



Hirsch, E.D. (2016). *Why knowledge matters: Rescuing our children from failed educational theories*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Pp. 280

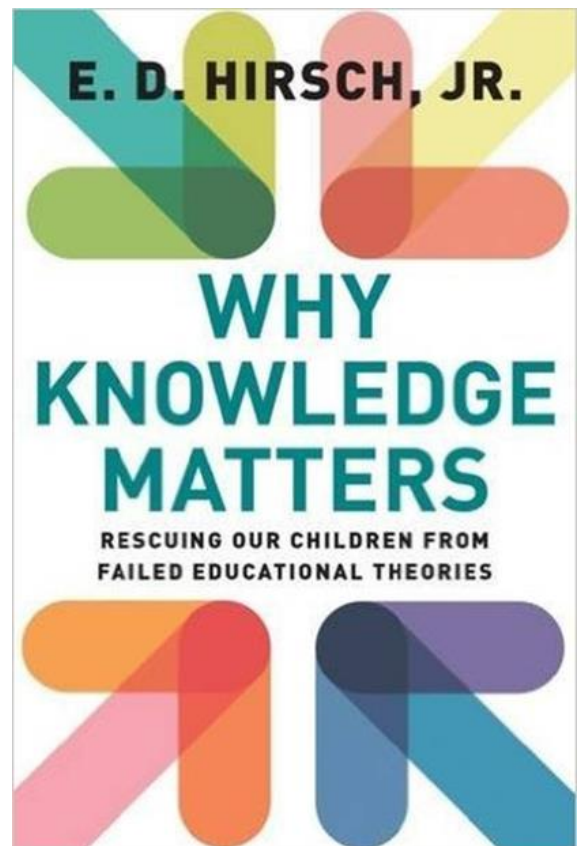
ISBN: 1612509525

Reviewed by Kevin Currie-Knight
East Carolina University
United States

In the introduction to *Why Knowledge Matters*, E.D. Hirsch admits that, intellectually speaking, he is a hedgehog. Alluding to Isaiah Berlin's essay on intellectual hedgehogs who specialize in one big idea and foxes who traverse between many ideas (Berlin, 2013), Hirsch fits well into the hedgehog category, a researcher who has been articulating the same big idea from different angles for decades. Hirsch's big idea is that content knowledge - rather than general reading skills - is the prime mover of successful reading, and our collective emphasis on teaching the latter over the former in reading instruction has undermined student success.

In previous books, Hirsch has explained why content-rich curricula are important (*Cultural Literacy*) why American schools have erroneously moved away from emphasizing factual knowledge (*The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*), and why educating citizens requires a common content-rich curriculum (*Making of Americans*). *Why Knowledge Matters* reiterates many themes from these previous books in a way that fits modern contexts.

The book's prologue lays out the core of Hirsch's case. Hirsch believes that maladies in current



(reading and other) education are the result of three bad ideas in education: (a) the idea that education should focus on the child's "natural development," (b) that education should be individualized to the child, and (c) that schools should focus on educating general skills - critical thinking and metacognition - at the expense of focusing on content knowledge. Hirsch argues that the more American education persists with these three flawed ideas, the less effective our education system becomes.

Most of the book's chapters defend the idea that what our schools need is a focus on instilling specific content knowledge rather than general and broad academic skills. In the first two chapters, for instance, Hirsch aims at refuting two commonly heard explanations for American students' struggles with reading: that there is too much testing, and that the teaching is of poor quality. Hirsch agrees that we should certainly avoid over-testing, but he sees the problem less as the quantity of testing than the quality of testing. Reading tests, he argues, frequently assess general skills like summarizing and predicting, where the evidence (as he presents it) suggests that reading is less about general skills than specific content knowledge. The argument is that teachers are generally the agents of bad curricular decisions (ones that emphasize general reading strategies than instilling content knowledge), and bear little blame for the failure of methods their job demands they use.

Hirsch argues improving students reading skills is not necessarily a matter of investing more in preschool (or high school) education either. Adequate funding for preschools, of course makes sense - but only if a good preschool is followed by a good primary school that consolidates and extends the early boost "by focusing primarily on content knowledge over skills acquisition" (p. 45). Hirsch similarly criticizes the Common Core Language Arts standards on similar grounds, that is, they focus largely on teaching reading skills - like summarizing, predicting,

and locating the main idea and supporting details - rather than instilling the factual knowledge that would help students understand the content of what they read.

