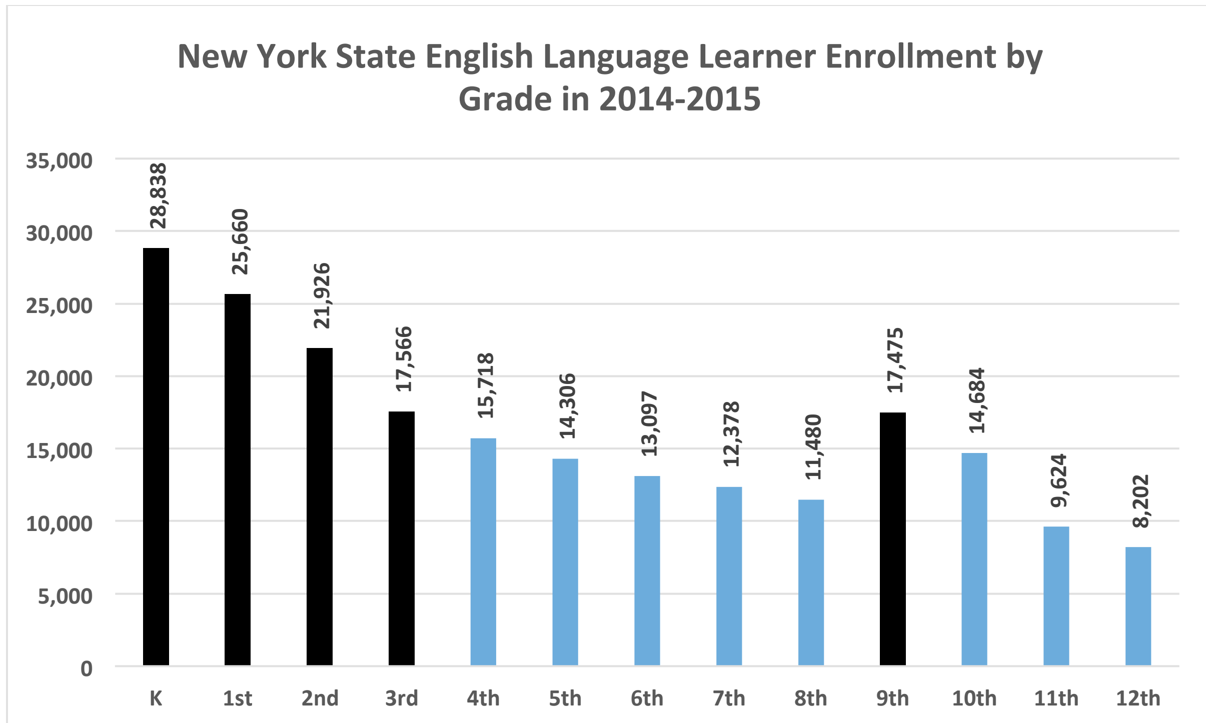

Figure 1. This bar graph shows K-12 enrollment in NY that was generated in a report from the New York State Education Department's data reporting website ("NY State Public School Enrollment 2014-15 K-12 Enrollment").

According to Figure 1, which shows New York State ELL K-12 enrollment, the largest number of ELL students are enrolled in K-3 and 9th grade, with more than 10,000 students per grade in 4-8 and a significant number in grade 10 (14,684). For ELL students starting school in K-3rd grade, Hirsch's core knowledge curriculum should, in theory, close the achievement gap by the time they reach high school. What happens, however, if a student enters school in 5th grade and lacks the core knowledge foundation the other students accumulated in grades K-4? Also, how is the core knowledge curriculum differentiated for high-needs students? Hirsch never provides any details about differentiation, instructional methods, enrichment, or remediation, so it is difficult to imagine the core knowledge curriculum being put into practice.

The biggest issue I have with the Hirsch is that he makes no effort to apply his ideas to secondary education. How can he claim that core knowledge is a social justice reform for all disadvantaged students if it only works for students who start at a very young age in the early

grades? For the 49,985 students in grades 9-12, he openly says that they cannot gain the "prerequisites to success in high school…by a sudden intensive incursion in later grades." What social justice reform does Hirsch propose for disadvantaged students in secondary schools? Perhaps we are supposed to wait until they either graduate or dropout. As someone who teaches disadvantaged ELLs, I assure you that Hirsch and other education reformers need to start thinking about this issue now because there is a much bigger problem coming down the pipeline in the form of Students with Interrupted Formal Education, or SIFE, students. Again, a quick look at the data will frame the problem.

