

STANDARD CURRICULUM

The pages shown here are typical of the social studies curriculum for most second graders in the country. These excerpts happen to be from the new 1997 Houghton Mifflin second-grade social studies textbook, *Work Together*. We don't mean to pick on Houghton Mifflin; other textbooks are similar. Thousands and thousands of teachers are given books like these and told to teach from them.

Not only are the contents vacuous and boring—is there any child who finds this interesting? informative? useful?—but they jump from one topic to another in a

scattered, disjointed fashion that makes it difficult for even an adult to find the thread.

Some very rudimentary map skills are introduced, along with a basic introduction to the dictionary and how a library is organized, and there is a strangely unconnected smattering of history scattered throughout the book—something on the founding of Pittsburgh, a few pages on the Pilgrims, a history of “Earth Day,” two pages on Canada and two on Mexico (approximately fifty words each). But the overwhelming impression one is left with is that this curriculum

Our Needs and Wants

Needs are things people must have to live. We all need **food** to eat. We need **clothes** to wear. We need **shelter**, or cover, for protection. We also need **love** and friendship. Needs are the same for everyone all over the world.



Needs... Wants

Wants are important too. Wants are things we would like to have. Different people have different wants. What do you want?

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Pilgrims Plantation

People do not always have everything they need or want. Throughout time, people have had to use things that were easy to get. People must also choose what they can afford.



In 1627, Plymouth Plantation was a village in Massachusetts where families worked hard to get what they needed. Pilgrims grew their own vegetables, milked their goats, and hunted for meat and fish.

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In Plymouth today, people have an easier time finding food, clothing, and shelter. People still grow vegetables. They can also buy food in supermarkets or go to a restaurant.



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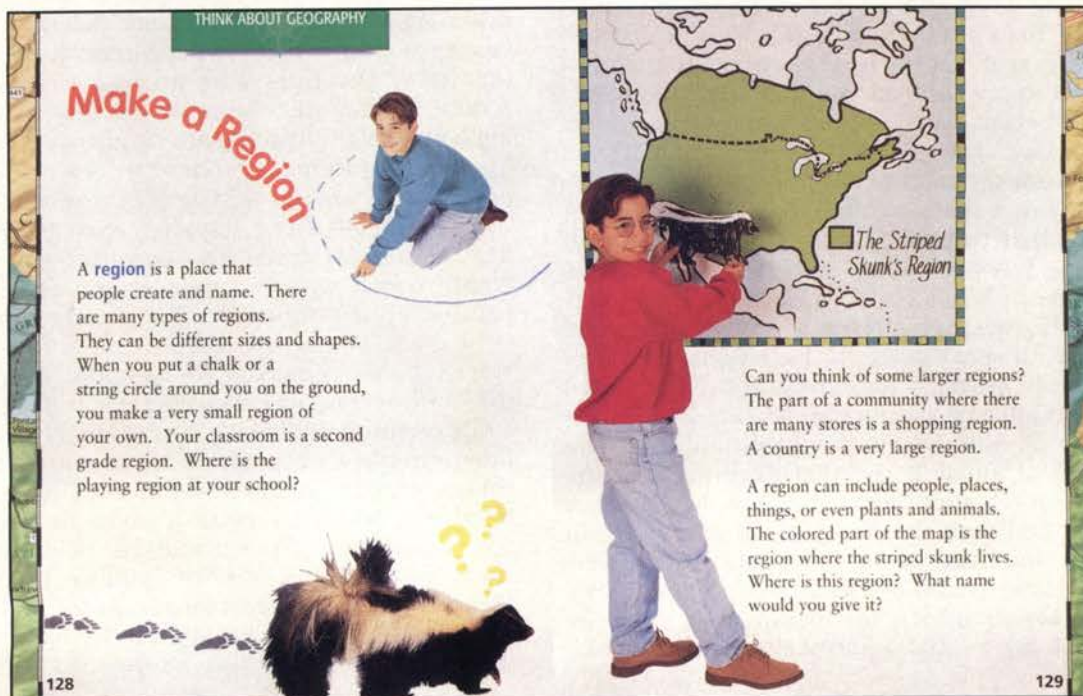
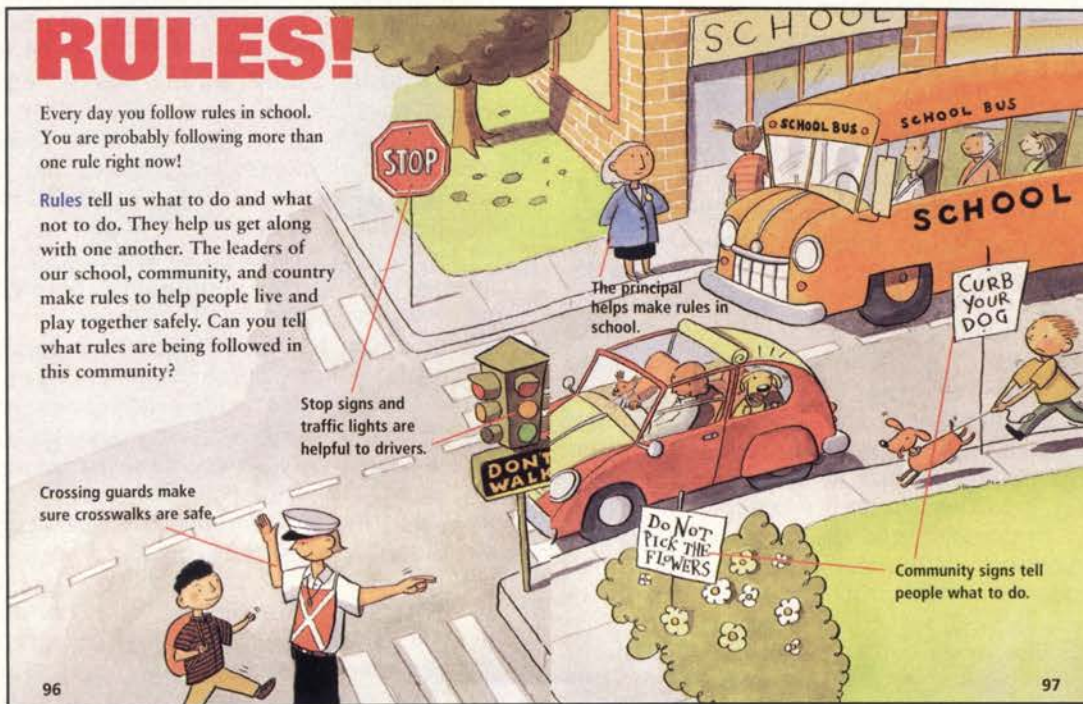
UNDERESTIMATES STUDENTS