Other chapters argue for the idea that that schools should create common content-rich curricula where children learn the same knowledge in common, rather than trying to individualize instruction around the child's interests and "natural development." Hirsch takes aim at what he sees as the gradual dilution of the elementary curriculum, as affected by the idea that instruction should be child-centered and individualistic, rather than designed so that all students are taught the same content-rich curriculum. Not only has this stress on individualization of learning proven to be a "quixotic idea that has put enormous pressure on teachers to achieve the impossible," (p. 72), but it has exacerbated inequality (by failing to prepare students who grow up in educationally impoverished environments to keep up with students raised in more fortunate home environments), and has undermined the idea that all Americans have access to a common cultural language. As Hirsch puts it,

All fully functioning citizens are functional because they have become initiated into the common language, whether or not they were born into it. When people speak of "communication skills," they properly imply the ability to communicate effectively with strangers, which is to say, mastery of the language of the public sphere (p. 81).

Hirsch brings in international data to make his case by telling a cautionary story about France's national education system. As Hirsch tells it, prior to 1989, France's education system had the purpose of "enabl[ing] all French children to acquire the same knowledge in order to unify society and reduce inequality" (p. 137). In 1989, France enacted a more differentiated and student-centered style of instruction, where "each

school was to respect and develop the child's home culture and conform to the individual characteristics of each locality and to the individual characteristics of each child" (p. 137). Hirsch invokes data from the French Ministry of Education and others to argue that, like the situation in America, France's focus on individualized and skills-based, rather than communal and knowledge-based, instruction, increased social inequality, lessened social cohesion, and reduced the academic effectiveness of French education.

He concludes by offering a positive vision of what Hirsch thinks American education should be, by focusing on recent data about Hirsch-inspired Core Knowledge schools. These schools not only have a strong focus on factual content knowledge, but also have very communal curricula, ensuring that all students are taught roughly the same things. These features, Hirsch argues, account for the academic success of these (public, private, and charter) schools.

As a philosopher, I will leave it to the more empirically-versed to assess Hirsch's claims about the importance of content (over general skills) for reading. The only thing I can say on that score is that Hirsch at times exhibits a bold confidence that seems unjustified given that he paints himself (accurately, as far as I can tell) as a lonely voice of reason swimming upstream in a sea of naysayers. For instance, Hirsch is confident that "*every cognitive scientist specializing in the subject would agree*" that "once decoding has been mastered and fluency attained, relevant knowledge becomes the chief component of reading skill" (p. 23, my italics). Given that the Common Core State Standards (whose approach Hirsch disagrees with) is said to be grounded in cognitive science research (Marchitello & Wilhelm, 2014), Hirsch is either making too sweeping a claim or might want to convince readers that cognitive science research in reading was not, in fact, brought to bear when developing the Common Core State Reading Standards.

My larger concern is that in *Why Knowledge Matters*, two of Hirsch's central arguments are framed as part of one argument, but I think are independent of one another. First, Hirsch wants to convince us that factual knowledge is the prime mover of good reading instruction, that we should focus less on teaching general reading strategies than concrete content knowledge. Second, Hirsch wants to convince us that the best institutions of education will be those who have all students learning the same content, so that all students can participate in a certain common culture.

My difficulty is that there is nothing I see that tie these claims together. To illustrate, I could firmly believe that the best type of instruction for improving reading is one putting emphasis on content knowledge rather than general reading strategies. In no way would that commit me to Hirsch's second argument that therefore, the best way to proceed is by creating a curriculum where everyone is presented the same content knowledge at roughly the same times. I might, instead, believe that if content knowledge is the key to reading success, and children are almost certain not to be interested in the same content at the same times (and the less interest, the less retention), the best approach is the more individualistic one Hirsch criticizes. Vice versa, I could strongly believe that the best institutional approach to education is a common curriculum that everyone receives yet envision a common curriculum that emphasizes skills, more than knowledge, which we are to have in common. These arguments - that we need a strong emphasis on content, and that we need a common curriculum - are entirely separable, where Hirsch implies without argument them as if they are necessarily connected.

