

What Do They Know of Reading Who Only Reading Know?¹ Bringing Liberal Arts into the Wasteland of the “Literacy Block”

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Why is it that the more we emphasize reading in the early grades, the less well our children read by the time they reach grade eight? School people deeply wish to know the answer to that question. I can say without hesitation that my colleagues and I at the Core Knowledge Foundation know the answer. Unfortunately, it is not an answer that many educators wish to hear. For one thing, the solution to the reading problem runs counter to doctrines that reading specialists have learned and duly promulgate. For another, the solution to the reading problem runs counter to some of the most deeply held convictions of the American education community. In short, the reading problem in U.S. schools is a problem of ideas—ideas about reading, in the first place, and ideas about curriculum, in the second place. Let me take up these two topics in turn.

Ideas about Reading. We are told by reading specialists that the road to improved comprehension is through mastery of comprehension skills such as classifying, questioning the author, and finding the main idea. Specific content is secondary. Any appropriate, “authentic” content, it is said, will build vocabulary and develop comprehension abilities. This how-to conception of reading dominates current thinking; but we cannot make significant progress in reading until this conception loses its power over us. Children who lag behind are being subjected to endless practicing of strategy skills such as “finding the main idea.” Their slow progress induces our schools to add still more time to the literacy block—up to three hours a day in many places—during which time students practice empty exercises on trivial fictions that subtract from time that could be devoted to the substantive knowledge actually needed to gain reading comprehension.

On May 31, 2004, a front-page story appeared in the *Washington Post* describing the activities in a third-grade classroom. Linda Perlstein, the reporter, had spent months observing the classroom. I’ll quote a brief passage from her report:

Here is 9-year-old Zulma Berrios's take on the school day: "In the morning we read. Then we go to Mrs. Witthaus and read. Then after lunch we read. Then we read some more." ... For 50 minutes, Tracey Witthaus pulls out a small group of third-graders—including Zulma—for an intensive reading-comprehension program. Instead of studying school desegregation and the anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, Zulma's group finishes a book about a grasshopper storm and practices reading strategies: Predict, summarize, question, clarify. "Clarify," said Zulma, who began the year reading at the late first-grade level. "When I come to a word I don't know, I look for chunks I do. Reminded. Re-mine-ded." "Clarify," said Zulma's classmate Erick Diaz, 9, who began the year reading at a second-grade level. "When I come to a word I don't know, I look for chunks I do." The methods are not working. Reading scores at the school are not going up significantly. Staff members said they aren't sure what they might be doing wrong.

Let me quickly absolve school reading specialists from any responsibility for committing these education crimes. Schools are carrying out the five themes enunciated by the National Reading Panel (NRP): phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. The last theme consists of the following tasks: students monitor their own comprehension, make predictions, use what they already know, question the author, identify the structure of the story, and summarize the main idea. Given the authority of the NRP report, it is only reasonable that schools should be filling the hours of the literacy block by having students monitor their comprehension, make predictions, use what they already know, question the author, identify the structure of the story, and summarize the main idea.

And what is the content upon which these skills are being exercised? Quoting from the table of contents of the best seller among the programs, Houghton Mifflin, the following are some of the stories upon which our children are exercising these so-called metacognitive skills: *A Dragon Gets by*, *Roly Poly*, *How Real Pigs Act*, *It's Easy to Be Polite*, *Mrs. Brown Went to Town*, *Rats on the Roof*, *Cats Can't Fly*, *Henry and Mudge and the Starry Night*, *Campfire Games*, and *Around the Pond*.

Let's assume that these are all charming stories and worthy vehicles for helping students monitor their comprehension, make predictions, use what they already know, question the author, identify the structure of the story, and summarize the main idea. It is reasonable to ask whether the many hours spent on these strategies with these ran-

dom stories leave the children knowing *very* much more about language and the world than when they started. If the topics seem scattered and haphazard to us, imagine how they seem to a first grader—say, a young child from disadvantaged circumstances—who is being asked to use his or her prior knowledge in summarizing the main idea.