“teaches” children very little that they don’t already know or will pick up by osmosis.

In contrast, here are the topics that Core Knowledge second-graders are taking up in the World Civilization (“Early Civilizations and History of World Religions: Asia”) section of their social studies curriculum, which builds upon what they learned in first grade: the geography of Asia, including the location of Russia, China, India, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam; India, including the Indus and Ganges Rivers, the caste system, Hinduism, and Buddhism; China, including the Huang He

and Yangtze Rivers, Confucius, ancestor worship, Qin Dynasty, Great Wall of China, the importance of silk, inventions—such as paper and the seismograph, and the Chinese New Year. In addition to these topics, students also study aspects of modern Japan, plus sections on American government; American history from the War of 1812 through the Civil War; immigration, cities, and citizenship; civil rights; and geography.

Some are skeptical that young children can master such an ambitious curriculum; but in fact, they do it and have fun doing so. —EDITOR



FORT COLLINS, COLORADO

(Continued from page 8)

helix, Niels Bohr, and supernovas in the sixth. The mathematics curriculum is traditional but rigorous, moving into introductory algebra and geometry by the sixth grade. Art and music are not extracurricular activities but part of the sequence. Students, for example, may study the work of Matisse and O'Keeffe and then be asked to emulate their style.

In all, it's a roaring avalanche of material. And the kicker is that the sequence is supposed to make up only 50 percent of the school's curriculum. The rest is up to the teachers. The introduction to the 262-page manual for the Core Knowledge Sequence states that teachers have "the freedom to decide what to teach beyond the sequence, and how best to teach it." At Washington, however, the teachers acknowledge that the sequence itself is, in reality, all-consuming.