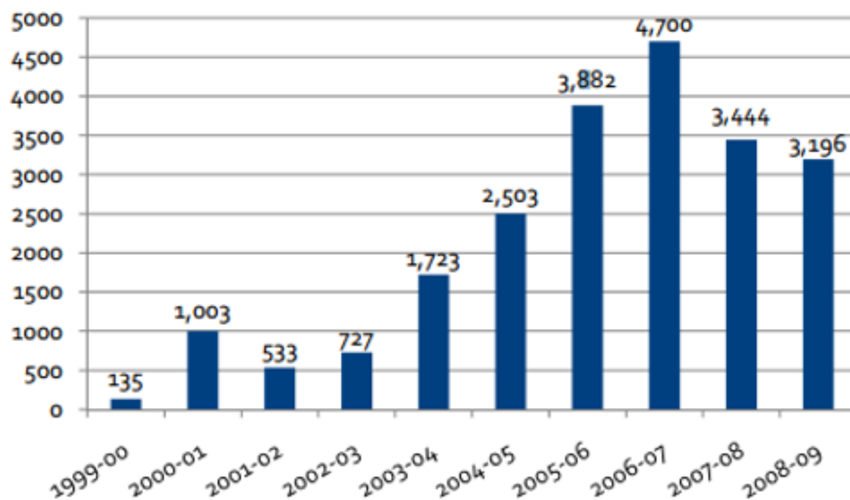

Figure 2. This bar graph shows the number of newly identified SIFE students in New York City public schools between 1999 and 2009 (Advocates for Children 10).

New York City is the only school district in the state to identify or track SIFE students, but the data are inconsistent because systems for identifying SIFE students are not standardized across schools. Often, SIFE students are mistakenly referred for Special Education services because schools do not realize they are SIFE. As of 2009, NYC schools identified a total of 15,410 students. They make up 1.44% of the total school population and it is estimated that they

make up 10% of the city's ELL population. Based on the existing data, the NYC Department of Education estimates that approximately 3000-3,500 *new* SIFE students enter the public school system every year. If you have never heard the term SIFE before, then you have no idea why these statistics matter.

SIFE students come to school with significant academic gaps. While some have attended school with a short interruption, it is more common to have students who attended school sporadically or not at all. An "average" SIFE student is functionally illiterate in his or her L1 (the home language) and completely illiterate in English. Most cannot read or write and some have never been to school before. They lack basic numeracy and cannot complete simple math problems, let alone use a calculator or follow a lesson in Algebra. Even so, most schools make no special provisions for the education of SIFE students, and they are unable to receive extra supportive services for their first year in the school system, so they are required to take general education classes and sit for state exams at the end of the year. None of this is to say that SIFE students are incapable of learning or achieving academic success, but merely to point out the extraordinary challenges they face. SIFE have greater social-emotional needs and academic gaps than beginner ELLs.

These needs and gaps are huge barriers to academic success that have real consequences in students' lives – they cannot complete job applications, access services, etc. Economically, they are often relegated very specific forms of low-wage labor like factory worker, laundry attendant, warehouse picker-packer, porter, etc. These jobs are rarely full-time, require a flexible schedule, and do not offer health benefits. SIFE students in secondary schools are very much in need of the equal access to opportunity Hirsch hopes to achieve with his core knowledge curriculum, which is why it is so unfortunate that he makes no attempt apply his idea to the

existing situation. Also, considering Hirsch's overarching concern with Americanization, it is strange to me that has nothing to say about how secondary schools should go about assimilating immigrant children. Another statistic shows why Hirsch should think about this issue.

