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## Essentialism and Education

Essentialism is a theory that asserts that education properly involves the learning of the basic skills, arts, and sciences that have been useful in the past and are likely to remain useful in the future. The Essentialist, as the name suggests, believes that there are some essential, or basic, skills that have contributed to human well-being, such as reading, writing, arithmetic, and civilized social behavior that should be found in every sound elementary or primary school curriculum. At the secondary level, the basic curriculum should consist of history, mathematics, science, languages, and literature. The college curriculum should consist of both the liberal arts and science. By mastering these subjects that deal with the natural and social environments, students are prepared to participate effectively in civilized society.

Although perhaps not identified as Essentialism, this theory has had a long history and definite staying power in U.S. education and schooling. When it originated in the nineteenth century, many proponents of public education believed that the goal of the common schools should be the development of a literate, skilled, and productive populace. Schooling was identified with economic productivity and growth. In the early twentieth century, social efficiency educators argued that the public school curriculum should stress those skills and subjects that contributed to economically and socially efficient lives. Periodically in U.S. educational history, concerted efforts have been made to relate education and schools to civic competency, economic skills, and social efficiency.

Clifton Fadiman has stated the case for basic education, another name for Essentialism. Basic education, he says, is concerned with subjects that have “generative power,” which means the potency to endow students “with the ability to learn the higher, more complex developments of these master subjects as well as the minor or self-terminating” ones. Such generative subjects deal with “lan-

guage, whether or not one’s own; forms, figures, and numbers; the laws of nature; the past; and the shape and behavior of our common home, the earth.”<sup>1</sup>

Among the common Essentialist themes are the following: (1) the elementary curriculum should emphasize basic tool skills that contribute to literacy and numeracy; (2) the secondary curriculum should include history, mathematics, science, literature, and language; (3) discipline is necessary for systematic learning in school situations; (4) respect for legitimate authority, both in school and in society, should be cultivated in students; (5) the mastering of a skill or a subject requires effort and diligence on the part of the learner; (6) the teaching of these necessary skills and subjects requires mature and well-educated teachers who know their subjects and are able to transmit them to students.

In this chapter we examine the Essentialist position, look at Arthur Bestor’s curriculum of intellectual disciplines, explore basic education and the Essentialist revival, examine schooling and Essentialism, and inquire into Essentialism’s philosophical and ideological relationships.

### THE ESSENTIALIST POSITION

Although the basic education position has had a long history, the Essentialist doctrine was formally stated by a group of like-minded educators at the convention of the National Education Association in 1938. Reacting against what they considered the excesses of Progressive education, the Essentialists argued that the primary function of formal education was to preserve and transmit the basic elements, or essentials, of human culture.

In outlining the “Essentialist Platform,” William Chandler Bagley, professor of education at Columbia University’s Teachers College, stated that (1) U.S. elementary school students were failing to meet the “standards of achievement in the fundamentals of education” attained in other countries; (2) U.S. secondary school students lagged academically behind the eighteen-year-olds of other countries; (3) increasingly large numbers of high school students were essentially illiterate and could not read effectively, and because of deficiencies at the primary and intermediate levels, remedial reading programs had to be instituted in many high schools; (4) in addition to declining literacy, notable deficiencies existed in mathematics and grammar; and (5) despite increased educational expenditures in the United States, there was a noticeable increase in the rates of serious crime.

Bagley identified two specific causes of the United States’ educational malaise: (1) dominant educational theories, such as Progressivism, were “essentially enfeebling,” and (2) the relaxation of academic standards in many school systems had led to the policy of widespread “social promotion.” Bagley chastised Progressives for overemphasizing the child’s freedom, interests, and play, and for abandoning discipline, effort, and work. For Bagley, Progressive education had contributed to the “complete abandonment in many school systems of rig-

orous standards of scholastic achievement for promotion from grade to grade, and the passing of all pupils 'on schedule.'<sup>2</sup> Instead of a curriculum based on systematic and sequential learning and consecutive, cumulative, and orderly academic development, the Progressives had substituted an undifferentiated program of activities, projects, and incidental learning. Bagley's condemnation of social promotion was similar to today's basic education arguments that students should master minimal competencies before being promoted to a higher grade or being awarded a diploma.

Bagley was joined by other professional educators such as Michael Demishkevich, Walter H. Ryle, M. L. Shane, and Gary M. Whipple, who, calling themselves Essentialists, urged U.S. schools, teachers, and administrators to return to the basic skills of recording, computing, measuring, U.S. history, health instruction, natural science, and the fine and industrial arts. In taking their stance, the Essentialists asked:

*Should not our public schools prepare boys and girls for adult responsibility through systematic training in such subjects as reading, writing, arithmetic, history, and English, requiring mastery of such subjects, and, when necessary, stressing discipline and obedience?<sup>3</sup>*

Arguing that progressive education had created discontinuity between the generations, Bagley urged U.S. educators and schools to provide each generation with "possession of a common core of ideas, meanings, understandings, and ideals representing the most precious elements of the human heritage."<sup>4</sup>

Although Essentialists stated their case carefully and consistently, their educational philosophy was not to prevail in the colleges of education, in teacher education, or in the professional literature. Essentialism was either neglected or relegated to a footnote in books on the history of education. Essentialism has recently reappeared in the basic education revival that argues that scholastic standards have fallen, academic rigor and sequence are absent in many schools, and that there needs to be a return to essential skills and subjects.

Bagley and his Essentialists issued a thorough rationale for the Essentialist position. Although early Essentialism has been neglected by philosophers and historians of education, the Essentialist Platform was clearly prophetic of what has proved to be a recurring critique of U.S. education and schools. Like the authors of *A Nation at Risk*, the early Essentialists used comparative and cross-cultural evidence to identify the academic deficiencies of U.S. students. They, like contemporary critics, contended that academic standards had eroded because of permissivism and progressivism. Like current critics, they attributed rising crime rates to indiscipline and a lack of standards in the schools. However, the Essentialism of the 1930s makes an interesting contrast with the contemporary movement. The early Essentialists largely came from within the ranks of professional educators; in fact, several were highly prominent professors of education. Contemporary Essentialism draws much of its support from outside of the educational profession, particularly from business leaders and from Neo-Conservative political forces.

## BESTOR'S CURRICULUM OF INTELLECTUAL DISCIPLINES

The basic education position surfaced again in the 1950s. Just as the earlier Essentialists had challenged Progressive education, critics in the 1950s reacted against a new educational theory called "life adjustment" that emphasized the personal and social needs of U.S. children and youth over academic subjects. Critics such as Max Rafferty, Hyman Rickover, and Arthur Bestor questioned life-adjustment education. Rafferty, who served as Superintendent of Public Instruction in California from 1963 to 1971, wrote two books, *Suffer Little Children* and *What They Are Doing to Your Children*, which attacked Progressive educators for lacking standards and for encouraging a permissiveness that had produced a generation of delinquent, unpatriotic, undereducated "slobs."<sup>5</sup> Admiral Hyman Rickover, who pioneered the first atomic submarine, decried the decline of U.S. academic standards in *Education and Freedom, Swiss Schools and Ours: Why Theirs are Better*, and *American Education—A National Failure*.<sup>6</sup> Rickover argued that U.S. public education had lowered academic standards, ignored the intellectually gifted, and neglected mathematics, science, and foreign-language instruction.