As overwhelming as the scope of the sequence may seem, there is no question that it has made the Washington Core Knowledge School a local phenomenon. In 1993, the school opened with 125 students in grades K-4. Two years later, it enrolled 408 students in K-6. And now parents are lining up. The waiting list currently tops 200, with some parents trying to sign up their unborn children.

Just what has made the school such a draw? Washington parents say it has a lot to do with the nasty "curriculum gaps" at other public schools. Their school, they say, has closed gaps that are widening to chasms elsewhere. "When my son was in the eighth grade, I happened to ask him when the Civil War was fought," Terry Resse, Washington's office manager and unofficial spokeswoman, said shortly after she greeted me in the school's office. "Well, he said he didn't know but that he would probably get to that in the next year or so. Somehow he had missed it."

As people like Resse tell it, such gaps are the inevitable consequence of schools permitting their teachers to teach pretty much whatever they want. "Another of my sons had a teacher who went off to Japan, came back, and then said, 'Wow, I'll teach Japan,'" Resse said. "Well, in this curriculum if you want or need to teach Japan you may need to change grade levels, because at this school knowledge is designed to surface at a specific time in a student's career. This is not a student-centered curriculum; it's 'Here's what you're going to learn today.'"

The sense that the curriculum at the majority of public schools has become an informal, hit-or-miss affair is pervasive at Washington. "The district has a general guide as to what children will study but no cut-and-dried list on what needs to be taught year after year," said Sandy Ernest, who moved her two children to Washington after becoming disenchanted with their previous school. She described that school's curriculum as a kind of movie house that liked to show the same matinee week after week. "You can do dinosaurs in first grade and then do dinosaurs all over again in second grade and even in the third," she said. "Here, on the other hand, we know exactly what our children are getting. My daughter, for instance, is studying Egypt in first grade, and I know she won't get the

same information about Egypt again next year."

Ernest, who runs orientations for parents looking into the school, said, "I'm seeing parents who don't want to take a chance on what their children will learn from one year to the next. They want a curriculum that will keep the children within parameters they like."

Ernest's belief that the curriculum was more rigorous in "the old days" is one shared by many parents at Washington. Gale Dunn, a scientist who spends almost twenty hours a week working as president of the school's site-based council, said he remembers reading *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in the fourth grade and acquiring a solid foundation in math and science, even though he attended school in a sparsely populated mountain town. For him, then, the Core Knowledge Sequence wasn't really new; putting it in place, he said, was rather like going "back to the future."

"Back to the future" means, among other things, reversing grade inflation, which has allowed C's to become B's and B's to become A's. At Washington, an A is a genuine mark of excellence rather than a way of promoting self-esteem. "If a kid at this school is asked how he's doing in school, he won't just say, 'I got an A,'" Dunn said. "He'll say, 'I got a Washington A,' because people in this community then know it really means something."

Washington teachers share the parents' belief that the public school curriculum has been allowed to erode. Veteran fifth grade teacher Susan Schlingman first visited Washington two years ago, under orders from her principal at the time to bring back some good ideas. The principal's plan backfired, Schlingman liked what she saw so much that she decided to jump ship and join the Washington staff.

"What appealed to me in the curriculum, which in this district is 'washed away,'" said Schlingman, whose long red hair, coupled with the peasant dress she was wearing, gave her a faint counterculture aura. "A lot of teachers just like to teach what interests them, which is okay with the district as long as they teach certain skills. As a result, kids may get the rain forest three years running if that's what interests their particular teachers. Teachers who go to a Core Knowledge school, on the other hand, know they're not just signing a contract to teach math or history from 8 to 3:30. You're also making a promise to teach this content—content you will not skip just because you want to."

One aspect of the sequence that Schlingman and her colleagues particularly like is the way it spirals upward, so that what is taught at one grade level is expanded upon—though never merely repeated—in a later grade. When students begin studying the Civil War in the second grade, for example, they learn about the controversy over slavery, Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, and how all of these things pertain to the broader conflict between the North and South. In the fifth grade, the students study the vicissitudes of the war itself, beginning with the shots fired at Fort Sumter through the Union victory at Vicksburg and the eventual surrender at Appomattox. This scrutiny of the Civil War circles back to an examination of race and the often-torturous quest for equal-

Fifth grade teacher Susan Schlingman liked what she saw so much that she decided to jump ship and join the Washington staff.

ity, as the students learn about the Gettysburg Address and then Reconstruction, from which rose the Ku Klux Klan and vigilante justice.