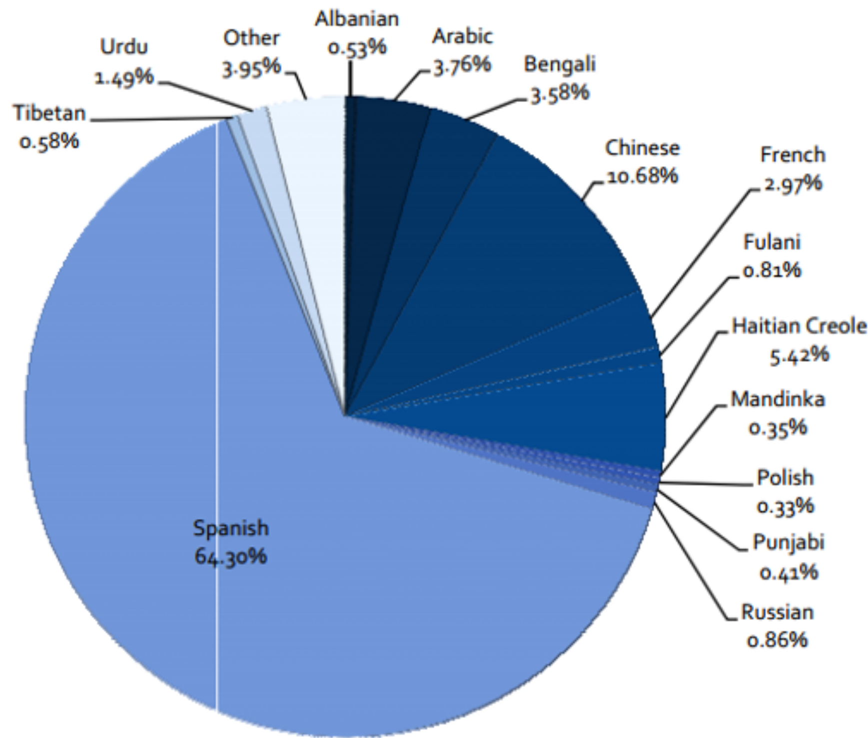

Figure 3. This pie chart shows the breakdown of home languages spoken by SIFE students in NYC public schools in 2009-2010 (Advocates for Children 11).

This pie chart clearly shows that SIFE students, especially those whose L1 is Spanish, constitute significant subgroups within the school population in NYC. Being immigrants, these students and their families almost certainly live in linguistically and culturally segregated neighborhoods in the city. This most likely means they have strong allegiances to their subgroup connections in the private sphere and a tenuous connection to the public sphere through the schools they attend. If they are to be assimilated and Americanized, as Hirsch proposes, NYC public schools must provide them with effective and engaging instruction. The stakes are high for these students because they face so many barriers to success and barriers to opportunities.

More data show that the highest-needs and most disadvantaged students are concentrated in secondary schools, not elementary schools.

Grade	Number of SIFE	Percentage of all SIFE
3	458	3.0%
4	676	4.4%
5	891	5.8%
6	1,041	6.8%
7	1,351	8.8%
8	1,619	10.5%
9	2,889	18.7%
10	3,108	20.2%
11	1,751	11.4%
12	1,626	10.6%
TOTAL	15,410	100%

Figure 4. This table shows the distribution of SIFE students in grades 3-12 in the 2009-2010 school year in NYC public schools (Advocates for Children 13).

If Hirsch is correct, and "middle school is rather late to begin intensive work in language" (149), then there is little hope for secondary teachers who have ELL and/or SIFE students in their classrooms. According to Figure 4, 39% of SIFE students in 2009-2010 were in grade 3-8 and the remaining 61% were in grades 9-12. In high school, the largest percent of SIFE students were in grades 9 and 10 (38.9% combined). In looking at these statistics, it is very important to keep in mind that I am only discussing SIFE students in reference to Figures 2, 3, and 4. SIFE students are a subgroup of ELLs (Figure 1). They make up approximately 10% of the larger ELL population and have very special needs that require highly specialized training in literacy and pedagogy. If Hirsch truly believes that his core knowledge curriculum is the key to closing the achievement gap by teaching all students what they need to know in order to access the public sphere, then he needs to think about how he can re-tool his approach to make his definition of "all" more inclusive of the most high-needs students. Recent arrival ELL students who speak no English and SIFE students in secondary schools are clearly not included in Hirsch's conception

of "all" students, yet they are the ones most in need of the language and knowledge that will allow them access to opportunities and full participation. Right now, our schools are failing these students, which is evidenced by graduation statistics.

