

The Book of Lists

DEBORAH MEIER AND FLORENCE MILLER

WHAT DO OUR 17-YEAR-OLDS KNOW? By Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr. Harper & Row. 293 pp. \$15.95.

When Jean Piaget noted that 6-year-olds gave surprisingly ignorant answers to his simple questions, he didn't rush into print with the information. How interesting, he thought. The answers I expected are not self-evident. Thus began a life's work of examining children's ignorance.

Seventh-grader Mariette points to the sky when asked which way is north. How interesting, thinks her teacher! For Mariette, "north" is "up." How shall I help her think about north and south as opposed to up and down? Reframe my question? Dig up useful evidence? Explore with her the way she thinks and be mindful that once told she's wrong, she is likely to mask her ignorance with the right answers yet still be confused about "north" and "up."

Ignorance is interesting and useful to many thoughtful toilers in the vineyards of education, and while Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn Jr. also toil in those vineyards, she at Columbia, he at Vanderbilt University and in the U.S. Department of Education, their view of ignorance is familiar and fruitless. They miss the vital connection between knowing and not knowing, and because they do so, not knowing is failure, or bad schooling—a case in need of a remedy, a cause for alarm, a reason to rush into print.

Under the aegis of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and with funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Ravitch and Finn and a panel of experts they chose developed two lengthy questionnaires designed to determine at mid-eleventh grade whether students know what the authors think they should about history and literature.

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The literature section is a mixed bag that includes Moses, *Romeo and Juliet*, Cinderella, Aesop, Hemingway, Goliath, *Gulliver's Travels*, Mars, Cain and Abel, *Julius Caesar*, King Arthur, Jonah, Sherlock Holmes, *Hamlet*, Pandora, *Genesis*, Martin Luther King Jr., Dickinson, Melville, Zeus, Atlas, *Macbeth*, the *Iliad*, Poe, Noah, *A Raisin in the Sun*, "Blood, Sweat and Tears" (the speech, not the group), Byron, Pip, *Beowulf*, Fitzgerald, Yeats, Wordsworth, Chaucer, Ibsen, Ellison, Joyce, Blake, Bunyan, Conrad, Dostoevsky, Hughes, London, Dickens, Daedalus, "Rappacini's Daughter." And more.

The history section includes Harriet Tubman, Pearl Harbor, Watergate, Lindbergh, Jamestown, Prohibition, the cotton gin, secession, Susan B. Anthony, the *Brown* decision, Sputnik, checks and balances, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Gold Rush, Hitler, the Ku Klux Klan, the Bill of Rights, Winston Churchill, Jim Crow, the Magna Carta, Betty Friedan, Reconstruction, *Common Sense*, D-Day, Jane Addams, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt, Ida Tarbell, the Seneca Falls Declaration, Lyndon Johnson, isolationism, John Winthrop, the Scopes trial, the Three-Fifths Compromise, John D. Rockefeller, Eisenhower, the Dust Bowl, Stalin, the Monroe Doctrine, laissez faire, the Missouri Compromise, Joe McCarthy. And more.

The questions are in the familiar multiple-choice format.

The Return of the Native, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* were written by:

- a. Sir Walter Scott
- b. Thomas Hardy
- c. Oscar Wilde
- d. Robert Louis Stevenson

Which of the following was NOT addressed by New Deal legislation?

- a. Agricultural price supports
- b. Labor unions
- c. Social Security
- d. Restrictions on immigration

The authors score the test with 90 as A, below 60 as failing. They correlate the results with demographic data, tell us what it all means and offer recommendations. Graphed and in tables, their findings confirm their suspicion that our schools and pedagogy are failing.

There are major and minor irritants throughout. *People* is sniffed at, *TV Guide* gets a footnote. Public funding

paid for six pages of acknowledgments, with special thanks to the woman who spent Mother's Day reading a draft of the manuscript. Under the scary heading "A Generation at Risk," Ravitch and Finn offer fifty pages of dusty recommendations, all of which recall undergraduate papers for Aims of Education 101, written in the hope that the professor wouldn't notice how wide the margins were:

Devote more time to the teaching and learning of history.

