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In the United States, issues of the curriculum and what should be taught in classrooms have become quite heated and have at times deteriorated into politicized soundbites thrown back and forth. While the goals of all sides in the debate are the same, to produce a population of students able of critical thinking, creative problem-solving, and strength of character, the means to these ends remain in disagreement. Two of the most vocal advocates of educational reform are E.D. Hirsch and Howard Gardner. While they share many of the same goals for student success, their views of how the mind works and how best to achieve those goals are quite different.

E.D. Hirsch favors an approach to learning which he terms "core knowledge." In his writings, he often uses the example of reading to demonstrate his philosophy. Reading, like all academic skills, can be broken down into two separate components or subsets of skills. First are the procedural skills which, in the case of reading, is the actual decoding. A student learns symbols and sounds and then how to put those pieces of information together to recognize and read words. The second subset is the higher-order skill of reading comprehension. Students competent in this skill can take what they read and analyze it for meaning. Identifying main ideas, themes, and purpose are all examples of this more complex form of thinking. The problem is, according to Hirsch, that students that can read adequately, ie. decode, may not understand what they are reading because they are missing a final important element, prior knowledge of the content matter. In the appendix to Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools, Hirsch states that, "A higher-order academic skill such as reading comprehension requires prior knowledge of domain-specific content; the higher-order skill for that domain does not readily transfer to other content domains."

The problem with our current system, according to Hirsch, is that there is no coherent and standardized curriculum in place which assures that all students are taught the same content. Depending on the individual school or district, students of the same age may or may not be exposed to the same material. More importantly, Hirsch sees the achievement gaps between affluent and disadvantaged students as directly correlating to the acquisition of prior knowledge. Students whose parents are able to read with them frequently, take them on trips, and expose them to various cultural sights will inevitably have more knowledge upon which to draw when taking standardized tests than students not afforded those opportunities. If schools step in and provide a systematic approach to content-driven curriculum that exposes students to a "broad range of subjects, not just reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also science, history, ethics, literature, and the arts," then more students will be prepared to succeed in Hirsch's view.

In Hirsch's view, not establishing a "cultural literacy" in the early school years is what dooms our schools to decline. The current trends of progressive education have seemingly not worked at the national level and demand a critical eye. As he states again in The Making of Americans, "Shall we have content-based early schooling that promotes universal competence and equal opportunity, or shall we have a nonspecific noncurriculum based on the providential, how-to theory of education that has not and cannot work?" In his mind, there is no choice.

Howard Gardner, on the other hand, has a very different view of how the mind works and how best to build knowledge. Although he agrees with Hirsch that "the lack of coordination and accountability regularly results in cases where students who move from one school to another discover almost no overlap between the institution's offerings," his approach to improving

education focuses more on the classroom and what individual teachers can do to promote learning. Gardner's philosophy is to "inculcate in students an understanding of major disciplinary ways of thinking." In fact, the disciplines is the major focus of his approach. Where as Hirsch is supportive of instilling a broad base of knowledge in students, Gardner's preference is to have students "study substantial topics in depth." He frequently states that it is not important which disciplines or related examples are used. The freedom of that choice can be made by individual schools and teachers based on the needs and interests of their students. What is more important is the process for learning that will take students from rudimentary knowledge to more complex understanding.

Gardner's approach is constructivist in nature. He explains that all young students have developed elementary understandings to explain the nature of the world around them. Part of the job of education is not simply to "fill" the mind with information, but to help students question their earlier assumptions and when necessary take apart earlier "engravings" so that new, more accurate understandings can be built. Educators must adopt both "cognitive and cultural" perspectives in their work. By understanding the factors that have led to certain misconceptions students may possess, they can better help them to draw new conclusions and understandings.

Other approaches for developing deep understanding in students include learning from "suggestive" institutions, creating frameworks for understanding, and developing assessments through demonstration. By suggestive institutions, Gardner refers to concepts like the apprenticeship or to actual museums which can give students hands-on opportunities to test their theories. The frameworks for understanding Gardner advocates are curricular guidelines to encourage students to consider the essential questions of each discipline. These frameworks serve as a roadmap for students and allow them to understand the big picture while they delve into the content of particular topics. Gardner also advocates a system of assessment that is performance-based. Like the school at Reggio Emilia, students should demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways, whether through projects, predictions, artwork, or dance. By developing a culture of performance, younger students can learn by watching the thoughtful products of older students and older students may begin to internalize the criteria for assessment so that in the end, there is a level of metacognition in play. Lastly, he also encourages multiple "entry points" for understanding. Referencing his theory of multiple intelligences, Gardner states that different kinds of minds require that varied entry points to content be provided to engage students. This will provide the best way to "enable all students to achieve enhanced understanding."

Gardner recognizes that there are various "pathways" to knowledge and that what he is advocating may not be the route that appeals to everyone, although he certainly feels it is the best. By a pathway, he refers specifically to community endorsed goals for education and how they should be achieved. Again, this circles back to Gardner's belief that culture is important in determining the goals of learning.

In closing, although E.D. Hirsch and Howard Gardner share similar goals for education, their views of how best to achieve those goals are very different. Some have suggested a common ground where schools adopt Hirsch's model for the early years and Gardner's model for middle and secondary school years. This approach is unlikely to find success due to differences in each thinker's views concerning the acquisition of knowledge. Gardner has specifically stated that he would not support such a system since it wouldn't address a critical step in his approach, which is the correcting of inaccurate mental representations. As much as educational reformers

would like to take the best of all philosophies and merge them, in this case, the ultimate choice on which approach is best will be left to parents, teachers, principals, and schools to decide.