

The Almighty Facts

A review of *The Knowledge Deficit*, by E. D. Hirsch Jr.

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An educational experiment in 1989 pitted a group of students with high reading scores, selected especially for their lack of interest in baseball, against a group of low-scoring students who happened to be avid baseball fans. The two groups were asked to demonstrate their reading comprehension of a passage on baseball. Can you guess which team won?

In *The Knowledge Deficit*, E. D. Hirsch Jr. recounts this experiment and draws on the work of reading researchers and theorists to argue that “background knowledge,” knowledge not explicitly presented in a text, is essential to reading comprehension. Hirsch advances his case at a time when there is growing concern about the poor reading proficiency of American students compared to their international peers. What is worse, Hirsch points out, is that the longer these students are in school, the lower they drop—to a depressing 15th out of 27 countries by the tenth grade. The scores get worse after the early grades when students are increasingly tested for comprehension and not just for “decoding,” the ability to translate written marks into words.

“We need to see the reading comprehension problem,” Hirsch writes, “for what it primarily is—a knowledge problem.” Schooling, according to Hirsch, must supply our students with the broad knowledge—much less of baseball than of history, literature, science, and other traditional subjects—that is requisite for reading. This broad knowledge of words and of the world is also what standardized reading tests in fact test for, Hirsch says. These typically consist of passages on a variety of topics, undisclosed until testing time, for which only a good general education can prepare the student. In or out of the exam room or the research lab, there is no such thing as reading comprehension without prior knowledge of a text’s vocabulary (90 percent of it is the estimated minimum) and its references, and no such thing as effective education without imparting to students a wide range of specific knowledge.

Readers of Hirsch’s earlier work will recognize that the body of “enabling knowledge” he refers to, demarcated not by ideal criteria but by the actual intellectual demands of a culture, is nothing other than the “cultural literacy” that provided the title for Hirsch’s already classic 1987 work, and which he has ever since dedicated himself to elaborating and advocating in books, articles, and curricular projects carried out through his Core Knowledge Foundation. (Disclosure: the author of this review is currently involved in a Core Knowledge Foundation–Shimer College collaboration to develop a graduate curriculum for K–8 teachers.)

Without background knowledge of the current state of American education, one might suppose that *The Knowledge Deficit* belabors the obvious. Hirsch outlines how in American schools—and not just in the early grades—the teaching of reading consists mostly of instruction in decoding, also called “sounding out.” What remains of reading periods, Hirsch writes, is devoted to “reading strategies,” such as looking for the main idea, notwithstanding measurements showing that reading strategy instruction stops yielding improved comprehension after the first few lessons. Hirsch draws a fine analogy between the inadequacy of technique-oriented reading instruction and efforts to build Russian-to-English translating computers by means of algorithms corresponding to human language rules: the automatons stay dumb because they lack the myriad items of specific information that human brains carry around.

We also learn that the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, intended to improve education for all students in the United States, and to narrow demographic achievement gaps, has not reduced the knowledge deficit. NCLB has led states to mandate at least 90 minutes of reading instruction every school day, but, as Hirsch explains, the additional time spent on reading techniques has been at the expense of classes in geography, history and the like. Thus a major consequence of the law has been to minimize school time spent on subject matter. It soon becomes clear that *The Knowledge Deficit* is not so much a critique of methods of reading instruction per se, but rather a brief for confining reading instruction to its proper place in the school day and largely replacing it with a knowledge-intensive curriculum. Such is the curriculum, called the “Core Knowledge Sequence,” that a group of scholars and teachers led by Hirsch painstakingly researched and created in the late 1980s. Three independent studies show higher achievement scores in reading and other academic skills by students in schools that use the Core Knowledge curriculum than students in schools that do not.

If this is the case, then why are American schools, unlike those of nations with more effective education systems, so excessively focused on teaching reading as a merely formal, abstract skill? Here, as in Hirsch’s two previous titles, *Cultural Literacy* (1988) and *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them* (1996), the nemesis of the teaching of knowledge is the Progressive educational

establishment, which rose to power in the era of John Dewey and the Teachers College at Columbia University, and whose orthodoxies he traces to the naive Romanticism of 19th-century America.

Hirsch attributes the knowledge deficit and the resistance to correcting it to two Progressivist ideas in particular, which he calls "formalism" and "naturalism." For Hirsch, these constitute "a kind of theology." He defines formalism as the notion that "what counts in education is not the learning of things but rather learning how to learn." Formalism leads to such Progressive slogans as "It's how to think, not what to think," and it stresses "process, not product." Formalist ideas derogate domain-specific knowledge as inessential and rapidly superseded, facts as "mere information," and their acquisition as "rote learning." Accordingly, formalist thinking privileges the teaching of supposedly general abilities such as decoding and reading strategies.

Naturalism is the older idea that "learning can and should be natural and that any unnatural or artificial approach to school learning should be rejected or deemphasized." Adherents to this approach abhor the thought of "stuffing . . . children's minds with dead, inert information." The naturalist constellation of ideas, one might add, underlies familiar Progressivist tenets such as "teach the child, not the subject" (which Dewey himself regarded as simplistic) and supports the more recent jargon such as "personal growth" and "finding your own voice."

Hirsch has critiqued both naturalism and formalism in previous work, but in *The Knowledge Deficit* his attempt to make the former share blame with the latter for the failure of reading instruction is not quite on target. After all, decoding is not so different from classroom practices that Progressive educators anathematize, in the name of natural learning, as "drill and kill." In fact, Hirsch recognizes that decoding instruction, which is both appropriate and effective in the early grades, now prevails in American schools largely because its proponents—Marilyn Jager Adams, Jeanne Chall, and others to whom Hirsch pays homage—discredited the truly naturalistic "whole language" approach.

While clearly no friend to the naturalists, Hirsch's knowledge-intensive, teacher-controlled classroom is not exactly congenial to the Progressivist school of thought, either. Progressive education is "child-centered" or "student-centered," as is often said by both its proponents and its critics. It not only puts the student at center stage but also seeks to restrict the role of the curriculum developer, the lesson planner, and the teacher—often renamed "facilitator"—so as to let students naturally learn "hands-on" by themselves as much as possible, letting them determine what the class talks about as far as possible, and without overly conspicuous supervision by authority. The Progressive orientation is neatly reflected in a Bank Street School of Education statement on reading pedagogy, which Hirsch quotes: "Beginning readers, too, need to learn to use their own background knowledge. Helping them activate and extend this knowledge and selecting texts that build on what they already know or understand about their world support their attempts to make sense of what they are reading."

This is all relatively easy for teachers to go along with as long as development of skills and abilities is the objective, a lot of practice by the students themselves goes on, and the teacher's role is essentially to "activate what they already know." But it is much harder when it comes to the transmission of facts, terms, and concepts not vetted by the students. "It is highly inconvenient to this doctrine," Hirsch comments, "that research has shown a body of specific background knowledge to be necessary for reading proficiency." The kind of schooling Hirsch has in mind quite inevitably and visibly casts the teacher as authoritative purveyor of knowledge. The hierarchical teacher-student relation that follows from emphasizing the transmission of content is hard to accept, not just for Progressive educators or for Romantics, but also for postmodernists, feminists, and the gamut of cultural formations that flourished in the 1960s, all of which have powerfully influenced education in the United States.

Hirsch's call for knowledge-intensive, teacher-controlled education amounts to a paradigm shift in the education world, though it is also a return to old-fashioned practices—and can also be seen, from a hostile standpoint, as reactionary. As might be expected, Hirsch draws a great deal of flak. The most common criticism, that he is an apostle of ethnocentricity and curricular dominance by dead white guys, is also the charge most easily countered. Perusal of the Core Knowledge curriculum reveals a wide array of multicultural units. Skill objectives for a first grade unit on travel to Mesoamerica include not only finding places on a map but also gained "knowledge of his/her culture, the culture of others, and the common elements of cultures." And it is noteworthy that the multicultural offerings in this curriculum are no less distinguished than Eurocentric texts regarding richness of specific content. He proposes, not for the first time, that vapid Dick and Jane-style readers be shelved as soon as students are competent decoders, and that they move on to fare such as Norse myths, Inuit songs, and historical accounts—in other words, texts that actually have something to say to students about the world and human existence. It's interesting that in American education the affirmation of students' entitlement to "respect" and "empowerment" has proceeded apace with the dumbing down of what they're given to read—and, what comes to the same thing, the censoring of controversial content out of textbooks.

Hirsch's multicultural curriculum follows logically from his educational principles. Cultural literacy, in contemporary culture at least, requires that readers know about groups and persons traditionally

confined to history's marginalia. But this rationale is different from the more political one that has informed multicultural studies over the past few decades: that we have an obligation to bolster the standing and self-perception of various suppressed or marginalized "identities." For Hirsch, the way to really help minority students is not through identity politics but rather through greater integration into the existing culture. Teaching that is focused on correcting the knowledge deficit, Hirsch argues, would be especially beneficial to disadvantaged children. The gap in reading and general academic achievement between them and advantaged students, which also widens as schooling proceeds, can be narrowed, as data on French minority pupils shows, by knowledge-intensive education:

Breadth of knowledge is the single factor within human control that contributes most to academic achievement and general cognitive competence. In contradiction to the theory of social determinism, breadth of knowledge is a far greater factor in achievement than socioeconomic status. . . . This little-known and quite momentous fact means that imparting knowledge to all children is the single most effective way to narrow the competence gap between demographic groups through schooling.

One does not, however, have to be a political multiculturalist, Progressive, or child of the '60s to have misgivings about a knowledge-transmission model of education. Is it not, after all, important that students of all ages be autonomous learners, actively involved in their education? Since Hirsch's disdain for formalism extends to the teaching of critical thinking, it is not self-evident how, in Hirsch's kind of classroom, children can be more than merely passive recipients of information. Even if we grant that possessing specific knowledge of an established culture is indispensable, shouldn't education also provide the means for dealing with texts for which one does not have sufficient background knowledge, or for evaluating ideas that may be outside the bounds of even the broadest cultural literacy? No acquired core of knowledge, however well chosen, can spare the reader from eventually having to deal with unfamiliar passages, in college or elsewhere. The theoretical basis for a wholesale elimination of instruction in metacognitive skills would have to be a resurrection of the epistemology of John Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, according to which "impressions" or units of knowledge clump together by themselves, and that is sufficient for the progress of understanding.

Hirsch's anti-formalist analogy of computers with sophisticated algorithms that are nevertheless inept because they lack specific knowledge can be turned against him. A program without data is useless, but data without a program is just as useless. Educators should take to heart Hirsch's exposition on the value of domain-specific knowledge, but without lapsing into a narrowness symmetrical to formalism: teaching what, but not how, to think.

In *The Knowledge Deficit*, as in all his work on education, Hirsch invokes "knowledge," so often that the word, avoided in neo-Progressive discourse, begins to function as Hirsch's trademark, in tandem with "cultural literacy." But one looks in vain for signs that he recognizes that "knowledge" is a philosophically contested term—a recognition that it would seem is nowadays demanded by cultural literacy itself, since even the hard sciences have embraced uncertainty.

Hirsch, busily making his positive, empirically based case for the benefits of knowledge-intensive schooling, flirts only briefly with questions of the fundamental aims and purposes of education. In the historical context of dominance of the educational community by Progressivism and its offshoots, Hirsch's is the kind of writing that makes one think, "It's about time somebody came out and said that." But it leaves readers who are not simply dismissive of alternative philosophies with deep and unresolved dilemmas.

The most serious dilemma, perhaps, turns on the question of whether the mission of educators is fulfilled by helping students to integrate into and succeed in a given society, without taking responsibility for its transformation. In the final analysis, Hirsch's case in *The Knowledge Deficit*, as in earlier books, rests on recalling educators to what would seem to be the more basic responsibility, which none of them, however much they may want present-day America to change, can ignore with a clear conscience: the responsibility to prepare the young to deal effectively with the social world that is already here and awaiting them, the responsibility to teach them literacy—in the Hirschian or the narrow sense—to help them "make it."

Before Hirsch, the Columbia University sociologist Amitai Etzioni called into question the ethics of attempting to turn schools into instruments of social change and in effect using children as subjects in utopian experiments. "The culture-changing idealists," Hirsch writes on this point, "have oversimplified how the job of changing the culture can best be done, and have placed the burden of their ideals on the backs of disadvantaged children." But even if one takes the view that, for the common good, tomorrow's better society must begin in today's schoolroom, there doesn't seem to be much chance of children maturing into an effective vanguard of transformation if they don't learn enough to make sense of a newspaper or magazine article. No person serious about education should fail to take Hirsch's new book into account.