Devote more time and attention to teaching literature, beginning in the earliest grades and continuing in every year of elementary school, junior high school and high school.

A hefty dose of good literature should be part of all students' English studies. Only those who are well educated in history or literature should teach those subjects in the schools.

The historical interconnections among different nations and societies should be understood.

There are statements that defy analysis:

The power of the facts-versus-concepts dichotomy has grown so great within the social studies field that some professionals now harbor an instinctive distrust of facts per se.

It is fatuous to believe that students can think critically or conceptually when they are ignorant of the most basic facts of American history.

When public libraries and museums celebrate Black History Month, for example, exhibitions should be designed not merely to commemorate some aspect of black history, but as an education for visitors who know little or nothing about the past.

They flip and they flop. Multiple-choice tests have "defects." "We were aware that many thoughtful people mistrust multiple-choice tests . . . we shared most of those doubts." Nevertheless, test data are "hard documentation" and "the results of this assessment reveal serious gaps in 17-year-olds' basic knowledge of history and literature."

The study comes down against teaching skills without content but insists that students cannot engage in critical thinking unless they have "prior knowledge of the material they are reading." In other words, teach content without thought. They approve of student discussion and Paideia-like seminars, but given the prior knowledge requirement, the chances of struggling through the masses of prerequisite information to the cool reaches of reasoned thought seem remote indeed.

HYPOCRISY: AMERICA'S LEADING EXPORT

Under the cover of "making the world safe for democracy," the U.S. has countless military interventions and covert operations directed at destabilizing sovereign nations and popularly supported governments. Washington, D.C.'s rhetoric about democratic rights is twice over a fraud. Its global exploits have more to do with propping up multinational corporate interests than with the export of democracy. And the U.S. record on democracy at home is abysmal.

The U.S. is ranked near the bottom of some 75 world-wide electoral democracies in voter participation. A maze of legislation and regulations restricts voter registration and impedes access to the ballot for insurgents and independents. A steady erosion of the fairness doctrine has led to monopolization of the media by heavily funded major party candidates. And genuine public debate on critical social and foreign policy issues is stifled by the lack of democratic process.

DOn the 200th anniversary of the ratification of the Constitution, American democracy is more than ever recognized as a myth. But there is something you can do to make it a reality. You can support the fastest growing grassroots citizens lobby in the country—the **Rainbow Lobby**—which is developing a portfolio of legislation and issues to guarantee the civil and democratic rights of all Americans.

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Theodore Sizer, author of *Horace's Compromise*, seems to be one of their good guys, but they weren't paying attention. Less, Sizer says, is usually more.

For Ravitch and Finn right answers mean good schooling. Twenty-four percent of those tested matched Thomas Hardy with *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. That's bad schooling. A stunning 94 percent got Noah, right. Good schooling? They call their 60 percent cutoff for passing "generous," but few junior high math teachers or graduate school professors would risk using that figure on an exam given a year or more after their courses were taken. So, what exactly is being measured here? If the 8,000 students questioned had all scored 90 percent or more, would that mean schools were successfully teaching literature and history?

There are good and proper reasons to scrutinize the state of American education. Too few students have read any of the books on the questionnaire from cover to cover. Most have experienced our best authors in a hit-and-run fashion as they rush through curricula oriented to tests like this one. Too few have had the opportunity to engage in thoughtful discussion about the books they've read. Too few have been directed back to the text to support their feelings or opinions or preferences.

Too few express strong convictions about anything they are exposed to in school. Seldom have they been encouraged to abandon their present identities long enough to enter the unfamiliar worlds created by authors, thus making themselves vulnerable to the expansion of experience and insight that good literature offers. It is not the nod of recognition nor crossword puzzle savanterie that identifies the well-schooled person. It is habits of the mind.

There's a ferment in the world of school policy today and a lively discourse is going on, for a change. Good minds have been set to work figuring out how pesky human beings actually learn and are trying to relate that knowledge to schooling. It's a lively and unfinished conversation. Best of all, there's an exhilarating consensus that there is no one best answer to many of these questions, although there are clearly some very bad ones.