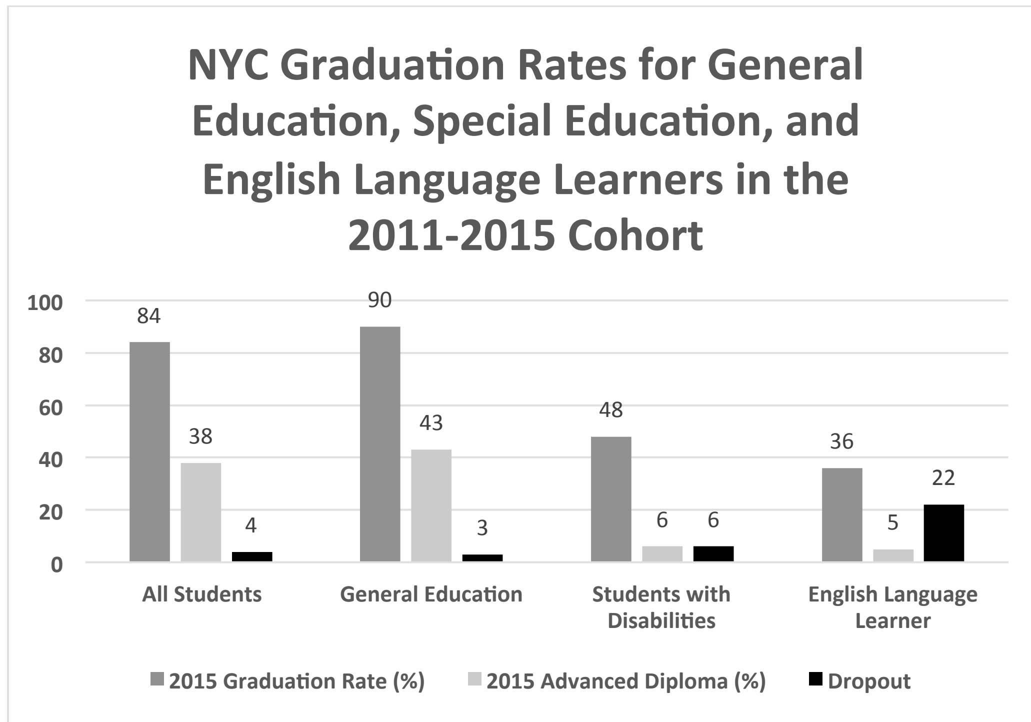

Figure 5. This bar graph shows NYC graduation rates for General Education students, Students with Disabilities, and English Language Learners from the 2011-2015 Cohort. According to NYSED (NY State Graduation Rate Data 4 Year Outcome as of June (NYC ELL filter), there were 2,649,039 students enrolled in K-12 in NYS in 2014-2015, of which 217,804 were ELLs. In grades 9-12, there were 49,985 ELLs and in the graduating cohort in 2015 there were a total of 7,326 ELL students.

The graduation data in Figure 5 clearly show NYC public schools are successful when it comes to education General Education students, but failing when it comes to ELL students and, by extension, SIFE students. Overall, General Education students have the highest graduation and Advanced Diploma rates (90% and 43%, respectively) and the lowest dropout rate (3%) compared to any other category of student. In contrast, ELLs have the lowest graduation and Advanced Diploma rates (36% and 5%, respectively) and the highest dropout rate (22%). These graduation and dropout statistics warrant a closer look to see the demographic breakdown within

the designation of ELL. Looking closer yields even more unsettling information when placed in the context of Hirsch's claims.