Schlingman emphasized that the sequence was made up not of disparate elements but of dovetailing components. For example, students study the U.S. Constitution only after studying the Enlightenment so that its influences can be clearly traced.

Core teachers say the spiraling, or recursive, nature of the curriculum promotes an ever-deepening engagement with the subject. In other schools, students may cover a subject thoroughly, but only in the course of a single year. They are likely to get American history in the fifth grade but then have no further exposure to the subject until the eighth grade. The child who moves to town in the fifth grade, or is ill or simply out of touch, may be out of luck—his or her “American history gap” may never be bridged. At Washington, on the other hand, a subject is not so much covered as repeatedly traversed, the student exploring the landscape from myriad perspectives.

This all sounds impressive, assuming, of course, that the teachers themselves have a firm grasp of the material contained in the sequence. I spent an hour looking through the sequence and found that I had only a scant familiarity with many of its topics. I asked Schlingman if teachers wanting to use the sequence wouldn't first have to spend a great deal of time re-educating themselves.

“Absolutely,” she said. “I myself did a phenomenal amount of research last year, studying everything in the fifth grade curriculum. The problem is that we teachers are, in college, inundated with methods, yet there's almost no emphasis on being educated yourself. It's like being asked to take care of flowers without knowing much about them. Sticking them in the ground and watering them is not enough; you have to know what's special about each kind of flower if you're going to make it grow.”

Because there are no textbooks that encompass the Core Knowledge Sequence, teachers at Washington and other Core Knowledge schools have to track down their own instructional materials to use with their students. Schlingman, for one, spent much of one summer in the library, gathering a diverse collection of resources that she could spin into her lessons.

Monte Peterson, assistant superintendent of the Poudre public school system, which includes Fort Collins, and district officials and board members were

initially skeptical about the ability of teachers to learn and present such a comprehensive curriculum. But according to Peterson, teachers rose to the occasion. In fact, he says, the school has been so successful and become so popular with parents that the district now plans to open a middle school incorporating an extended version of the sequence.

“Washington Core has helped us set the bar higher and focus more intently upon academic rigor,” Peterson said. “And parents like the fact that the sequence is clear and crisp in terms of what their kids should know. It's free of the jargon educators like to put out. In fact, we're rewriting the district curriculum now so that it has that kind of clarity.”

CULTURAL LITERACY, the book that led to the creation of the Core Knowledge Sequence and schools, is one of the best-selling education books of all time. An immediate success when published in 1987, it appeared on the bookshelves of hundreds of thousands of parents and catapulted its author, English professor and literary critic E.D. Hirsch, to instant fame.

The book's popularity can perhaps be traced less to its title than to its subtitle, “What Every American Needs To Know,” and cover blurb, “Includes 5,000 essential names, phrases, dates, and concepts.” Indeed, many book buyers undoubtedly flipped immediately to the back of the book to see just what on that list of 5,000 might ring a bell. Cultural literacy, as an educational approach as well as a book title, became indelibly associated in the popular imagination with a high-octane game of Trivial Pursuit.

While this may have given the book a great boost in terms of marketability, it distracted readers from Hirsch's central message, which has little to do with attaining glory at a cocktail party of would-be literati. In simplest terms, what Hirsch wants to tell us is that learning begets learning. If you know nothing, you will find it very hard to learn something. If, on the other hand, you know a little, you can learn a little more, until you finally get to the point where you know a lot.

By knowing a lot, Hirsch does not mean a thorough knowledge of his list of 5,000, or any other list for that matter. He knows that's impossible, and unnecessary, too. What he wants us to acquire, rather, is a general familiarity with the kinds of cultural knowledge he considers essential for an educated American to have at the close of the century. But the word “essential” is a bugaboo. What, we may well wonder, gives Hirsch, or anyone else, the right to decide what everyone needs to know?