One of the most articulate critics of the 1950s, Arthur Bestor, professor of history at the University of Illinois, published *Educational Wastelands* (1953) and *The Restoration of Learning* (1956) and helped organize the Council for Basic Education.<sup>7</sup> According to Bestor: (1) academic standards in U.S. public schools had declined because of an anti-intellectual educational philosophy that had separated the schools from the scientific and scholarly disciplines; and (2) a narrowly educated group of professional educators, administrators, and department of education bureaucrats at the state level had gained control of entry into the teaching profession by manipulating certification requirements. Bestor urged that the trend to anti-intellectualism be reversed and that the public school curriculum be based on the intellectual disciplines of English, foreign languages, history, mathematics, and science. While the Essentialists were professional educators and the critics of the 1950s primarily were not, their arguments had much in common. Both groups believed that U.S. schools were dominated by an anti-basic education theory. For the Essentialists, it was Progressivism. For the critics of the 1950s, it was life adjustment. Both groups decried falling academic standards, declining literacy, and the absence of rigor and discipline in the schools. Bagley, Rickover, and Bestor saw European schools as having higher academic standards than U.S. schools.

In particular, Bestor's books were part of the movement to restore a basic subject-matter curriculum in the nation's schools. Some comments on his philosophy of education are useful in examining contemporary Essentialist education that emphasizes basic education and a return to intellectual disciplines as the focus of curriculum.

In *The Restoration of Learning*, Bestor established a criterion of education based on intellectual disciplines and indicated that U.S. education was failing to meet the criterion of disciplined intelligence. Strongly implied in Bestor's edu-

cational theory is a conception of U.S. democracy based on the rule of reasonable and intelligent citizens. An intelligently functioning democracy is a government of law, orderly parliamentary processes, and democratic guarantees for all citizens. Bestor expressed a definite Essentialist theory of education which provides

*sound training in the fundamental ways of thinking represented by history, science, mathematics, literature, language, art and other disciplines evolved in the course of mankind's long quest for usable knowledge, cultural understanding, and intellectual power.*<sup>8</sup>

These intellectual disciplines should be fundamental in the school curriculum for they are basic in modern life. In the elementary school, reading, writing, and arithmetic provide indispensable generative skills. The essentials of the secondary school curriculum are science, mathematics, history, English, and foreign languages. These intellectual disciplines, the core of a liberal education, are humankind's most reliable tools in solving personal, social, political, and economic problems.

Bestor sought to achieve his educational ideal through an essential subject-matter curriculum based on history, mathematics, science, foreign languages, and English. Indeed, the years devoted to the pursuit of formal learning are based on these five essential intellectual disciplines. During the first four, five, or six years of schooling, reading, writing, and arithmetic are the necessary generative tool skills. The elementary school student should also be introduced to the structures and methods of the natural sciences, geography, and history.<sup>9</sup>

Junior high school, the grades from seven to nine, marks the beginning of organized and systematic study. A transition is made from arithmetic to the more abstract forms of mathematical reasoning, beginning with elementary algebra. History is to assume a recognized chronological structure. From the generalized natural science studied earlier, a transition is made as the student is introduced to sciences such as biology, physics, or chemistry. Instruction in foreign languages moves forward to grammatical analysis.

Students in the senior high school are expected to pursue a subject methodologically and to use abstract reasoning. Specifically, the study of mathematics is continued through advanced algebra, plane geometry, trigonometry, analytical geometry, and calculus. Systematic work in chemistry, physics, and biology furnishes the needed foundations of scientific knowledge. History's chronological pattern and structure are emphasized. English is employed with accuracy, lucidity, and grace. One foreign language is mastered and another begun.<sup>10</sup>

Bestor's proposed curriculum is prescribed for all students. Once he or she has mastered these essentials, the student can begin vocational or college education. Training in the liberating disciplines prepares a person for intellectual life, citizenship, a vocation, and for a profession.

Bestor feared that U.S. schools were failing to provide the needed intellectual discipline. He charged that some professional educators postulated an erroneous view of a democratic education. Because the intellectual disciplines were

once reserved to aristocratic elites, these educators failed to realize that the progress of the modern age now made an intellectual education the prerogative of all.

Bestor charged that professional educators, no longer content with methodology, had usurped curriculum making. Curriculum construction is best exercised by the scholars and scientists who are expert in their academic disciplines. Some professional educators had distorted Progressive education into a "regressive education," according to Bestor. They had watered down the great intellectual disciplines and introduced vocational and life-adjustment courses into the general curriculum to the detriment of the academic subjects. By weakening liberal education, too much of public education had become anti-democratic and anti-intellectual.