The truth is that the recommendations from the NRP report about metacognitive strategies are misleading. The NRP report is highly incomplete in the very area, comprehension, on which so many sterile hours are being spent by the schools on so many fragmented and educationally trivial stories. The research citations in the NRP report ignore or deemphasize important studies that have established a central finding about reading comprehension—that *the possession of relevant prior knowledge is the single most potent contributor to the comprehension of a text*. The lack of relevant prior knowledge will hinder comprehension, no matter how many long hours a child has spent learning to monitor, question, or summarize. There is a consensus among comprehension researchers that students with low fluency and self-monitoring skills but with relevant prior knowledge will comprehend better than those who have excellent technical reading skills but are weak in relevant knowledge.² My favorite example of this is a much-cited experiment in which students were given a story about baseball. Students with low reading skills who knew about baseball understood the passage faster and better than students with high technical reading skills who were weak in baseball knowledge.

Where does this important finding about relevant prior knowledge leave us if we want our students to score better in reading tests? In my recent book, *The Knowledge Deficit*, I used examples from state tests to show that relevant background knowledge was being tested fully as much as technical reading skills. This is especially true of the tests in later elementary grades and in high school, for which our students do quite poorly by U.S. standards and in international comparisons.

How do we ensure that students possess the background knowledge that will make them good readers? After all, if the background knowledge necessary for comprehension has to be text-relevant—or, as cognitive scientists say, “domain specific”—how do we ensure that our students have knowledge of the many, many knowledge domains that are involved in school tests and real-world reading tasks?

If we want to make sure that students have the background knowledge they need to be good readers, we must give them a good general education—that is, an education in literature, science, history, and the liberal arts. That is the *only* kind of education that can build good readers. Period. Wasting hours on hours of precious

school time on trivial, disconnected stories and on futile how-to exercises deprives students of hours that could be spent on learning literature, science, history, and the arts. The opportunity costs of these endlessly repeated exercises are nothing less than tragic.

Let's imagine an experiment in which two similar school districts are being compared. One district, let us call it the "orthodox district" continues devoting the many hours of the literacy block to *A Dragon Gets by*, *Roly Poly*, *How Real Pigs Act*, *It's Easy to Be Polite*, *Mrs. Brown Went to Town*, *Rats on the Roof*, *Cats Can't Fly*, *Henry and Mudge and the Starry Night*, *Campfire Games*, and *Around the Pond*. Students continue to practice monitoring their comprehension, making predictions, using what they already know, questioning the author, identifying the structure of the story, and summarizing the main idea.

We know what the results will be, because we have test scores before us from schools throughout the country. Compared with reading scores of past years, the districts now show a slight rise in grade four, but stagnation or decline in grade eight and beyond. But these later reading scores are the ones that count. A score on a fourth-grade reading test is irrelevant to a student's success in later life compared with the score on an eighth-grade or eleventh-grade reading test, which is fateful for that person's future and, by extrapolation, the future of the nation.³

Now consider a demographically comparable district that pursues a different course. Let's call it the "unorthodox district." Instead of teaching trivial stories and having students endlessly practice comprehension strategies, the district mandates that extensive time during the literacy block shall be spent on specified topics in literature, science, history, and the fine arts. Because the listening skills of young children far exceed their reading skills, these subjects would be taught in the earliest grades through texts that are read aloud and discussed. Several weeks will be spent reading and discussing a particular domain, building up relevant knowledge and vocabulary for all students, and thereby narrowing the knowledge gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

