CULTURAL LITERACY IN CLASSROOM SETTINGS:
TEACHERS AND STUDENTS ADAPT THE CORE KNOWLEDGE CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT: A group of teachers participated in a project to develop and to teach units of study based on the Core Knowledge curriculum advocated by E. D. Hirsch. As a result of their deliberations, in school and as students in graduate courses, the teachers selected topics, built units, and devised literacy strategies to teach Core Knowledge content. The teachers adapted rather than adopted the Hirsch proposals.

A set of books on the Core Knowledge curriculum advocated by E. D. Hirsch has been widely publicized and subsequently purchased by both educators and parents. Core Knowledge has been the subject of much commentary in educational literature and the popular press. Although some practitioners who have im-

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plemented a Core Knowledge curriculum assert its benefits, critics—particularly university faculty members in colleges of education—have raised serious concerns. Several critics have asserted that Hirsch’s notion of cultural literacy is overwhelmingly based on European American content, simplistic in its treatment of content, lock-step and prescriptive, and opposed to critical inquiry.

Sledd and Sledd, for example, claim that Hirsch’s ideas are steeped in middle-class rhetoric and intended to enable those in power to pass on that power to their children. Arvizu and Saravia-Shore argue that Hirsch’s Core Knowledge is “monocultural” and therefore harmful to a diverse society; children who do not come from a European American ethnic background or from a middle-class family may not be well served by a Core Knowledge curriculum. Is the content outlined by Hirsch irrelevant for children in a diverse society, or is it part of what schools need to teach all children? Peterson, a Hirsch critic, expresses concern that the Core Knowledge curriculum is not responsive to minority children but admits that Hirsch does raise “the issue of unequal access to knowledge and literature in our stratified society.”

In this study, we explored the effect of Core Knowledge content on the curriculum development work of a group of teachers working in an elementary school in a high-poverty neighborhood. Approximately 95 percent of the students received free or reduced-price lunch, 65 percent were Hispanic, and 25 percent were African American. Some critics of the Hirsch curriculum have argued that such a curriculum would have negative effects on classroom outcomes, in

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particular those related to minority children. This report offers a description and analysis of outcomes of one group of teachers who used the Hirsch curriculum in real classrooms in one school. Its findings question some previous assumptions and criticisms.

Glatthorn's curricular typology was helpful in understanding what happened when the Hirsch curriculum met teachers and students in a school setting. In Glatthorn's scheme, the recommended curriculum is that which is recommended by scholars, reformers, and policymakers. It stresses and specifies what ought to be taught in schools. Hirsch's curriculum clearly fits into this category. E. D. Hirsch has written and edited a number of books, including those that outline his philosophy. In *Cultural Literacy*, Hirsch's list of items that he believes culturally literate people should know is dominated by European and European American contributions to civilization, resulting in the criticism that Hirsch's educational content is "monocultural."  

The written curriculum is also important in the school. It appears in state- and district-approved scope-and-sequence curriculum guides. Texas, the state in which the study took place, has an extensive list of Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and mandates the use of that list as the basis of curriculum planning. Teachers used Hirsch's recommended curriculum as they decided the nature of their written curriculum. It could not replace the TEKS, but it could be adapted to them. Primarily the teachers used the set of books called the Core Knowledge Series (e.g., *What Your First Grader Needs to Know*). In these books, Hirsch makes what critic Walter Feinberg terms "a strong and admirable effort" to include topics that reflect contributions by African Americans, Native Americans, and women.

The taught curriculum, according to Glatthorn, is the delivered curriculum. As the recommended curriculum and the written curriculum became the taught curriculum, teachers in this study made additional changes to Hirsch's recommendations. In *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, Hirsch stresses traditional schooling practices, direct teaching, and "focused instruction" leading

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to "well-stocked minds conversant with individual subject matters like history and biology." He criticizes integrated themes and firmly rejects the "project approach" to teaching as harmful. Ironically, teachers who have implemented the Hirsch curriculum in schools designated by the Core Knowledge Foundation as Core Knowledge Schools for the most part have used the very instructional methods Hirsch condemns. For example, units described in the pages on the Core Knowledge Foundation Web site (http://www.coreknowledge.org) include strategies such as museum displays with students as docents. Some units include many hands-on projects and integration across subject areas. The learned curriculum refers to children's responses to the curriculum. It includes intended and unintended consequences of instruction, overt and hidden curricular elements.