Bestor's educational agenda emphasized two fundamental principles: (1) ensuring disciplined intellectual education to every future citizen, and (2) providing opportunity for advanced study to all who possess genuine intellectual capacity and a willingness to develop their intellectual powers.<sup>11</sup>

These two principles serve as the basis of the school's primary responsibilities, which are outlined as follows: (1) the school should provide a standard program of intellectual training in the fundamental disciplines geared to the needs of serious students and to the capacities of the upper two-thirds of the school population; (2) the school should provide special opportunities for exceptionally able students; (3) programs designed for the highest third of the school population should be balanced with adequate remedial programs for the lowest third, the slow learners; (4) a program of physical education for all children should be provided that is distinguished from interschool athletics; (5) the school should diversify its offerings to include certain areas of vocational training; (6) there should be certain extracurricular activities; (7) high-ability students should continue in school; (8) life-adjustment training should be provided only for the least able and least ambitious.<sup>12</sup>

Bestor's proposed reform runs counter to the Progressive views of education. The chief contention is evident in this quotation from Bestor's *The Restoration of Learning*: "The school makes itself ridiculous whenever it undertakes to deal directly with 'real-life' problems, instead of indirectly through the development of generalized intellectual powers."<sup>13</sup>

## BASIC EDUCATION AND THE ESSENTIALIST REVIVAL

A recent revival of Essentialism in the United States is the movement for "basic" education. In some respects, this movement, like the earlier Essentialist one, generated from criticisms of U.S. public schools. Basic-education proponents used comparisons with education in other countries, often Germany and Japan, for evidence that U.S. academic standards and achievement had declined. Among the criticisms that proponents of basic education have levied are the following:

1. Permissive, open, and progressive educational methods have neglected basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and have contributed to a growing functional illiteracy.
2. Schools do not stress fundamental values of industriousness, punctuality, effort, morality, or patriotism.
3. Teachers are ill prepared and undereducated; those teachers who strive for academic excellence find themselves thwarted by inefficient, expensive, and mindless educational bureaucracies.
4. Recent curricular innovations have neglected fundamental skills and subjects. Further, the confusing jargon of the "new math, new social studies, and new science" has made it difficult for parents to be involved in and to monitor their children's education.
5. Social-promotion policies rather than academic achievement have dumped ill-prepared and undereducated high school graduates on the society and the economy.
6. Schools have been used for social engineering and experimentation rather than for basic education. Administrators and teachers perform so many non-educational functions that they neglect the basics.
7. Educational expenses could be contained by reducing nonacademic frills, eliminating electives, and concentrating on required basic skills and subjects.
8. Permissive policies have contributed to violence and vandalism in the schools.
9. Minority groups such as African Americans and Hispanics have been short-changed by the schools with respect to instruction in the basic skills.
10. U.S. industrial and business productivity has been reduced by undereducated graduates who cannot perform fundamental skills, who cannot read or write effectively, and who lack productive work skills and habits.

The revival of basic education took three lines of development. One, the Council for Basic Education continued to emphasize intellectual content from a liberal arts and sciences perspective. The Council for Basic Education emphasized intellectual content from a liberal arts and sciences perspective. The second line of development emerged from a coalition of some parents, businesspersons, politicians, and occasionally professional educators, who were dissatisfied with public education for a variety of reasons, among them, declining test scores, a decline of traditional patriotic and moral values, increasing drug abuse, and the weakening of the economic position of the United States relative to foreign competitors. Although these critics had varying motives, they were united in demanding a return to basic skills, subjects, and values.<sup>14</sup> The third line of development came under the auspices of the federal government, under the leadership of Terrel Bell, Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration, with the publication in 1983 of *A Nation at Risk*.