In both *Cultural Literacy* and his later works, Hirsch answers the question of what's “essential” in two ways. First, and most obviously, what's essential is what makes further learning possible. (Learning begets learning.) If you know something of the world's geography, you'll be able to understand broad climatological trends and their impact on countries' economics. If you're familiar with the outlines of the U.S. Constitution, you'll be able to follow contemporary political debates about citizens' rights. If you have a good command of basic mathematics, you'll be able to tackle trigonometry and calculus down the road.

Somewhat more subtly, Hirsch also argues that what's necessary is knowledge—or basic cultural literacy—that enables citizens to communicate with one another in more than a superficial way. If we are to keep our nation from disuniting, we must know certain things in common. First graders should become familiar with *Aesop's Fables* not just because they are important morality tales but because many of our common expressions, such as “sour grapes” and “cry wolf,” are derived from them. Sixth graders should learn about Ancient Greece so they understand the influence the polis had on the development of modern democracy.

For Hirsch, then, school should primarily be about the transmission of specific knowledge that will, ideally at least, be shared by students of all religions, races, and economic classes. Such is the precise mission of Core Knowledge schools like Washington.

The sequence, which all the Core Knowledge schools have in common, is somewhat different in focus from Hirsch's original list of 5,000. Put together in 1990 by dozens of teachers, scholars, and scientists, and substantially revised in 1994, the sequence is more diverse than Hirsch's original compendium, which was adamantly attacked by left-leaning teachers and scholars for its emphasis on the accomplishments of white males. Now, alongside Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* are Indian and African folk tales; alongside James Madison are Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Cesar Chávez.

In a telephone interview, Hirsch acknowledged that his original list had changed in terms of content. “That first list was descriptive of what bankers and lawyers knew and of what poor people didn't know,” he said. “The accusation made was that we should be more inclusive. Well, I said ‘Okay,’ because I had no political agenda. I had a social-justice agenda, so I was perfectly willing to make the list more multicultural. I was less interested in what the shared knowledge was than in the necessity of there being shared knowledge.”

Despite changes in the list, Hirsch insisted that the theoretical basis of cultural literacy has not changed at all. Schools must yet be about, as he wrote in *Cultural Literacy*, “the early and specific transfer of knowledge.”

Hirsch told me that the attacks on him by the academic left for his putative Eurocentrism were “an '80s phenomenon.” Graduate students are now interested in him once again; the academy is coming around to his point of view. “I have a black professor friend who said, ‘I'd like to talk about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but my students don't know what it is.’ She's right. Our students have to know something so we can teach our classes.”

If the academy has become less hostile, Hirsch said, “the ed school people would hate our position no matter what because they like process.” This point is an important one. For Hirsch and the people at his Core Knowledge schools, subject matter always comes first, while most educators, Hirsch asserts, emphasize thinking, feeling, and the development of skills. It's not, Hirsch says, that these “processes” are unimportant but that they are meaningful only when brought to bear upon content of genuine consequence.

Hirsch said he had no objection to “progressive” re-

form projects that emphasize critical thinking, such as Theodore Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools, as long as students get a strong elementary school foundation. “I once said to Ted Sizer, ‘Look, I'm like the Jesuits; let me have the kids to the sixth grade, and then you can coalition all you want because then it will work.’ One of the reasons the evaluations for Sizer's schools have not been as favorable as you'd like is that students come into high school without adequate background knowledge.”

Several times during our conversation, Hirsch insisted that implementing his cultural literacy program is simply a matter of doing what works. Recent research in cognitive psychology, he claimed, has established its efficacy: Learning does beget learning.

One noted cognitive psychologist I talked to, David Geary of the University of Missouri, believes that Hirsch's curriculum does indeed mesh with how youngsters actually learn. “Some people like to say that children are innately curious and that they'll construct knowledge for themselves,” Geary told me. “To an extent, that's true; children are innately interested in socialization and sex, for instance. But that doesn't mean they are innately interested in history and math. These things have to be taught, and Hirsch's curriculum does that with carefully sequenced building blocks.”

The sequential, subject-driven nature of Hirsch's initiative is apparent at the Washington Core Knowledge School, where there is a near-scorn for consciousness-raising programs that mark the calendars of many public schools. DARE Day, for example, a drug education campaign sponsored by the federal Drug Abuse Resistance Education program, was practically ignored; the faculty didn't want to give up teaching time to make posters and ribbons. AIDS education, self-esteem raising, social adjustment—at Washington these are perceived as mere digressions.