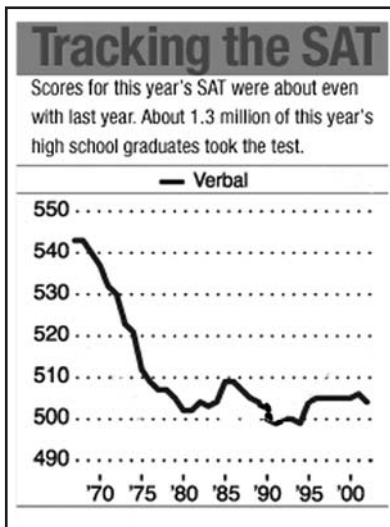
How would that unorthodox district compare in its reading scores to the orthodox district? Disappointingly, in third and fourth grade, its scores would be little different from those of the orthodox district—and this would be so for two reasons. First, reading tests in third and fourth grade do not test comprehension very deeply. Professor Joseph Torgesen and his colleagues have shown that, early on, technical skills of decoding and fluency are tested primarily, with background knowledge being tested more fully only in later grades. So, there is no reason that the two districts should be far apart in tests of technical preparatory skills. Another reason for seeing little early

difference between the districts is that vocabulary, which is a critical element in later reading tests, is a plant of gradual growth. Word learning occurs with glacial slowness over a broad front, and in the early stages, much of that learning remains *latent*. It is not until fifth or sixth grade that a dramatic leap in vocabulary and in reading scores would become noticeable between the two districts. But the differences then will be quite remarkable, as we know from longitudinal studies, and if any large district actually undertook such a long-range approach, the results would be so significant that it would herald the solution to the nation's reading problem. Over past decades, if we had been teaching a strong liberal arts curriculum in the early grades, we would not currently *have* a reading problem.

Why, then, have we not taught a strong liberal arts curriculum in the early grades? This brings me to the second of the two ideas that have blocked education progress—the elementary curriculum.

Ideas about Curriculum. If you look at Figure 1 below, you will see that there was a sharp decline in the verbal abilities of American twelfth graders from a peak in 1963 to a low point around 1980. Thereafter, despite our current modest progress, scores have remained rather flat.

FIGURE 1. Tracking the Scholastic Aptitude Test



Source: The College Board, AP, 2002

Educators claim that the precipitous drop in the 1960s and 1970s was the result of an increase in the numbers of lower-income students taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), but this explanation has proven to be inadequate. Cutting to the nub of the issue was a quiet

insight by the sociologist Christopher Jencks, who observed that the state of Iowa, like the rest of the nation, suffered a decline in verbal scores during the 1960s and 1970s. In those days, Iowa was 98 percent white and 98 percent middle class. Hence, a supposed sharp rise of low-income test takers could not adequately explain why Iowa, like every other state, declined so sharply in the 1960s. Jencks correctly posited that the chief cause of the verbal decline was what had been happening to instruction in the nation's schools.

What *did* happen to school instruction in the 1950s that lowered the scores in the 1960s and thereafter? (I say 1950s because it takes some years for a student to receive the full benefit or liability of a new education idea, so when we see twelfth-graders declining drastically in the mid-1960s, we need to know what changes occurred in schooling during the previous decade.) Mostly, it was this: a new post-1945 generation of teachers and administrators replaced the older ones, and this new cohort shared strongly held ideas about curriculum and followed new textbooks reflecting those ideas. Recent analyses of the watering down and fragmentation of textbooks have confirmed this explanation. By the 1950s, most teachers, administrators, and textbooks reflected a new point of view, variously called child-centered education, progressivism, or constructivism. Its key feature was opposition to subject-centered education and to a grade-by-grade curriculum set up in advance.

We can see what lay behind this change in schooling in an essay written in 1939 by the brilliant scholar Isaac Kandel, an education professor at Teachers College. He crystallized what was happening then to American education and why it was happening. He observed that, since the early years of the twentieth century, American education professors had argued about whether schooling should center on subject matter or grow from the needs of the pupil. The latter idea was the one that caught hold. Kandel's 1939 summary of this new scheme of education can hardly be improved upon.

Rejecting ... emphasis on formal subject matter, the progressives began to worship at the altar of the child. Children [they said] should be allowed to grow in accordance with their needs and interests. ... Knowledge is valuable only as it is acquired in a real situation; the teacher must be present to provide the proper environment for experiencing but must not intervene except to guide and advise. There must, in fact, be "nothing fixed in advance" and subjects must not be "set-out-to-be-learned." ... No reference was ever made to the curriculum or its content. ... The full weight of the progressive attack is against subject matter and the planned organization of a curriculum in terms of subjects.⁴

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Reading these remarks of Kandel after my many years of experience in the field brought all into focus for me. It made me realize finally that *none* of the reasons currently marshaled in opposition to definite subject matter or “mere facts” are the *real* objections to a set curriculum. Not the importance of local control, not the ever-changing character of knowledge, not the closing off of creativity, not conservative politics, and not elitism, Eurocentrism, or the other scary objections to a set curriculum. Those who pronounce these views surely believe them, but the more fundamental, often hidden, issue concerns the fundamental operational idea of progressivism about whether there should be *any* set curriculum at all.

Anyone who doubts that *this* is the fundamental issue can take a simple test. Whenever an objection against a particular content curriculum is made, ask yourself the following question: Is the objection followed up by a counter-proposal for an alternative content curriculum that removes the supposed objection? This *never* happens. If you examine state or district language arts standards, you will find that specific content is left up for grabs. This strange fact is not owing to indifference, it is the historical result of the doctrine that *there shall be no set content curriculum*.

This explains why the state-standards movement has been so toothless and ineffectual in enhancing verbal abilities. The public takes the word “standards” to include the idea of guides to curriculum content. But that word “standards,” which we have become so used to employing, is often a way of *avoiding* detailed content without seeming to avoid it. Typical state standards read like this:

1. Students will comprehend, evaluate, and respond to works of literature and other kinds of writing which reflect their own cultures and developing viewpoints, as well as those of others. 2. Students will demonstrate a willingness to use reading to continue to learn, to communicate, and to solve problems independently.” These words are then repeated verbatim for several grade levels. As are these words: “Students will use prior knowledge to extend reading ability and comprehension. Use specific strategies such as making comparisons, predicting outcomes, drawing conclusions, identifying the main ideas, and understanding cause and effect to comprehend a variety of literary genres from diverse cultures and time periods.”

The job of constructing state standards has been placed in the hands of people who have long been indoctrinated with the principle that *there shall be no set content curriculum*.

Until state standards define a core of grade-by-grade content that cumulatively builds up students' knowledge, what is a school or district to do? How can more and more schools and districts resemble our imagined unorthodox district and raise reading scores in the later grades where they count? Some Core Knowledge schools have achieved that goal by teaching Core Knowledge subjects—literature, science, history, and the fine arts—within the literacy block itself. They do spend up to an hour each day in the earliest grades on the technical skills of reading and writing, but they use the rest of the literacy block educating children in subject matter. This has resulted in some Core Knowledge schools achieving the highest demographically adjusted reading scores in their areas.

Some years ago, the late-great reading researcher Jeanne Chall recommended that the schools introduce real subjects into the language arts block. Her advice was not heeded. The anti—set—curriculum idea was too strong, and so was the idea that language arts consists only of fiction and poetry. How *that* mistaken notion arose, the idea that language arts is exclusively imaginative fiction and poetry, is the subject of a separate essay, but it is a further illustration of my present theme—that is, the enormous power of ideas in determining the fate of U.S. education. The two disastrously mistaken ideas that I have focused on here—that reading is a formal skill like typing, and that we should not mandate core content—are potent enough to account for most of our failures. It will not be easy to overcome these two established ideas. Nothing will be more critical than doing so—for the educational achievement of our children and for social justice.

Endnotes

- ¹ The allusion is to Kipling: “What should they know of England who only England know?”
- ² See E. D. Hirsch, *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children*, New York, Doubleday, 2006, pp 37ff. with references to the literature.
- ³ See for instance: William R. Johnson and Derek Neal, “Basic Skills and the Black-White Earnings Gap,” in C. Jencks and M. Phillips, eds., *The Black-White test Score Gap*, Washington, DC, Brookings, 1998.
- ⁴ Isaac Kandel, “Prejudice the Garden Toward Roses?” republished in Wesley Null, Diane Ravitch, eds., *Forgotten Heroes of American Education*, Greenwich, Information Age Pub, 2006.