Like other reports calling for a return to rigorous academic standards, *A Nation at Risk* warned that "the educational foundations of our society are pres-

ently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."<sup>15</sup> Echoing the criticisms of Bagley and Bestor, the National Commission on Excellence reported its findings. Among them were the following:

*Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose.*<sup>16</sup>

*In many other industrialized nations, courses in mathematics (other than arithmetic or general mathematics), biology, chemistry, physics, and geography start in grade 6 and are required of all students. The time spent on these subjects, based on class hours, is about three times that spent by even the most science-oriented U.S. students, i.e., those who select 4 years of science and mathematics in secondary school.*<sup>17</sup>

*In many schools, the time spent learning how to cook and drive counts as much toward a high school diploma as the time spent studying mathematics, English, chemistry, U.S. history, or biology.*<sup>18</sup>

Leaning heavily in the direction of a content-oriented and subject-matter curriculum, the Commission on Excellence recommended

*that State and local high school graduation requirements be strengthened and that, at a minimum, all students seeking a diploma be required to lay the foundations in the Five New Basics by taking the following curriculum during their 4 years of high school: (a) 4 years of English; (b) 3 years of mathematics; (c) 3 years of science; (d) 3 years of social studies; and (e) one-half year of computer science. For the college-bound, 2 years of foreign language in high school are strongly recommended in addition to those taken earlier.*<sup>19</sup>

and

*that schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct, and that 4-year colleges and universities raise their requirements for admission. This will help students do their best educationally with challenging materials in an environment that supports learning and authentic accomplishment.*<sup>20</sup>

*A Nation at Risk* stimulated other national reports and educational recommendations that urged emphasis on basic skills and subjects. For example, the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, in *Action for Excellence*, stressed basic skills and competencies for productive employment in a structurally and technologically changing society.<sup>21</sup> The College Board in *Academic Preparation for College* identified the basic academic competencies or "broad intellectual

skills essential to effective work" in college as reading, speaking and listening, writing, mathematics, reasoning, and studying. Added to this conventional list of tool skills was a basic knowledge of computer processes, terminology, and application.<sup>22</sup> The College Board identified the basic academic subjects that provide "the detailed knowledge and skills" for effective college work as English, the arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign languages.<sup>23</sup>

Essentialism also has reappeared in the arguments of commentators such as E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Chester Finn, and Diane Ravitch who contend that public schools are failing to impart the knowledge needed for cultural and political literacy. For example, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., argues that the average American's declining cultural literacy, the lack of a shared body of common knowledge, is negatively impacting a sense of a national cultural identity and ability to communicate effectively with other Americans. Because the contemporary school curriculum does not deliberately transmit a core to develop cultural literacy, many students complete their formal education without the necessary contextual background that enables them to reference and interpret materials crucial for public communication and for effective functioning in the workplace. A core curriculum designed to promote cultural literacy, Hirsch contends, is needed if citizens are to participate in the institutions and processes of political democracy.<sup>24</sup>

## SCHOOLING AND ESSENTIALISM

Essentialism defines the role of schooling in strictly academic terms. For Essentialists, the term *academic*, too, is specifically defined as foundational skills and intellectual subject matters. Essentialists do not like vaguely constructed or broadly defined educational agendas that move the educational process into non-academic areas. This tendency, found among Progressives and Social Reconstructionists, for example, confuses the purpose of the schools, according to Essentialists.

Just as the school's function is specifically defined, the curriculum, too, is specific in terms of generative tool skills and academic subjects. Further, the curriculum is considered too important by Essentialists to be determined by shifting social fads and tendencies and by childish whims. Essentialists argue that educators must carefully structure the curriculum according to scope and sequence. Each grade level should have a particular set of objectives to guide instruction. Each teacher must have a particular set of skills or a well-defined academic subject to teach. It is important that the schools be administered so that each skill or subject is taught in an articulated manner, with one phase of instruction leading to the next. Further, instruction should be cumulative in that each phase builds on the preceding phase and leads to the next.

