

©2000 NewFoundations

The Educational Theory of E. D. Hirsch

Analyst: Jen Coppola



RETURN

1/4/08

1. Theory of Value:

Hirsch advocates teaching a core knowledge that emphasizes specific information for students to learn. It is a "lasting body of knowledge, which includes such topics as the basic principles of constitutional government, mathematics and language skills, important events in world history, and acknowledged masterpieces of art, music and literature" (I, pp. 28-31).

Hirsch also believes that a child should acquire a broad vocabulary because it is "an index to broad knowledge, and broad knowledge, extended over time, is the key to depth of knowledge and to a general ability to learn new things" (C, p. 9).

He asserts that "the principal aim of schooling is to promote literacy as an enabling competence" (G, p. 137). General knowledge should be a goal of education because it "makes people competent regardless of race, class or ethnicity while also making people more competent in the tasks of life." This general knowledge includes knowing facts. Hirsch says that highly skilled intellectual competence only comes after one knows a lot of facts (A).

2. Theory of Knowledge:

Knowledge, according to Hirsch, is "intellectual capital" (F, p. 19) - that is "the knowledge and skill a person possesses at a given moment." Similar to money as capital, the more knowledge and skill a person has, the more they can acquire. (F, p. 256).

Hirsch argues that the beliefs of formalism and naturalism are incorrect. He explains formalism as "the belief that the particular content which is learned in school (the content which he calls intellectual capital) is far less important than acquiring the formal tools which will enable a person to learn future content." When referring to naturalism, Hirsch states that he means "the belief that education is a natural process with its own inherent forms and rhythms, which may vary with each child, and is most effective when it is connected with natural, real-life goals and settings" (F, p. 218).

He says that schooling, under this philosophy, is viewed as ineffective and spiritually harmful because it goes against this natural process (F, p. 219). In his view, overemphasis on innate ability is an empirical

mistake (F, p. 87). Thus, he believes, "both formalism and naturalism are half-truths - the most pernicious kinds of errors because they appear so plausible" (F, p. 219)

3. Theory of Human Nature:

Hirsch believes in the anthropological notion that "all human communities are founded upon specific shared information, and the basic goal of education in a human community is acculturation - the transmission to children of the specific information shared by the adults of the group or polis" (G, pp. xv-xvi). Furthermore, he says the modern world requires a literate culture. Effective communication among a human group, in his opinion, requires the accumulation of shared symbols and the information that those symbols represent (G, p. xvii).

Children in American schools must master the English language. A failure to do so in the use of speech and writing drastically limits one's potential for opportunity, freedom and income (E, pp. 136-139).

According to Hirsch, natural talent will only get a person so far in life. In order to succeed, one must accept the idea of hard work and be fully committed to the task at hand (F, p. 87).

4. Theory of Learning:

"Learning builds on learning" (F, p. 89). The more a person knows, believes Hirsch, the more a person can learn. He calls existing knowledge "mental Velcro", which allows for additional knowledge to become attached to it (J, pp. 70-72).

Hirsch emphasizes that all learning requires effort. The effort of attention is needed as well as repetition. He argues that "no matter how much innate math ability a child has, he or she will not learn the multiplication table effectively by osmosis" (F, p.87). Thus, drill and practice are necessary for learning. Furthermore, unless efforts are "directed and monitored, a primary responsibility of the teacher, secure learning will not occur" (F, p. 87).

5. Theory of Transmission:

"You tend to be a good teacher if you tend to be a generally competent person, and you tend to be a generally competent person if you have a lot of general knowledge" (A).

Hirsch believes that the teachers who are currently in our schools, as well as future teachers, should be encouraged to abandon the teaching philosophies of educational naturalism that stemmed from the Romantic movement. He believes that the emphasis on natural and innate ability has proven to be a failure (F, p. 16). He says that the emphasis on hands-on learning and critical thinking skills espoused by the theory of natural learning should be replaced with a core, common curriculum that focuses on a specific, shared body of knowledge (D, p. A, 29:1). Hirsch has developed the Core Knowledge Sequence for grades K-8, which comprises about 50% of the participating schools' curriculum (J, pp. 70-72).

He believes that "the goal of meeting students' individual needs in the classroom has been greatly misused in American educational theory" (I, pp. 28-31). If a teacher has 25 students in a classroom and is giving individual attention to one, they are failing to give attention to 24. He favors teachers using whole-class instruction instead. (I, pp. 28-31).