Resse, Washington's office manager, said, “We do not set aside special time here for affective learning: ‘How do you feel today? How do you make friends?’ We are all—parents, teachers, administrators—involved with these issues and deal with them day to day as they arise.”

Even African-American history month gets scant attention at Washington Core Knowledge School. Principal Art Dillon said this isn't because the contributions of African Americans aren't valued; to the contrary, people like Crispus Attucks and Sojourner Truth are essential parts of the ongoing curriculum. “The problem with African-American history month is that the people studied may come from completely different centuries,” he said. “And we want kids to know the historical context in which these African Americans lived their lives.”

NO ONE, Hirsch included, claims that following the Core Knowledge Sequence will magically ensure excellent teaching. A teacher can be handed a good program, but that does not make teaching—fussy and idiosyncratic as it inevitably is—programmatically. A teacher, therefore, is not necessarily a good teacher just because he or she has the “core.” Washington principal Dillon said as much when he told me that his school had teachers at the “crawl, walk, and run

No More 'Mickey Mouse' Inservice

ONE OF the less obvious effects of the Core Knowledge curriculum is its impact on the nature of inservice and professional development. As teachers are called upon to teach everything from medieval African Kingdoms, world religions, and the reign of Peter the Great to basic chemistry, optics, and early theories of matter, they are no longer willing to waste their time in dumb inservice sessions, the kind one teacher characterized as "101 ways to use milk cartons for student projects."

Certainly, the vast majority of teacher training institutions do not provide teacher candidates with the rigorous liberal arts education that would prepare one to teach an ambitious, knowledge-based curriculum. In a recent report on teacher education published by the Council for Basic Education, teachers' biggest complaint was the lack of content in their college courses.* "The weakest part was content," one teacher summed up the problem. "My classes touched very little on detailed content in the various subject areas I was certified

to teach in."

The Core Knowledge curriculum brings this problem home in spades. "We don't know anything about the Byzantine Empire!" one group of Core teachers laughed. But they didn't seem to mind the effort that awaited them. "Because the curriculum is so exciting," commented Joan Falbey, a third-grade teacher at Three Oakes Elementary in Ft. Myers, Florida, "I've enjoyed doing this. I think it's natural to the teacher in all of us."

And if the Core Knowledge teachers are fortunate enough to have nearby a university education department as tuned into their needs and as helpful as Trinity University in San Antonio is, all the better. Through its chairman John Moore and associate professor of education Bruce M. Frazee, Trinity University has pioneered a unique partnership (a longer story that deserves to be told in full sometime) with Hawthorne and other Core Knowledge schools in the area.

One of the many features of this partnership is the undertak-

ing by Trinity and the schools it works with to literally redefine inservice education. The teachers decide what they need to know, and Trinity sets up a seminar with an expert on that topic. Recently, fifth-grade teachers attended a session on the chemistry topics covered in Core Knowledge, while third- and fourth-grade teachers brushed up on their knowledge of art history. In addition, teachers at the same grade level from the different Core schools meet monthly to share lessons and activities and to reflect upon concerns and practices. Both these types of gatherings help teachers gain confidence and expertise: "At first it was scary, real scary, because I didn't know some of the content," explained one teacher, "But now it gets easier each year because now I know more and so do the students." Concluded another: "Inservice now relates to what I want to teach and learn."

—EDITOR

**What Teachers Have To Say about Teacher Education*, Fall 1996



PHOTOGRAPH © BOB DAEMERICH

stages." The new teachers just out of college were at the crawl stage; they might become outstanding teachers, he said, but you couldn't expect it to happen overnight.

Furthermore, as the Core Knowledge Foundation's material fastidiously points out, the sequence only specifies what to teach, not how to teach it. That is completely up to the teacher and school. "I've been very careful to avoid telling people how to teach the content," Hirsch told me. "I do want people to use what works. People think of cultural literacy in terms of a lecture, of people sitting in rows. But I've never recommended that."

True to Hirsch's words, the teaching I observed at Washington varied greatly in terms of style and approach. In some classrooms, it was rote. In others, it was "hands-on." Some lessons demanded substantial "seat work," while others were highly participatory. Sometimes it seemed that the only common denominator was the "core" itself, which was apparent everywhere. In the corridor were posters delineating the five pillars of Islam; in the classrooms were banners laced with bold-faced aphorisms: "One rotten apple spoils the whole barrel"; "A feather in your cap"; "Don't beat around the bush."