Essentialists argue that although schools are part of a societal context, they are effective when they fulfill their primary academic function. Knowledge of the social context should help teachers do their academic jobs more effectively

and efficiently. It should also help administrators and teachers perform their primary tasks more effectively and efficiently. However, the existence of social problems should not deter teachers from performing their academic tasks, nor should these social issues be allowed to alter the primary function of schools. The Essentialist view is that large social problems are at base political, economic, and social issues that need to be addressed by agencies outside of the school, whose functions are appropriate in dealing with these problems. Although educators need to understand social problems and how they impact education, teachers do not have it in their power to cure society's ills. They do have it in their power, however, to teach reading, writing, history, and science, for example. By providing academic literacy, schools can build a civic knowledge base in an informed citizenry that can then use their informed intelligence to resolve social issues.

For the Essentialist, the examination of social, political, and economic issues are part of the exploration of the academic knowledge base. Here the academic subject either reaches its current or applied state. For example, poverty, drug abuse, and racism might be part of an academic exploration of subject matter. The objective is to understand trends and tendencies in a particular academic subject. The function of the school is to examine issues academically, not to solve them in the school. Indeed, the Essentialist is likely to argue that it is beyond the school's power to solve social problems. The school does its job when it educates an intelligent citizenry and a competent work force by imparting the necessary skills and knowledge of subject matter.

## ESSENTIALISM'S PHILOSOPHICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS

As an educational theory, Essentialism exhibits certain themes that are parallel with the more traditional philosophies of Idealism, Realism, and Thomism discussed earlier. (To review these themes, you may wish to refer to Chapters 2, 3, and 4.) Like these philosophies, Essentialism's educational perspective stresses the transmission to the young of a structured and orderly view of reality. While the Idealist, Realist, and Thomist conceptions of reality are metaphysical, the Essentialist preference for order and structure is primarily social, economic, and cultural. It should be pointed out, however, that some Essentialists derived their position from one of these traditional philosophies.

In terms of an ideological orientation, Essentialism parallels most closely the Conservative view that sees education's primary function as that of transmitting the funded and approved knowledge and values of the culture. It also bears some resemblance to the Liberal perspective, particularly the Classical Liberal variety, which emphasizes the skills, knowledge, and values that enhance social and economic efficiency. Essentialism is highly compatible with those aspects of the contemporary Neo-Conservative ideology that emphasizes a need to (1) enhance U.S. economic productivity in a highly competitive global economy;

(2) restore standards of civility and academic achievement in public schools; (3) structure the curriculum around the fundamental skills and subjects that contribute to social, economic, and political efficiency; and (4) oppose those educators who would weaken the schools' primary academic mission.

The Essentialist position opposes certain aspects of Naturalism, Pragmatism, and Existentialism, which were discussed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Unlike the Naturalists, who stress the educational potency of the person's feelings and emotions, Essentialists emphasize the primary importance of the human mind as an instrument best cultivated by intellectual disciplines. While Pragmatists stress an open and evolutionary universe of constant change, Essentialists want education, especially schooling, to provide human beings with a secure and stable reference point. Whereas Existentialists stress human subjectivity and self-definition, Essentialists are more concerned with transmitting an antecedent curriculum to learners.

For the Essentialist, the school has the specific function of transmitting to the young certain generative skills and certain general intellectual disciplines. By transmitting these skills and subjects, the school perpetuates the cultural heritage. Conservatives would concur with Essentialists that the school is to be an agency of cultural continuity and stability. Essentialists would argue that the more the society shows symptoms of social malaise, the more important it is for schools to be stable academic environments for students.

The term *essential* means that the school, in performing its role as a cultural transmitter, identifies and perpetuates the basic cultural elements. It is not to take on nonessential functions such as "social adjustment," career education, consumer education, cooking classes, and other such activities that should be learned elsewhere. For the school to assume responsibility for these nonessentials would mean that the essential core of necessary skills and subjects would be diluted or diminished.

For Essentialists and the contemporary proponents of basic education, the school's primary mission is academic. It is not an agency to promote social engineering, as Utopians or Social Reconstructionists assert. Sharing the Conservative's suspicion of innovation and change, Essentialists would oppose using the schools as experimental laboratories to test curricular or instructional innovations. Untested innovation creates an unsettled atmosphere that weakens the school's essential or basic function.