The reason I bring that up is that while I tentatively agree with Hirsch that factual knowledge is a vital component to reading instruction, I suspect that his way of structuring a curriculum will not lead to the best possible environment for children to

retain what facts they've learned. In Hirsch's eagerness to (in my view, correctly) criticize Piaget-inspired theories that learning should follow the child's natural development, he introduces the idea of a curriculum where content is introduced regardless of what students' interests are. More than a few cognitive scientists and psychologists suggest that retention of content is strongly enhanced when students are learning what they have an interest in (Garner et al., 1992, Kang et al., 2009, Engel, 2013). It may well be the case that the type of "one size fits all" curriculum Hirsch is proposing might end up doing a worse job at getting students to retain crucial factual information than a fact-rich but more individualized curriculum.

Thus, while I tentatively agree with Hirsch that content knowledge is a vital part of reading skill, I am not convinced in his argument for a common curriculum. Not only does this latter argument not follow from the former, but taken on its own, Hirsch's argument for it is unconvincing. Hirsch writes that it is important for all students to receive the same content knowledge so that they can learn *the* common language or be equipped to enter *the* public square. ("In a modern democracy, whatever *the home culture*, the duty of schools is to transmit *the shared knowledge of the shared language* - to transmit *the cultural commons* of the nation, its public sphere" [68, my italics].) This depicts culture in a very unrealistic way, as both a singular entity (no matter whether you are a teenager in rural Kansas, fisherman in the Louisiana bayou, or academic in the city of Boston, you are part of the very same culture) and an entity from which we can isolate those things that everyone needs to know. The reality, it seems,

is that culture is a much more organic, decentralized, and fluid "thing" than Hirsch gives credit for (Ridley, 2016, ch. 5). The culture, and hence, what one needs to know to participate in it, will surely be different depending on context; what one needs to know at a baseball game, as an employee of Facebook, or in a conversation with teenage video gamers will be different, as all three have quite different cultural contexts. At times, Hirsch is rightly skeptical of the idea that factual knowledge is irrelevant because in the age of the internet, we can always look things up. But I think Hirsch misses how implausible it is to think that we can identify that set of facts that all Americans really do need to know in common given such a diverse society as ours. Hirsch may badly want there to be such an identifiable body of knowledge, but as long as culture is a dynamic and decentralized system, it is unlikely that we will find one. The best we could do is guess at what facts all students need to know and content ourselves with scores of false positives (teaching many students what they will never need to know) and negatives (not teaching them what they will need to know).

Hirsch is indeed what Isaiah Berlin would term an intellectual hedgehog, who has spent the last several decades arguing different variations on the same big idea. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with that, as Hirsch's message is an interesting one that deserves frequent reiteration. *Why Knowledge Matters* reiterates (with recent data as a support) Hirsch's message about the importance of content knowledge to reading (and other) instruction and of a common knowledge-rich curriculum in U.S. schools.


References

- Berlin, I. (2013). *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*. Princeton University Press.
- Engel, S. (2013). The Case for Curiosity. *Educational Leadership: Journal of the Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development, N.E.A.*, 70(5), 36–40.

- Garner, R., Brown, R., Sanders, S., & Menke, D. J. (1992). "Seductive details" and learning from text. In K. A. Renninger, S. Hidi, & A. Krapp (Eds.), *The role of interest in learning and development* (pp. 239–254). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Kang, M. J., Hsu, M., Krajbich, I. M., Loewenstein, G., McClure, S. M., Wang, J. T., & Camerer, C. F. (2009). The wick in the candle of learning: epistemic curiosity activates reward circuitry and enhances memory. *Psychological Science*, 20(8), 963–973.
- Marchitello, M., & Wilhelm, M. (2014). *Cognitive Science Behind The Common Core* (No. ERIC ED561076). Center for American Progress.
- Ridley, M. (2016). *The Evolution of Everything: How New Ideas Emerge*. Harper Perennial.

About the Reviewer


Kevin Currie-Knight is a Teaching Assistant Professor in East Carolina University's Department of Special Education, Foundations, and Research. He teaches classes and conducts research in the philosophy and history of education as well as the psychological foundations of education.



education review // reseñas educativas
a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

editors: gustavo e. fischman / melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

 *Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenbas Educativas* is supported by the edXchange initiative's Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and ***Education Review***, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or ***Education Review***. ***Education Review*** is published by the Scholarly Communications Group of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

Please contribute reviews at <http://www.edrev.info/contribute.html>.

Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview