

Education Reform Reconsidered

Michael P. Federici

THE CURRENT DEBATE concerning education in America has resulted in numerous publications and studies which analyze the collapse of standards in our schools. Most of these recently published essays and books include both an analysis of why students are not learning about their cultural heritage and recommendations that suggest how to improve the quality of education. Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr.'s book *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* statistically documents what we have known for several years—our schools are failing to transmit cultural knowledge to the rising generation. Their book presents the results of a national assessment of 17-year-old students' knowledge of history and literature. Not surprisingly, the assessment is discouraging. The nearly 8,000 17-year-old students participating in the sample failed, as a group, to score above 60 percent on both the literature and history parts of the test.¹

The reason today's students do so poorly on such tests is no mystery. We have known that our schools are failing to transmit cultural knowledge for some time. More than forty years ago Walter Lippmann explained in an article published in *The Commonwealth* that "during the past forty or fifty years those responsible for education have progressively removed from the curriculum of studies the western culture which produced the modern democratic state. . . ."² The removal of Western culture from the curriculum has been the subject of several recent publications. In addition to the Ravitch-Finn study E.D. Hirsch, Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy*, and NEH Chairman Lynne V. Cheney's *American*

Memory have contributed to the growing evidence that American schools have abandoned the traditional humanities curriculum.

Hirsch's book *Cultural Literacy* argues that the dominant theories of education in America derive their understanding of the methods and purpose of education from the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and the American pragmatist John Dewey (1859-1952). Rousseau's belief in the natural goodness of man shapes his view that education is a natural process. "He thought," writes Hirsch, "that a child's intellectual and social skills would develop naturally without regard to the specific content of education."³ Consequently, the twentieth-century disciples of

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Dewey, Hirsch argues, is responsible for bringing Rousseau's educational theory to America. He precipitated the Rousseauistic prejudice against "information." "Believing that a few direct experiences would suffice to develop the skills that children require," Hirsch charges, "Dewey assumed that early education need not be tied to specific content."⁴ But, contrary to Dewey and Rousseau's belief, content is vitally important for communication and the transmission of cultural traditions. Without a shared knowledge of the origins and meaning of culture it is unlikely that

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