In one third grade classroom, the teacher used the conventional question-and-answer approach to review the feats of Roman engineering. It went something like this:

"Did they have aqueducts in colonial times?" the teacher asked.

"No, they had wells," the students answered.

"What did the Romans have?"

"Pipes."

"Were the Romans pretty advanced then?"

"Yes."

Down the hall, in another third grade classroom, the students were studying the same Roman material, only in small groups with project-oriented tasks. In one group, students were drawing up "blueprints" for a Coliseum; in another, they were constructing a small-scale aqueduct.

The all-consuming nature of the sequence generally makes digressions impossible, but sixth grade teacher Tinka Greenwood permitted her students one during the course of my visit. The students begged off a discussion of the 17th-century English Civil War so they could rehearse for me *Julius Caesar*, which they would be performing the next week for the entire school. They had undertaken the play—an abridged edition drawn from the Shakespeare for Young People series—during a segment of the curriculum fusing Shakespeare with an expanded study of Ancient Rome.

We traipsed off to the auditorium, and the students immediately launched into the performance, which was remarkably well-oiled. They all had memorized their parts and mastered the rather complicated entrances and exits. When the performance came to temporary halts, it was because the students, as much as the teacher, wanted to discuss voice intonation or the choreography of the assassination scene. At the end of the rehearsal, several of the students gathered around me, asking for my critique.

Then it was back to the classroom. Seven minutes of

The students seized the initiative whenever they could, offering up definitions, providing explanations, and drawing parallels.

class time remained, and in keeping with the inexorable nature of the sequence, not one of them was wasted. It was right back to Cromwell and the Puritans.

"Who were the Puritans?" Greenwood asked.

"They believed God spoke directly to the heart," a student said.

"What were the Puritans fighting for?"

"To get rid of the monarchy."

"That's the good news. What's the bad?"

A student answered, "Cromwell dissolved Parliament and established a Protectorate, of which he was supposedly 'Protector.' But he ended up making a military dictatorship."

"That's right," Greenwood said. She then concluded the period on an epigrammatic note. "Don't forget, people, 'history is a pendulum.' It swings back and forth before finding the middle."

In one respect, this brief exchange was no different from discussions that take place in so many classrooms: The teacher asked questions; the students answered. Here, though, the students did more than grunt their monosyllabic assent; their responses had an aspect of give-and-take that could provoke further commentary. There was a textured nature to the discussion that was typical of the other Washington classrooms I visited: For the most part, the students seemed highly engaged.

In no classroom were they more engaged than that of Susan Schlingman, the fifth grade teacher who had liked the Core Knowledge Sequence so much that she had transferred to Washington on its account.

On one of the two days I visited her classroom, Schlingman and her students were exploring what she termed "the beginning of the end for Napoleon." Essentially, Schlingman told the students a story about Napoleon's demise. As she went along, she interspersed cues and inquiries to get student reaction. After talking about how Napoleon had prohibited European countries from importing goods from England, she asked, "You're a shopkeeper depending on exports who suddenly finds out you can no longer sell to Holland, one of your key buyers. What happens to you?"

Later, after discussing how Napoleon "gave" conquered countries to his family members, she asked, "Would that be a good idea—giving your brother or sister a country to govern?"

And after exploring the strategies Napoleon used to keep his empire intact, she asked, "How many of you play chess?"

A student answered, "I love that game; it really makes you think."

"Checkmate," another said. "That's exactly what Napoleon was trying to do to the enemy."

As in Greenwood's class, the students seized the initiative whenever they could, taking cues from Schlingman's narrative to offer up definitions, provide explanations, and draw parallels. Napoleon was arrogant, one said, "because he set his mind on a task history has shown cannot be accomplished—defeating Russia." This led a student to repeat the old Russian expression: "We are beaten, but never defeated."

The students had a clear grasp of why Napoleon had found it so difficult to conquer Russia. They talked about the Russian winter and pointed out that Napoleon was encountering difficulties on other fronts. They also expounded upon Russia's scorched-earth policy, which undermined, as one student pointed out, Napoleon's usual strategy of having his troops plunder the land they overran so that "they could travel light."

