

Educational Warfare:

Exploring Hirsch and Gardner on what is Worth Knowing in Public Schools

In the post No Child Left Behind era, educators are working harder than ever before to see that their schools reach the national mandated measurements of “adequate yearly progress” set forth by the 2001 law (Hirsch, 2008, 1). Yet students do not appear to be making the long-lasting gains many had hoped, especially in regard to reading comprehension. Students make initial and encouraging improvements, but this is not ultimately sustained. According to Elissa Gootman (2008), only “43 percent of the city’s [New York] eighth-graders read at or above grade level,” which differs greatly from state and national fourth-grade reading test results. E.D. Hirsch Jr. (2008) further illustrates this in a Washington Post article when he says that, “Today’s eighth-graders had recorded gains in fourth grade, but these have not led to improvements in later grades when reading scores actually count for a student’s future” (1). So why is there such disparity between reading ability among the grade levels? What causes the scores of students to seemingly drop between fourth and eighth grade? Unfortunately, many experts agree that the average public school is not currently meeting the needs of its students. Exploring the opinions of these experts yield very different views on what is worth teaching and learning, and how to maximize the academic experience of all students. Two of the most important writers in the educational inquiry community are E.D. Hirsch Jr. and Howard Gardner. Both propose interesting, but highly differing views on the nature of successful academic investments.

Howard Gardner, primarily known for coining the encompassing phrase “multiple intelligences,” describes his educational vision of the most effective curriculum one can offer learners: that which cultivates deep disciplinary understanding (2000, 186). Gardner purports that it is obvious as to why educational systems have failed—they have placed too much emphasis on a large set of factual knowledge and skills, and within only the short amount of time allotted, attempt to cover them all (116). While students with the ability to recall large amounts of information may understand a topic or be able to regurgitate facts, Gardner states that it is unlikely they will be able to transfer such knowledge to a new situation which requires them to utilize this data (119). In content-driven schools, which are more concerned with test results, Gardner goes on to suggest that students remain “fundamentally unschooled” in such curriculums (120). In a controversial assertion, he says that “it is not important which disciplines or topics are featured...Instead, students should probe with sufficient depth a manageable set of examples so that they come to see how one thinks and acts in the manner of a scientist, a geometer, an artist, an historian” (118). It is only “rich, probing, and multifaceted investigation of significant topics [that] makes it reasonably likely that more sophisticated understandings will emerge” (122).

Gardner, in his call for a more comprehensive curriculum involving a limited number of topics and/or themes (130), believes that students will gain a deeper understanding of the lenses with which disciplinarians work, and will thus be able to apply this knowledge to other topics and subject matter—bringing students one step closer to disciplinary expertise. It is important to note, however, that Gardner’s essential goal is not to make students actual experts in a particular domain, but to “enable

them to draw on these modes of thinking in coming to understand their world" (118). It is this deep consideration of subject matter through various angles that allows students to readily apply their knowledge, not only across disciplines, but also in the larger society in which they live. The disciplines, he says, offer students the medium in which to practice and hone the skills required to tackle deeper issues (146). In contrast, Gardner says, "one can never attain a disciplined mind simply by mastering facts" (126), especially since "facts themselves are discipline-neutral" (155). It is rather through apprenticeship, hands-on instruction, and the direct confrontation of misconceptions that allows students to possess a much richer comprehension of academic material. "At the end of the day, they should be able to emulate some scientific, artistic, and historical ways of thinking" (Gardner, 2000, 157), which will lend itself to the knowledge necessary for curricular success.

Despite the push for progressive curricular avenues (i.e. similar to Gardner's pedagogy) educational thinkers such as E.D. Hirsch Jr. have been calling for a more foundational approach to schooling. According to Hirsch, students must be integrated into a regimented, content-based curriculum which emphasizes the knowledge that will be necessary as they move up in age and/or grade level. As if to refute Gardner directly Hirsch says that, "The so-called higher-order skills are those that are least susceptible to transfer. They are the most dependent on domain-specific knowledge" (2009, 220), which is best acquired through a core knowledge intensive curriculum. Not only does Hirsch describe such information as important in the basis of disciplinary understanding, but also crucial in reading ability. This is because, "Studies of reading comprehension show that knowing something of the topic you're reading about is the most important variable in comprehension" (Hirsch, 2008, 1). Reading is essentially baseless without a context in which to consider its content. As Hirsch mentions, "The sure road to adequate progress in reading is adequate progress in knowledge" (2008, 2); knowledge which is gained by covering a multitude of information that is often taken for granted by both educators and policy makers.

In a direct response to the testing woes of schools nationwide, Hirsch offers that "if we want students to score well on reading tests in the eighth grade and not just in the fourth grade, we need to teach them the broad knowledge that is taken for granted in books and lectures" (Hirsch, 2008, 1). Unlike Gardner who champions curriculum decisions with fewer topics and more depth, Hirsch is proponent of covering more material in a centralized fashion. Hirsch's compelling argument against the narrowing of established curriculum finds its roots in cognitive science, since he believes that the "character of an academic skill is constrained by the narrow limitations of working memory" (2009, 210). When students are fluent in the most basic of information required in a given discipline, then their minds (and therefore, memories) are freed to consider topics on a more meaningful scale. For example, Hirsch explains that "A skill depends on prior possession of specifically relevant content knowledge that enables the mind to circumvent the strict limitations of working memory" (214). To make this argument even clearer, Hirsch explains that "We can attend to only a few things at a time, so if we attend to the basic processes, we can't attend to much else. The more automatically and rapidly we can turn letters into words and sentences, the more of them we can attend to" (217).

Perhaps the most crucial point in Hirsch's pedagogical argument is his idea that the so-called progressive curriculum and his core knowledge curriculum are not so different in modality. Is it not possible for core knowledge learning to also include the hands-on, interesting, and fun elements purported to be included naturally in a progressive curriculum? Hirsch points out that "there is no inherent connection between establishing definite curriculum and any particular form of instruction and classroom management. Why should an anti-curriculum approach be unique and lively and humane and a coherent curriculum deadly and inhumane" (2009, 52-53)? While "progressive" proponents tend to utilize the now famous rhetoric (i.e. "child-centered") necessary to push their pedagogical agendas

above those of critical colleagues, Hirsch continues to assert that “there is absolutely no reason why definite topics in world cultures and animal stories cannot be part of a highly explicit multilayer academic curriculum and taught in all the lively ways described” (ibid). Surely, students can be plunged into a core knowledge curriculum that also promotes the hands-on, project-oriented, and creative academia supposedly championed by only progressive educators (Hirsch, 2009, 54). Since “new learning depends on relevant prior knowledge” (Hirsch, 2001, 2), it is this core knowledge curriculum that Hirsch believes best prepares students for the demands of future tasks; incorporating the so-called progressive learning tactics only makes his curriculum more effective and far-reaching.

As different as Hirsch and Gardner may seem in their approaches to improving the academic standard in American education, there is some noteworthy commonality as well. Both E.D. Hirsch and Howard Gardner agree that there should be standards created by a central body to ensure that curricular priorities are met. Both go so far as to say that grade level and/or age expectations need to be assigned—such as what will be covered, understood, and accomplished by the end of each school year. Accountability is a priority for both, regardless of their other differences. According to Gardner (2000), “all too often in America, [the solution] is to pay lip service to the formal curriculum and bow to the standardized tests, but thereafter to shut the classroom door and to do one’s own thing” which creates “unjustifiable redundancy” (117). Considering Hirsch’s strategies furthers this view of commonality in academic vision when he says that “a knowledge-based strategy must be long-range—starting as early as kindergarten to focus on substantial content read aloud to students and discussed” (2008, 1).

Regardless of which curricular view is employed, educators must ensure that they are doing more than simply paying “lip service” to the established goals. This is so that not only are students better prepared for that which will be required of them later, but also to create “productive and engaged citizens” that have an essential “common body of knowledge” (Hirsch, ibid). In fact, even Gardner recognizes that his views may not stand in such stark contrast to others (i.e. Hirsch) that they cannot be consolidated. For instance, he says that “a compromise might nonetheless be possible. One could commit to an education for understanding, while retaining the right to place a certain spin on it” (Gardner, 2000, 228). Hirsch also acknowledges that his views on education do overlap somewhat with others like Gardner; Hirsch concedes that in regard to the breadth versus depth issue in academia, “a broad range of examples should be studied, but studying too many is a waste of time...it is a waste of time to pile up more and more facts that don’t really add much to one’s understanding or ability to learn” (2001, 2). Indeed, both Hirsch and Gardner have very different views on what is worth knowing, and how to go about teaching it; yet, they are not so different that a compromise is not impossible to those who find both of their views on education lucrative.