6. Theory of Society:

Hirsch agrees with the Enlightenment ideals proposed by Thomas Jefferson, which were later supported by his follower Horace Mann. Both men believed the common schools should serve as a means of "making everyone a participant in the political and economic marketplace" (F, p. 208) and these schools should "provide all children equally with the knowledge and skills that would keep them independent and free" (F, p. 18).

Hirsch believes that it is up to everyone involved in the field of education to redeem the promise of public schooling (B). Common schools that offer common content, as idealized by Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann, should exist so that all children can realize their potential, regardless of who their parents are (D, p. A, 29:1).

In reference to his Core Knowledge program, Hirsch says that parents and teachers, and to a lesser degree administrators, are involved in this educational movement. He says that administrators tend to be resistant toward making such a radical change (I, pp. 28-31).

7. Theory of Opportunity

"Giving everybody more knowledge makes everybody more competent, and creates a more just society. Since knowledge is the great equalizer, the schools have a huge opportunity and responsibility to provide more equal life chances for all students, no matter where they come from" (A). A recurring theme in Hirsch's writings is that the more general knowledge a person possesses, the better they will do in life. He points out that this "has enormous implications for social justice and education, since scientists have found that general knowledge correlates with annual income" (A).

Hirsch believes that by establishing a common curriculum, schools can better serve disadvantaged students. Specifically, he argues that "competence in reading (that is in comprehension) is central to academic achievement and to participation in economic and political life." Furthermore, "theory predicts that teaching such a high-octane curriculum will raise everyone's reading and learning levels and narrow the achievement gap between social groups" (C, p. 9).

Hirsch explains that he is less worried when it comes to students in the suburbs than about the students in the inner cities. He states that, "If teachers in the inner city can actually deliver this kind of curriculum, if they decide they want to do it, their children will gain, most significantly in reading comprehension and learning ability" (I, pp. 28-31).

8. Theory of Consensus

According to Hirsch, people disagree in education because of allegiance to traditional political agendas. He says that Democrats typically side with the ideals of the Progressive education movement and Republicans favor the ideals of educational conservatism (C, p. 9).

Hirsch labels himself a political liberal, yet considers himself an educational conservative. He believes consensus would be achieved if the educational community accepted the practices of educational conservatism (F, p. 6). Within his Core Knowledge community, Hirsch says he is building a broad consensus among the parents, teachers, scientists, etc., who are familiar with his common curriculum (H).

Currently, Hirsch argues that the ideas of the Progressive/Naturalist movements take precedence. However, he believes that Progressivism's consensus is distorted by the use of "scientific-sounding terms, (such as "developmentally appropriate")," and that the disputes of the mainstream scientific community are more accurate (F, p. 222).

CITATIONS

- A Hirsch, E.D. (1998). Why general knowledge should be a goal of education. Common Knowledge, 11. Retrieved October 11, 2001, from <http://www.coreknowledge.org>
- B Hirsch, E.D. (1999). Why core knowledge promotes social justice. Common Knowledge, 12. Retrieved October 11, 2001, from <http://www.coreknowledge.org>
- C Hirsch, E.D. (1999, September 11). Finding the answers in drill and rigor. The New York Times, p. 9. Retrieved September 25, 2001, from the ProQuest database.
- D Hirsch, E.D. (1999, November 4). One curriculum for New York. The New York Times, p. A, 29:1. Retrieved September 25, 2001, from the ProQuest database.
- E Hirsch, E.D. (1999). Americanization and the schools. The Clearing House, 72, 136-139. Retrieved September 25, 2001, from the ProQuest database.
- F Hirsch, E.D. (1996). The schools we need and why we don't have them. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- G Hirsch, E.D. (1987). Cultural literacy, what every american needs to know. Boston, MA. Houghton Mifflin Company.
- H Hirsch, E.D. (2001). About core knowledge. Retrieved October 11, 2001, from <http://www.coreknowledge.org>
- I O'Neil, J. (1999). Core knowledge & standards: a conversation with E.D. Hirsch. Educational Leadership, 56, 28-31. Retrieved September 25, 2001, from the ProQuest database.
- J Summers, M. (1999). Defining literacy upward. Forbes, 164, 70-72. Retrieved September 25, 2001, from the ProQuest database.

TO TOP