

## **Many Americans Can Read But Can't Comprehend**

By E.D. Hirsch Jr.

Back in the 1970s, I had a "Eureka!" moment as I reviewed the results of reading comprehension tests. The community college students we tested had done almost as well as students at the highly selective University of Virginia — as long as the passages the community college students were asked to read dealt with familiar, everyday topics. But when they encountered passages that required historical background, they faltered. These Richmond, Va., students had difficulty understanding a passage on Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee because many of them were unfamiliar with the Civil War. That shocked me.

These students had been cheated. They hadn't acquired important general knowledge in their homes and communities, and their schools hadn't compensated for that. Their basic intelligence was sound. They simply did not have the knowledge they needed to make sense of many texts.

Since then, I have argued for a deeper understanding of reading. Successful reading requires more than an ability to decode, or "sound out," words. It also requires adequate background knowledge, or "cultural literacy." Without background knowledge of history, literature, art, music, science and math, students will read — but without comprehension.

### **Gap widens**

For years, reading scores have remained low. The achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children is not only dishearteningly wide, but also grows bigger the longer students stay in school. These dismal facts help explain the bipartisan agreement Congress mustered to pass the No Child Left Behind Act, with its provision that federal grants be contingent on all children making "adequate yearly progress" in reading.

That provision sent shock waves through schools and prompted more complaints about standardized tests — misplaced complaints, because standardized reading tests are valid and reliable. They measure the real-world ability to read, and they reliably predict the ability to become good learners, earners and citizens. The tests aren't the problem; it's the scores our children are making on them.

As a consequence of that law, some localities have mandated that schools devote large chunks of time to reading in early grades. In California, for example, it's 150 minutes per day. You'd think such an intensity of effort would yield proportionately big results; yet, test scores have risen only modestly or not all, and the reading gap between groups remains large.

Why? Recall those community college students. They had mastered decoding skills. They may have been taught to read by phonics techniques, which are now regarded by most educators as the most effective way to teach reading. But they hadn't been exposed coherently to important knowledge, such as the history of the Civil War. They hadn't developed the broad vocabulary that comes with general knowledge.

### **Time vs. knowledge**

Their deficiencies underscore what is missing in the way we teach reading: We expand the time spent on reading but don't examine what is being read. Most of the precious hours spent on reading should be devoted to history, science, literature and art, not bland stories about "José at the supermarket," or "Janice and her new friend." Content-rich reading selections should be part of an integrated curriculum that builds up the broad knowledge and varied vocabulary required for true reading comprehension.

"Some people may ask why first-graders need to know Hammurabi's Code or Queen Hatshepsut, or why fifth-graders should read Don Quixote ," wrote Kathy Schaub, a Catholic school principal in San Antonio. "Why not? I have never seen so much enthusiasm for learning."

History and literature, interesting and exciting in their own rights, also will be useful to these students when, for instance, they come across a description of someone "tilting at windmills." Because these students possess not just decoding skills, but also wide knowledge and cultural literacy, they more likely will be strong readers and full participants in our democratic society.

*E.D. Hirsch Jr., the author of Cultural Literacy and The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them, founded the Core Knowledge Foundation, whose curriculum is used in more than 600 U.S. schools.*

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