Schlingman's tale had an air of poignancy, perhaps because she painted Napoleon not as a hero or villain but as someone who was, in some respects, all too human. "Napoleon was forced to retreat, and many of his men dropped from exhaustion, perishing in the snow," she said. "He lost hundreds each day. This was devastating for Napoleon, for one of his greatest virtues was that he deeply cared for his men."

It is impossible to say to what extent the sequence and the overarching philosophy of cultural literacy are responsible for the apparently high level of engagement at Washington. After all, the school has a number of things going for it. Because it is a choice school—parents choose it for their children—the families have *a priori* bought into the notion of cultural literacy. Also, the school was founded by parents who still have a strong voice in its governance. Seven parents sit on the fourteen-member site-based management council, and each year parents spend thousands of volunteer hours working at the school.

Still, Schlingman gives the curriculum a great deal of credit for piquing student enthusiasm. "Now, I'm not saying that sending a child through a Core Knowledge school will guarantee that the child will be excellently educated," she said. "You've got to have good teaching. But with good teaching, the kids will soak it up. History, for example, we present as a story, and the kids always want to know what happens next. We talk about how the Renaissance started in Italy because it was a trading nation, which meant that it was crossing cultural lines in terms of religion and language. People began to ask questions, and the result was a whole change from the medieval philosophy where you sat around and waited for God to make your life better. With the Bible in translation, with the printing press, people said, 'I can do something to make my life better.' And kids understand all of this. Ask our kids what they learned today and you'll get, unlike the typical elementary school, all kinds of interesting responses. Why? Because it's all presented to them."

I asked Schlingman what she thought of those progressive educators for whom it was almost a tenet that you "begin where the child is," following his or her interests wherever they may lead.

"That's like telling a child to educate himself and

find what he can find," Schlingman said. "That doesn't make any sense. How is a child going to know what he or she is interested in if not provided with things to choose from? There's something I've always found funny. In a lot of schools, teachers say, 'We're getting ready to cover mammals,' but cover means to hide. Well, we don't want to cover, to hide; we want to put it out there for the children so they can see it and work with it. We're not going to sit back and watch while the child tries to put all these things together for himself. No."

DO PEOPLE really need to know about Achilles and Falstaff, or Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, or A. Philip Randolph and Thurgood Marshall to be considered well educated? For many critics of Hirsch and his list, the answer is an emphatic "no." Any such package of the cultural goods, they say, is hopelessly contingent on and vulnerable to cultural shifts. The treasure trove is, in fact, a grab bag, as indicated by the fact that Hirsch has allowed his own list to be substantially revised since it first appeared in 1987.

More absurd, some say, is the idea that the sequence represents some kind of common cultural language. As Ted Sizer has pointed out, advertising is now our common language; the grammar of consumerism rules our speech. It might well be a good thing for Americans to know about Cézanne or the Constitutional Convention of 1787, but to suggest that knowing these things is necessary for economic success or personal fulfillment is a blatant exaggeration. America is full of successful business executives and cardiac surgeons who cannot tell the difference between a mural by Diego Rivera and a Nike ad sprayed over the side of a brick warehouse.

Still, there is something that remains undeniably compelling about the Core Knowledge Sequence and the idea of cultural literacy, even a decade after it was first conceived. While it may not be necessary for someone to know the music of Duke Ellington or the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, almost everyone can agree that they are good things to be familiar with. And what parents wouldn't be pleased to have their children understand the impact of the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education* or appreciate Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam"?

Furthermore, the very existence of the sequence allows parents to know specifically what their children are studying and to ascertain if they are indeed learning it. Vague curricular goals leave parents in the dark; specific ones invite parents into the academic process.

Not surprisingly, it's parents themselves who provided the strongest case for the sequence. Over and over, they spoke of how their children had been lost but were now back on track and engaged at Washington. Mary Pat Barlow was one such parent. Her once-tight-lipped son, she said, now comes home from school talking about what he has learned.

"Once, in Texas," she said, "we visited a cathedral that my son said was an excellent example of Gothic architecture. I thought he was putting us on, but then he spoke of the buttresses, the stained-glass windows. He knew what he was talking about—he really did." □