book review

Battling the Progressives
What you don’t know will hurt you

The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children
By E. D. Hirsch, Jr.
Houghton Mifflin, 2006, $22.00; 169 pages.

As reviewed by Diane Ravitch

This is the first time that I feel compelled to acknowledge from the get-go that I am a frank partisan of the ideas in a book I am reviewing. I am a member of the board of the Core Knowledge Foundation, the nonprofit organization created by E. D. (Don) Hirsch, Jr., to promote the goals of a knowledge-based curriculum. I receive no compensation other than the pleasure of seeing more children gain access to this excellent curriculum. I agreed to join the board when invited because I believe that Don Hirsch’s knowledge-based program encapsulates the best hope for the future of American education.

The Quest for Cultural Literacy
The Knowledge Deficit is Hirsch’s third attempt to explain why schools should teach a coherent, carefully considered, knowledge-based curriculum. In his first book on this subject, Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know, published in 1987, he explained why all children and adults need to learn the words, phrases, idioms, ideas, and other information that are an essential part of contemporary society and culture. He explained that simply teaching skills was not enough; that people actually need a large body of knowledge and information in order to read and understand the world they live in. At the end of the book was a long list of words and expressions in an appendix titled “What Literate Americans Know.” A surprise bestseller, the book generated enormous controversy, and Hirsch was denounced by many academics as, along with other insults, an elitist and an apologist for the canon of dead white males.

Hirsch had always seen himself as a political liberal and was taken aback by the critics’ harsh words, but he was undeterred. In his second book in this series, The Schools We Need: And Why We Don’t Have Them (1996), he described in fulsome terms the insular “thought-world” of progressive education, based in the nation’s schools of education, which had miseducated teachers and administrators for decades. Our schools did not have a knowledge-based curriculum, he contended, because they were under the sway of certain bad ideas, which he called naturalism and formalism. Naturalism is the romantic notion that all children are motivated to learn and, if left to their own devices, will make wise choices about what and how to learn. Formalism is the belief that the schools should teach certain procedural skills—like reading and critical thinking—that can be transferred to any situation, and that the schools must avoid teaching “mere facts” or “mere knowledge.”

Taking on the Progressives
In this, his third book on the subject, Hirsch has once again entered the fray, this time to demonstrate with supporting research that students will not learn to read with comprehension unless they have acquired a large fund of background knowledge. Furthermore, he shows that the achievement gap between students from different racial groups will continue to be large unless students of all groups are educated with a knowledge-based curriculum. Even the use of the latest, research-based reading programs, he shows, will only teach children to decode, but it will not give them the broad and deep knowledge of the world that they need to read increasingly complex texts in any subject.

In his assault on the precepts of progressive education, Hirsch enters a battle that has been waged for over a century. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, almost every high-school student studied Latin. Teachers and parents believed that the study of Latin taught certain skills that could be transferred to any other pursuit or activity, such as precision, judgment, logical thinking, clarity, and so on. It was, in the words of its defenders, a valuable form of mental gymnastics, intended to improve one’s faculties. The same argument was made for algebra and other areas of advanced mathematics. The first generation of education psychologists (such as Edward L. Thorndike of Teachers College) took aim at this belief and sought to demonstrate through their studies that “transfer of training” was a myth, and that there was no reason at all to study Latin or any subject that was not immediately useful.

Progressive educators were heartened by Thorndike’s work and concluded that “you study what you study, and you learn what you learn.” In other words, what was the point of learning Latin or algebra or even history since they had no demonstrable utility? In 1958, Walter Kolesnik showed that the research that allegedly “exploded” mental discipline (as advanced by Thorndike and others) was deeply flawed, but his work was ignored by progressive educators.
In this century-old debate, the great error of traditionalist educators was their failure to defend cultural values in education, that is, the importance of knowledge. By making the case for Latin or history dependent on “transfer of training,” they lost the debate. The culturally important studies such as literature, history, and foreign language never should have been defended for their value in “training the mind,” but for their importance in shaping an educated, civilized human being.

Hirsch now makes that case, and it is a very important contribution to American education. He shows that research is now firmly on the side of those who advocate knowledge as the goal of learning. In a curious reversal of history, progressive educators now find themselves defending “transfer of training,” the belief that the practice of critical thinking will ensure that the student is able to think well about other things in the future. In this formulation, what a student learns is irrelevant so long as the student is doing something that really interests her. As Hirsch shows, this belief in formalism leads to dull practice in summarizing, predicting, clarifying, and other mindless and unnecessary activities in the teaching of reading, but it does not lead to a knowledgeable person who reads widely and with deep comprehension.

As I said at the outset, I need no convincing. I believe that E. D. Hirsch, Jr., has become an indispensable figure in American education, and that the curriculum he has developed over the past 20 years—the Core Knowledge curriculum—restores the essential ingredients of a solid education, including history, literature, science, mathematics, art, and music. He now demonstrates that the same kind of education is necessary to cure the well-documented reading deficiencies of large numbers of students, and that is icing on the cake.

Diane Ravitch is Research Professor of Education at New York University and a member of the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.