



Culture, Knowledge and Power: What the Conservatives have Learnt from E.D. Hirsch

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ABSTRACT

British Conservatives happily acknowledge the debt that they owe to E.D. Hirsch. To understand the nature of their curricular project, and how it is located within the wider goals of education and social policy, we need to attend carefully to the character of this transatlantic borrowing. Its emphases and omissions reveal much about the exclusionary reimagining of national identity that informs the continuing counter-revolution in education.

KEYWORDS

Knowledge; culture; curriculum; identity; difference; nationalism

Living in this post-Brexit, post-Trump, post-truth period, it is easy to emphasise the novelty of these times, to remark on manifestations of nationalism and routine, calculated and aggressive assertions of white, masculinist, heteronormative supremacy as distinctively new – as evidence of a moment of rupture in politics, culture and society. There are, nonetheless, important continuities, in education as elsewhere. The new British prime minister's commitment to the reintroduction of segregated secondary schooling may represent a fresh trajectory for the politics of nostalgia, but even this might be construed as building on the legacy of Michael Gove, former education minister and prominent Brexiteer (Jones 2013), and of the Conservative-led government in which he served.

Writing on the Conservative Home website in the year before he became prime minister, David Cameron reflected on what it is to be British:

Ultimately, Britishness is about Britons. ... So if we're serious about strengthening our national identity we should do whatever we can to give these individuals reasons to feel pride in their country. There are three key ways of doing this.

We must abandon 'state multiculturalism'

First, it would be easier to promote a national identity if everyone felt like they were part of one country – not a 'community of communities' as one government-commissioned report argued. We need to bring our country together, and that means moving away from the wrong-headed doctrine of state multiculturalism by, for example, making sure all new arrivals to our country can speak, or will learn to speak, our common language.

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We must teach the whole narrative of British history

Second, ... it's vitally important that we bring back proper teaching of British history in our schools. We won't get very far in promoting Britishness if people don't have a feel for Britain's history and heritage.

It is a tragedy that we have swept away the teaching of narrative history, and replaced it with a bite-sized, disjointed approach to learning about historical events. And the results of [a] recent survey ... highlights only too well what happens when you shift away from learning actual knowledge, such as facts and dates. This failed approach has led us to the great irony that most British-born citizens would struggle to answer the questions on our citizenship tests.

We must defend our armed forces, our monarchy, our democratic traditions. (Cameron 2009 (emphases as in original))

Education policy is here framed as an answer to a long-standing problem, which is both political (about threats to the institutions and the autonomy of the British state) and social (about the lack of cohesiveness or a common identity in British society). How education figures here is not in terms of accountability measures (Ofsted, testing and so on), nor with a focus on school structures (academies, free schools, selection, privatisation), but rather in relation to the *content* of the curriculum. The job of schools is to give people – school students – ‘a feel for Britain's history and heritage’.

It would be tempting to regard Cameron's early entry into the politics of the curriculum as mere singing to the choir – reassuring the Tory faithful of the writer's adherence to the true faith of Little Britonism. Tempting, but wrong. The position that Cameron sketched out in this blogpost is the one that informed the rewriting of the National Curriculum under Michael Gove (DfE [Department for Education] 2014) – and it is a position that continues to dominate Conservative thinking and policy today. Gove's departure from the DfE might have led to a change in tone, and sometimes even in tactics, but not in substance. What is going on is nothing less than a counter-revolution in the politics of education: a sustained attempt to reverse the progressive, pluralist and egalitarian gains of the period from the 1960s through to the 1980s – to complete the unfinished business of the Thatcher government (Jones 2013). Those with an interest in defending the gains of the postwar consensus have tended to focus attention on the neoliberal dimensions of this attack: prominent here has been the undermining of coherent state provision through marketisation and commodification – the myriad forms that privatisation and atomisation of the system has taken. What has received less attention has been the counter-revolution in curriculum and pedagogy – that dimension of the Tories' attack that draws less on free market neoliberalism and more on cultural conservatism.

In this context, it is instructive to consider the contribution of Nick Gibb (2015), re-appointed as education minister in the new government, to a recent collection of essays published by the right-wing think-tank, Policy Exchange. The collection was produced in honour of E.D. Hirsch, the American proponent of 'Core Knowledge', whose ideas, enthusiastically adopted in England by a number of free schools and academy chains, were massively influential in shaping the current National Curriculum (as Gibb acknowledges in his essay).

For Gibb, as earlier for Gove, what Hirsch provides is an argument for a 'knowledge-rich curriculum'. This, Gibb declares, is a 'compelling social justice case' (2015, 14). It's worth pausing on this phrase a moment. One of the lessons that the new generation of curricular counter-revolutionaries has learnt from the Thatcherites is the value of co-opting the language of their opponents. In the 1980s, the imposition of the first version of the National

Curriculum was presented as a matter of equal opportunities, a means of ensuring ‘... that all pupils, regardless of sex, ethnic origin and geographical location, have access to broadly the same good and relevant curriculum and programmes of study’ (DES [Department of Education and Science] 1987, 4). Then, the language of progressive identity politics was used in a statement of entitlement that denied any space for the exploration of difference, of subjectivity; now, the cultural conservatives claim the mantle of social justice for their project.

The argument that Gibb makes needs to be taken seriously, since it is at the heart of the curricular project that confronts us in England. Gibb follows Hirsch very closely here in an argument about language, class and education (cf Hirsch 1987, 1996, 2006). There is, they assert, a ‘Matthew effect’, a phenomenon named after the biblical verse that announces the law of ever-increasing inequality: ‘For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath’ (*Matthew 25: 29*). How this works in school is that those children who arrive at the gates already in possession of large vocabularies, and hence ‘intellectual capital’, are in a position to take advantage of what the school has to offer. In Hirsch’s terms, such children have the ‘Velcro to gain still more knowledge’. Those children who begin school without such linguistic resources, on the other hand, struggle to make sense of the knowledge that is presented to them in school. The gap between these two groups, says Hirsch, becomes ever wider thereafter.

Gibb announces that ‘the existence of such a gulf is now incontrovertible’ (2015, 14). Following Hirsch (again), this claim is based on a single piece of research, a hugely influential study of vocabulary development by two Americans, Betty Hart and Todd Risley (not, as Gibb insists, Risely). Hart and Risley observed language interactions between parents and their children over a two-and-a-half-year period, starting when the children were less than a year old. Their sample consisted of 42 families, all in Kansas, from different socioeconomic groups. Hart and Risley’s hypothesis was that limitations in the language of poor children and their families tended to perpetuate the cycle of poverty. In their analysis of the data they gathered, they made claims both about the quantity of language (middle class parents used more words in interacting with their children) and about the quality of the language (middle class parents used better language). Hart and Risley have not been shy about presenting their findings in such a way as to attract publicity: a summary of their research appeared in *American Educator* under the title, ‘The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3’ (Hart and Risley 2003).

Hart and Risley’s research has been subjected to strenuous critique in relation to its methodology, its data analysis and its conclusions (see, for example, Dudley-Marling and Lucas 2009). Central to their claims about linguistic impoverishment are the six families in their sample (all African-American) who were on welfare: they make much of the contrast between the interactions in these homes and those in the professional, middle-class homes (where only one of the 13 families studied was African-American). Their analysis of the data starts from the assumption of the superiority of particular (middle-class) registers of language. It isn’t particularly surprising, therefore, that their findings confirm their initial hypothesis: the language of poor African-American families is deficient. What we are presented with here is something that looks horribly like a new version of a very old tactic: blame the victim. (When IQ tests were first used on a large scale, on US servicemen during the 1914–1918 war, the results revealed a difference in the scores of Black and white soldiers. Further analysis suggested that these differences were closely correlated with differences

in whether, and for how long, the soldiers had been to school. The results were interpreted as evidence of innate differences in intelligence in the different ‘races’: the results showed, the testers announced, that Black people weren’t smart enough to realise the benefits of schooling [Gould 1981].)

Hart and Risley’s research can, at best, be seen as a contribution to a long-running debate about language, schooling and identity. The argument can be traced back to Labov’s ground-breaking work on ‘The Logic of Non-Standard English’ (1970), with its careful analysis of the complexity of the speech of African-American youth, as well as to Harold Rosen’s magnificently bad-tempered response to Basil Bernstein’s theory that working-class children fared less well in school because of the gap between the ‘restricted code’ that they used outside school and the ‘elaborated code’ – the less context-dependent forms that were characteristic both of middle-class conversation and of classroom language (see Rosen 1972). Over the past four decades, a great deal of ethnographic research has been undertaken to explore the different language and literacy practices of different communities. We now know much more about these differences, about the different ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005) that are valued among different social groups, and about their different ‘ways with words’ (Brice Heath 1983). Much of this work has also wrestled with the question of how schools might be respectful of, and responsive to, these differences. Again, this is not a new notion; the principle was stated very clearly in the Bullock Report:

No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart. (DES [Department of Education and Science] 1975, 286)

The point about this is not that these are settled questions – it is clear that they are not. But it is somewhat disingenuous to pretend that the debate has been ended by some pretty tendentious interpretations of data on six Kansas families on welfare.

In this, as in other respects, Gibb has learnt a great deal from his reading of Hirsch, and what he has learnt is as much a political and rhetorical strategy as it is a curricular programme. Like other counter-revolutionaries, Hirsch is at pains to present himself as an embattled defender of freedom of thought, engaged in guerrilla warfare against the massed ranks of a powerful, entrenched enemy. He refers to his adversary as the ‘Thoughtworld’ that has, he alleges, come to ‘to monopolize the thinking of the American educational community’ (Hirsch 1996, 13). In his tribute to Hirsch, Gibb picks up on the military metaphor:

Hirsch’s work provides an unrivalled intellectual armoury with which reformers can equip themselves prior to engaging with the education establishment. (Gibb 2015, 18)

Gibb doesn’t quite say the word ‘Blob’, but one gets the message.

Confronted with what they present as the incontrovertible fact of working-class and minority ethnic deficit, Gibb offers a Hirschian remedy: knowledge. This is far more than an attempt to distinguish the new version of the curriculum from its New Labour, skills-oriented predecessor. It is the high road to social justice, since ‘The body of academic knowledge belongs to everyone, regardless of background, circumstance or job’ (Gibb 2015, 16). This knowledge is a universal entitlement, then, a birthright. And what’s more, the new curriculum presents it in the right order, ‘properly sequenced to allow the incremental accumulation of knowledge’ (Gibb 2015, 16).

This is, in its purest form, what the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire (1972) called the ‘banking model’ of education. Learning becomes the ingestion, or appropriation, of specified

gobbets of intellectual capital; by some process of alchemy, knowledge simultaneously belongs to all and becomes the property of the individual. There are, I want to suggest, three fairly substantial problems with this model.

First, its version of knowledge bears no resemblance to how knowledge is encountered – and contested – in actually-existing academic disciplines. In the Hirschian model, knowledge is inert, fixed, stable – ready to be delivered, more like a sack of potatoes than a box of delights, to the next generation. In life, though, even in the rarefied life of academic communities, knowledge isn't like this at all. It is dynamic, shifting, uncertain, argued over. It is the stuff of debate and uncertainty, not of lists and certitudes. This distinction is not, however, one that applies only to knowledge at the frontiers, as it were; it applies equally to knowledge in the classroom. Let's take a specific example – one from Nick Gibb himself. In presenting the new curriculum and its carefully sequenced programme of knowledge acquisition, he announces that 'we have established that all pupils should learn three Shakespeare plays over the course of their secondary school education' (2015, 16–17). But what does this mean? What does *learning* a Shakespeare play entail? And in what sense will this be the same experience from one classroom to the next, let alone from one area to another? Making meaning out of *Romeo and Juliet*, say, involves working with concepts such as family, marriage, loyalty, generational obligations and differences, love, sex, violence, and working out – that is, interpreting – how these concepts are explored in the drama. At its best, the experience of the play will enable students to explore and problematise these concepts, to argue over how they are instantiated in the world of the play and how their meanings are contested both there and in the students' lifeworlds. Any notion of curriculum *delivery* – the passing on of existing knowledge – does not begin to do justice to the situated complexity of what is being accomplished (collaboratively, dialogically) in such work.