Glatthorn identifies two additional curriculum types—the supported curriculum and the tested curriculum. The supported curriculum is backed by the school system's allocation of resources or, as was the case in the school examined in our study, by funds from outside sources. In this case, the Hirsch curriculum was supported with funds from a local foundation that also supported the project by offering its prestige and giving the teachers' work a sense of legitimacy. The tested curriculum is the information and skills that form the basis for tests. Texas has a high-stakes testing program for children in the elementary grades. These tests, however, focus on skills in reading, math, and writing and do not test the specific content knowledge prescribed in the TEKS. Thus, the Hirsch-type curriculum developed by these teachers was not tested by the state.

THE CLICK PROJECT: CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN ACTION

A group of 31 teachers, all employed in the same large urban school district in Texas, participated in a two-year program called CLICK (Connecting Literacy with Content Knowledge). The project intended to connect literacy and the Core Knowledge curriculum. The teachers represented six elementary schools, all located in low socioeconomic neighborhoods. Data for this study came from one of these schools. All the project teachers, divided into primary and intermediate groups, were enrolled in graduate classes at a nearby university. The courses centered on literacy and on curriculum devel-

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3E. D. Hirsch founded the Core Knowledge Foundation in 1986 to work with schools interested in implementing a Core Knowledge curriculum. A list of the Official Core Knowledge Schools appears on the Foundation Web site (http://www.coreknowledge.org).
opment. Primary-level teachers focused on the study and the implementation of the Early Literacy Framework, whereas intermediate-level teachers studied current literacy theory and devised literacy practices appropriate for intermediate students. Funds from the local foundation allowed both groups of teachers to buy informational texts and other materials needed for implementing curricular topics outlined by E. D. Hirsch. They worked collaboratively with their university instructors and their colleagues to create their own instructional units combining literacy strategies and Core Knowledge content. The teachers chose topics from the science and the social studies sections of the Hirsch books.

The Core Knowledge Series provides topics, information on some of those topics, and lists of readings. The series does not prescribe any instructional methods through which teachers might teach the topics. In this project, teachers made instructional decisions based on their goals to enhance the cultural understandings and the literacy development of their students. Delpit has noted that for children who are not well supplied from home with the “cultural capital” necessary for social and economic advancement, teachers need to make explicit the “discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society.”

Thus, teachers in the project planned literacy activities for the purpose of helping their students learn Core Knowledge content and, in the process, to develop more sophisticated expression of spoken and written language.

The study’s research questions focused on two issues: What was the impact of the Hirsch curriculum on the teachers’ work and on their thinking? and What were some impacts of the Hirsch curriculum on student learning? More specifically, research questions asked the following:

1. Did the prescriptive nature of the Hirsch Core Knowledge stifle and constrain teacher planning?
2. How did teachers make connections between their study of literacy development theory and their creation of units for the Hirsch curriculum in instructional planning?
3. How did the children learn and respond to the Hirsch units?

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16See Kathryn Button, Margaret J. Johnson, and Paige Furgerson, “Interactive Writing in a Primary Classroom,” The Reading Teacher 49 (March 1996): 446–454.
17As examples, see Fran Lehr and Jean Osborne, eds., Reading, Language, and Literacy (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1994); Robert Ruddell, Martha Ruddell, Harry Singer, eds., Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1994).
METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

We gathered data primarily from the 18 teachers involved in the CLICK project at one elementary school. Several different sources provided data for this study. In weekly meetings with teachers, we took field notes as teachers shared classroom events and student work with their colleagues. We also collected copies of teachers’ lesson and unit plans and student work (e.g., inquiry projects, written reports, journal entries). We interviewed teachers at the end of the second school year; the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

We analyzed data using the constant comparative method of content analysis\(^{19}\) and identified, clarified, and verified themes and patterns in the data.\(^{20}\) We analyzed data separately and then jointly to negotiate interpretations. To obtain further clarification, we also discussed findings with the teachers.

ADAPTING THE CURRICULUM

Modifying the Recommended Curriculum

At the planning stage of the project, the recommended curriculum was modified as teachers made decisions to alter Hirsch’s scope and sequence to fit the context of their own classrooms. Teachers began their work with the Hirsch curriculum by reviewing the Hirsch books, various curricular materials published by the Core Knowledge Foundation, and teachers’ Core units on relevant Web sites. The teachers traveled to another city in Texas to visit a school designated by the Core Knowledge Foundation as a Core Knowledge School. When they returned, they discussed how they would proceed with their implementation of Core Knowledge.

The Core curriculum is intended to be sequenced, with topics arranged in a spiral fashion under major headings that are addressed throughout the elementary years. The teachers in this study did not attempt to treat all the topics outlined in the Hirsch books. Rather, they decided to select the topics they wished to teach as well as ones that they believed would be appropriate and engaging for their students. Equally important, they devised literacy activities intended to help the students learn about the topic and, simultaneously, develop their literacy skills.