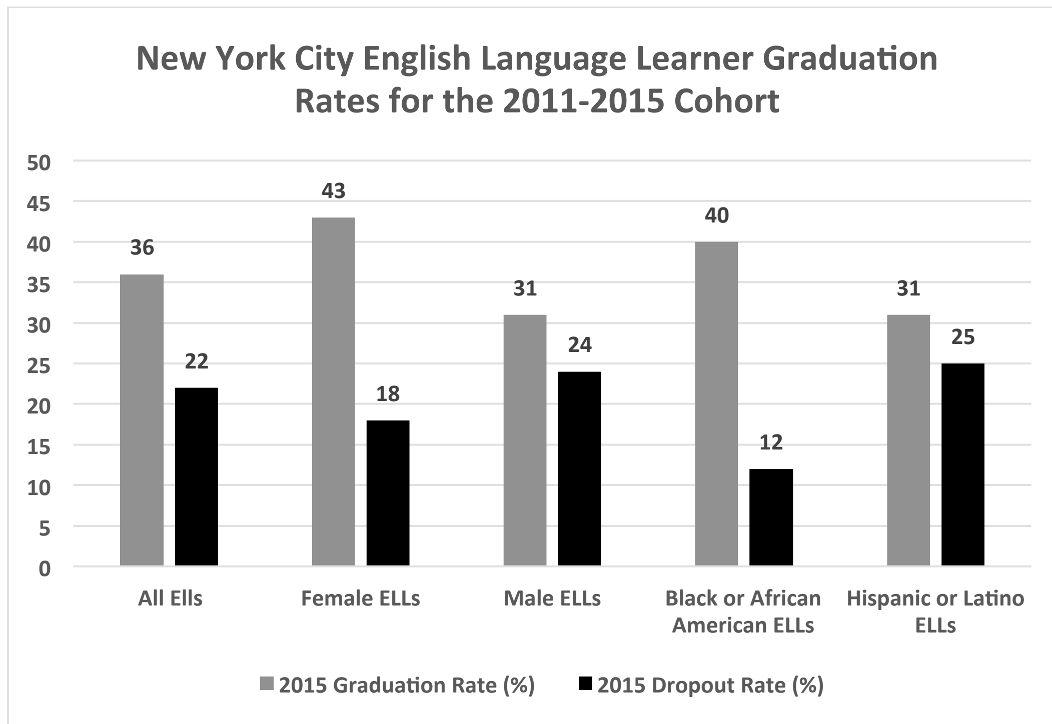

Figure 6. This bar graph shows NYC graduation rates for ELL students in the 2014-15 cohort (NY State Graduation Rate Data 4 Year Outcome as of June (NYC ELL filter).

These data are important for two reasons. First they show that female ELLs fare better than male ELLs. They have a higher graduation rate (43%) and a lower dropout rate (18%) compared to males (31% and 24%, respectively). Second, they show that Hispanic or Latino ELLs are in trouble. They have a low graduation rate (31%) and a high dropout rate (25%). In contrast, public schools seem to be doing an acceptable job engaging and educating Black or African American ELLs, since they have the largest difference between graduation and dropout rates (40% and 12%, respectively). All in all, however, a total graduation rate of 36% for all ELLs is terrible and indicates a failure in public education system to address the needs of ELL and SIFE students in secondary schools. If these trends continue, we will see larger

concentrations of ethnic minorities living in segregated neighborhoods in the city. Members of these minority communities who do not experience academic success in public schools will fail to access the public sphere and turn to their subgroup affiliations for community. Without any strong connections to the public sphere, according to Hirsch, they will lack economic opportunities, democratic representation, and legal recourse.

Based on my teaching experience, I believe there is a case for Hirsch's approach – the need for a core curriculum, direct instruction, and an emphasis on Standard English – is appropriate and fits the needs of ELL and SIFE students. ELL teachers already use a mix of direction instruction and project-based learning, but what is missing is a coherent curriculum that minimizes teacher freelancing, maximizes consistency, and emphasizes content. Another thing ELL teachers already do explicit teach language and language usage. What is missing, however, is the emphasis on Standard English. I agree with Hirsch that allowing non-standard English to pass as acceptable works against the long-term interests of students.

That said, I am confused as to how such an instructional shift can be implemented with very high-needs students in secondary school. Being an overworked and underpaid teacher, I have neither the time nor the energy to address this question. Hirsch, however, had plenty of time over his thirty-five years of publishing about educational reform. Now that his Core Knowledge Foundation has published curriculum guides for each grade K-8, it is time he turned his attention to the needs of disadvantaged students in secondary schools.

In conclusion, The Making of Americans: Democracy in Our Schools is a compelling read and I recommend it to anyone interested in education reform. Hirsch's unapologetic argument is that Dewey's Progressive movement is to blame for the problems we see today and that the anti-curriculum impulses of progressivism, identity politics, and multiculturalism do

more harm than good. He also argues in favor of Americanization and American exceptionalism. While I do not agree with everything he says, I do agree with need to return to a core curriculum and direct instruction, as well as the need to teach Standard English. I found this book particularly helpful because it articulated for me the problems I see on a regular basis when teachers freelance, administrators ask teachers to re-create the curriculum wheel from year-to-year, and grading rubrics on standardized writing tests allow for "holistic grading" that does not penalize students for grammar, spelling, and punctuation mistakes so long as they do not hinder the reader's comprehension. I have always felt that these policies and grading procedures lowered standards for students, but could never fully articulate the "big picture" for why it mattered. Now, after reading this book, I am armed with a coherent argument for why students need to be held to high language usage standards and a body of core knowledge – because that information bolsters reading comprehension and gives them access to the public sphere. I want my students to access the public sphere so that they can have educational and employment options, legal recourse, and democratic representation. These are the reasons why Hirsch's book is an important read.

Works Cited

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