This leads on to the second problem with Hirsch, and the Conservatives' adoption of Hirsch. Theirs is a model that lacks any understanding of learning, and hence any adequate understanding of pedagogy. It assumes that it is enough to specify a body of knowledge, that the role of the teacher is to communicate this knowledge and that the role of the learner is to receive it. Really? Is that how learning happens – in neat, predetermined sequences of accumulation? To pretend that this is the case is to ignore all that we know about the messiness of learning, about the complex interplay of social, emotional and intellectual dimensions, about the vital importance (for teachers) of remaining attentive to the interests and motives of the learners themselves. To say these things is not to advocate some caricature of 'discovery learning' but rather to acknowledge the irreducibly dialogic, multidimensional nature of what Douglas Barnes (1976) called the 'enacted curriculum' – the curriculum that is so much more, and so much more complicated, than any mere plan or policy.

The third problem with the Hirschian model takes us back to David Cameron's words with which we started, with the excoriation of multiculturalism and the retreat into British history, British heritage. What Hirsch and his adherents now call 'core knowledge' started off under a different banner: 'cultural literacy' (Hirsch 1987). The problem with this earlier slogan was, Hirsch said, that 'the term "cultural" raised too many extraneous questions' (Hirsch 1996, 13). He doesn't divulge what these questions were, but it seems plausible that they concerned the provenance of the cultural literacy that Hirsch has been so keen to promote. Whose culture, and hence whose literacy, is being represented? And whose culture, whose literacy is marginalised, or excluded?

At the end of his essay, Gibb borrows from Hirsch (1987) an extract from the introduction to Baker and Thorndike's *Everyday Classics* (1917):

We have chosen what is common, established, almost proverbial; what has become indisputably 'classic,' what, in brief, every child in the land ought to know, because it is good, and because other people know it. The educational worth of such materials calls for no defence. In an age when the need of socialising and unifying our people is keenly felt, the value of a common stock of knowledge, a common set of ideals is obvious. (Baker and Thorndike 1917, 6; cited in Hirsch 1987, 131–132)

What neither Hirsch nor Gibb quote is what follows immediately from this in Baker and Thorndike:

A people is best unified by being taught in childhood the best things in its intellectual and moral heritage. Our own heritage is, like our ancestry, composite. Hebrew, Greek, Roman, English, French, and Teutonic elements are blended in our cultural past. We draw freely from all these *and retain what suits our composite racial and national spirit*. (Baker and Thorndike 1917, 6, emphases added)

Even in the context of 1917, this list of the composite parts of an American national heritage is noteworthy for what is *not* represented. This is a melting-pot from which most ingredients – African-American, Russian, Polish and Hispanic, as well as First Nation American – have been discarded. When, in the first paragraph of their introduction, Baker and Thorndike wrote of their aim to put children 'in touch with ... the common heritage of the race,' it would seem that their concept of race was somewhat more particular than that of humanity in general.

And that is what remains deeply problematic about core knowledge, even when the term 'cultural' has been dispensed with. Whose heritage is at this core, and whose is effaced?

One of the achievements in schooling over the past half century has been the recognition that classrooms are constituted in difference – and that such difference is not background noise or an obstacle to be overcome but a rich educational resource. Harking back to an anthology published a hundred years ago is symptomatic of the counter-revolutionaries' refusal to engage with the world that exists, a world where cultural pluralism is part of the fabric of society. When their nostalgia becomes a deliberate policy of distortion and exclusion, when difference is denied, claims to social justice ring hollow.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

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