Primarily an educational theory that focuses on schooling rather than on large socioeconomic issues, Essentialism has a well-defined curricular orientation. Essentialists assert that the curriculum should provide students with a differentiated and organized learning experience rather than an undifferentiated experience that students must organize themselves. The most effective and efficient mode of providing a differentiated educational experience is the subject-matter curriculum in which each subject or intellectual discipline is organized separately from other subjects. Further, each subject is organized according to carefully arranged principles of scope and sequence.

The Essentialists reject curricular innovations, such as Experimentalist problem solving or Progressive projects, which seek to break down subject-matter boundaries. Such undifferentiated curricular designs, contend the Essentialists, are inefficient in that they often force students to "reinvent the wheel" rather than learning and using the fund of knowledge that already exists. Moreover, these undifferentiated educational approaches are presumptuous in that they assume that students can take some elements from a subject without knowing the context from which it comes. Essentialists would condemn the Pragmatist, Reconstructionist, and Progressive approaches to learning as contributing to an academic confusion that weakens intellectual authority and social organization.

Essentialists, like the adherents to traditional philosophies and Conservative ideology, assert that the teacher is an academic authority figure. The teacher is to be a specialist in the content of the subject matter and be skilled in organizing it for instructional purposes. While the Essentialist teacher speaks with the sense of authority that knowledge brings, this should not be confused with authoritarianism. Defenders of intellectual disciplines, such as Arthur Bestor, argue that the liberal knowledge that they contain and convey is the best guarantee for preserving both academic freedom in the school and civil liberties in society.

## CONCLUSION

Essentialism is the educational theory that sees the primary function of the school as the preservation and transmission of the basic elements of human culture. It emphasizes (1) a return to systematic subjects, (2) learning as the mastery of basic skills and knowledge, (3) the teacher as a mature representative of the culture and someone who is competent in both subject matter and instruction, (4) education as preparation for work and citizenship, and (5) the preservation of the school's academic function. Above all, Essentialists oppose catering to childish whims or to transitory fads that will cause schools to degenerate into mindless and irrelevant institutions.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Define Essentialism and indicate how the term applies to the school and the curriculum.
2. Examine the Essentialist critique. Does it resemble contemporary criticisms of U.S. public schooling?
3. Examine Arthur Bestor's rationale for a curriculum based on intellectual disciplines. Compare and contrast Bestor's proposed curriculum with that recommended in *A Nation at Risk*.
4. Why has there been a resurgence of the basic-education theory in the United States?

5. Reflect on your own educational experience. To what extent does it resemble or differ from an Essentialist or basic-education perspective?
6. Of the philosophies examined in this text, which is most compatible and which is least compatible with Essentialism or basic education?
7. Of the ideologies examined in this text, which is the most compatible and which is the least compatible with the Essentialist or basic-education theory?

## INQUIRY PROJECTS

- Identify the key points in the Essentialist critique. In a paper, examine contemporary criticisms of public schooling found in reports such as *A Nation at Risk* and *Action for Excellence*. Do these criticisms parallel those made by the Essentialists?
- Examine and review selected publications of the Council for Basic Education.
- Review a book on education written by one of the following: Arthur Bestor, Max Rafferty, Clifton Fadiman, James Koerner, Hyman Rickover, or Diane Ravitch.
- Collect "letters to the editor" or other public-opinion pieces on education. Determine if these items reflect a basic-education perspective.
- Consult curriculum or methods books used in courses in teacher education at your college or university. To what degree do they reflect or disagree with the Essentialist or basic-education theory?
- Visit several schools and observe the curricular organization and instructional methods being used. To what extent do they reflect or disagree with the Essentialist or basic-education theory?

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## ENDNOTES

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2. William C. Bagley, "An Essentialist's Platform for the Advancement of American Education," *Educational Administration and Supervision*, XXIV (April 1938): 241–256.
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