It is a time too of discussion about the aims of education. The business community sees the goals of education as outperforming Japan, curing the ills

of our economy and providing a useful labor pool. Academics call for schools that produce students prepared to handle subject matter in the way college professors dish it out. But there are those who point out that neither the employer nor the academy is the rightful beneficiary of a good education. Such people declare that the principal function of secondary education is to create a lively and strong civic culture, an active citizenry with the knowledge and understanding requisite for engaging in reasonable and responsible discourse, an education as rigorous for those who go straight to work as for the college-bound. In other words, the cosmetic surgeon and the cosmetician need an equally sound liberal education.

The argument for the humanities, which Ravitch and Finn are so passionately eager to strengthen, traditionally rests upon this latter claim. In the foreword to *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, Lynne Cheney writes that the study of the humanities "can expand the mind and enlarge the soul." She quotes Thomas Jefferson to the effect that the study of history "will qualify (people) as judges of the actions and designs of men."

Oh, the dangers of fooling around with original intent! Repeating well-worn phrases about history and literature as guarantors of democracy is naïve or cynical. Free schooling in a democratic society was a novel and exciting prospect in Jefferson's time. Two hundred years later, we are forced to acknowledge that successful, universal schooling can coexist with tyranny and gulags. Education alone is no guarantor of democracy.

How schools educate is then critical. Schools can cherish or ignore, prize or disdain habits of mind. Schools may preach respect for knowledge of the past, but if students are rushed through hundreds, perhaps thousands of years using generalizations as mileposts, such respect is not demonstrated and not learned. Sweeping survey courses given to the young and inexperienced student are essentially disrespectful of the complexities and subtleties of history. We telescope a thousand years of ancient Greek history so that we seem to be looking at a single coherent society that barely changes over ten centuries. There is no time to consider the nature of evidence, the credibility of witnesses. To help youngsters who, by virtue of their youth, distinguish poorly between a hundred and a thousand years, we pin catchy

labels onto events, labels that often hide more than they reveal. In the rush to cover the curriculum, there is no time to examine those who stood in the way of Progress. Only the winners are remembered. The Vince Lombardi school of history.

History as a discipline for citizenship needs to be treated with the respect we ask our students to use in examining the present. Only thus will history serve to assist in developing the dispositions that might serve our society well, that might "expand the mind and enlarge the soul." With such habits of mind people are ready to consider alternate viewpoints and possibilities, weigh evidence with care, look cautiously at claims of cause and effect. Such habits of mind include a romance with the past that stays in place long enough to come alive.

And time is a factor. The current interest in re-examining schools and education's goals won't last long, if an educated backward glance means anything. The struggle to put deeper and more authentic content and pedagogy into our schools will not be easy, at best, and will require its proponents to do battle with well-entrenched customs and interests. The textbook publishers and the testing corporations—the two are often the same—are waiting in the wings to see which way the wind will finally blow. Then they will rush in with surefire solutions: Curriculum from Kindergarten to Twelfth Grade, Guaranteed to Improve Scores on the Latest National Assessment in History; Sixty Days to Mastery of the 5,000 Words Every Cultured Person Should Know by the Age of 17; 100 Days to 100 Great Books.

Following the publishers and the testers will come the busy local and state curriculum teams, with their scores, sequences, stanines, pretests and posttests at the ready. *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* seems written for just such a constituency. Given the influence of Ravitch and Finn, new curriculums are probably already in the making. If so, we will have foreclosed on the real debate and be witness to one more cycle of alarm and reform, swinging from fad to fad and never digging deep. We'll move from the mindless teaching of skills to the mindless teaching of content as measured by mindless multiple-choice tests. We'll have missed the opportunity to develop a responsible approach to schooling, one that disdains the quick fix, that probes beneath the obvious, one undismayed by ignorance and am-

biguity, one patient in the face of tough and persistent issues, one first and foremost attentive to developing thoughtful, educated citizens. □