Designing and implementing thematic units drawn from Hirsch materials offered teachers opportunities to engage in deliberations about what their pupils should study. In the past, the teachers had planned lessons for their classes framed by guidelines provided by their grade-level group, the school, the district, and the TEKS. The Hirsch topics, particularly in social studies, were decidedly different from those found in typical scope-and-sequence schemes. The project licensed teachers to question the guidelines under which they had operated, and that license extended to the Hirsch curriculum as well. They questioned Hirsch's scope and sequence and critically chose specific areas and aspects of the curriculum that they believed would be beneficial for their students.

Reid describes typical teacher curriculum planning as unproblematic and self-evident.21 The curriculum is mandated, and the decisions left to the teacher are largely procedural. Because the teachers in this project were able to choose topics to teach, the questions they asked (e.g., “What topics will I select?”) were not questions with certain answers. From a range of possibilities, the teachers debated the merits of the different Core Knowledge selections. In their deliberations, they considered “interest”—their own as well as that of their students—as an important factor in making their selections.22 One teacher, for example, chose the Middle Ages because it was a topic that had long intrigued her. She said, “I didn’t know much about the Middle Ages myself, and I wanted to do something new and exciting.” She believed that her own interest would enable her to arouse excitement in her students on the topic. A teacher with a 5th/6th grade combination class chose a unit on Shakespeare and his plays. She reported, “I had been interested in Shakespeare when I was in high school and college, and I thought, why not?” Similarly, a 3rd grade teacher who was fascinated by colonial America and the schooling of that period helped her students to develop the same interest and ultimately their own understandings about that time period. Sharp notes that curriculum development involves both subject matter and children, and advocates placing the prominent focus on the child’s needs, backgrounds, and interests.23 Along those lines, an-

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21See W. A. Reid, Curriculum and Institution and Practice (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999) for a set of essays describing the idea of the practical and the deliberative tradition of curriculum decision making.

22For a description of the importance of interest and engagement to learning, see John Guthrie, “Educational Contexts for Engagement in Literacy,” The Reading Teacher 49 (March 1996): 432-445.

23Writing 50 years ago, Sharp argued for a shift from placing subject matter in the foreground to placing children in the foreground of curriculum work. See George Sharp, Curriculum Development as Re-education of the Teacher (New York: Teachers College, 1951).
other teacher, whose students were predominantly Hispanic, reported a fascination with early cultures of Mexico and Central America. She chose to focus on Aztec civilization as an aspect of the children’s cultural and historical heritage. A 5th grade teacher decided to teach a unit on the American Civil War, but as her students raised questions about civil wars elsewhere, she expanded the unit to include a study of the contemporary conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Reid, drawing on Schwab,\(^{21}\) has claimed that making curriculum decisions in the practical realm involves making moral choices. Teachers also considered the challenging nature of topics as they discussed possibilities and the abilities of their students to meet the challenges. They did not view their choices as value-free. One noted, for example, “I wanted to show my kids that they could learn something like Shakespeare’s plays, something that kids in college learn.” These teachers articulated their desire to plan units that would engage and challenge their students.

Teachers began their units midway through the spring semester. Most planned for the studies to last three or four weeks, but, as evidence of their good decision making, the time frame for the units of study continued on long past their original estimates. The 4th grade teacher who chose to study the Middle Ages with her students started by creating a concept map on castles, thinking that her students would probably know something about castles that could provide a starting point for the unit. “I started with information from the Hirsch book, but then the kids came up with things they wanted to know.” She reported that her three-week unit lasted nine weeks. “The students could have gone on for a longer period of time. The project finally had to end because the school year ended.”

**Transforming the Taught Curriculum into the Learned Curriculum**

The teachers worked to transform some of the recommended curriculum of E. D. Hirsch into the taught curriculum observable in their classes by selecting and modifying topics and building in student choice and inquiry. Their students, through their choices and their inquiry work, transformed some of the taught curriculum into their learned curriculum.

Most students became engaged in the challenging topics. The 5th/6th grade teacher who chose Shakespeare as her topic began her unit by reading aloud to her students several of the play summaries in *Tales from Shakespeare* by Charles and Mary Lamb. After reading

about Macbeth, she asked the students to write paragraphs and to draw illustrations using literacy strategies to help them sequence events in the text. She reported, "They loved it. They were captured. By the time they actually sat down to read sections of the play in play format, they were ready." The class staged a 45-minute abridged version of the play for a Core Knowledge Fest, a school day set aside for acknowledging and celebrating students' learning. "We had a night when the parents came and we presented [the play] to them," the teacher said. "The children were so proud."

All teachers involved in the project reported that their students showed pride in their work. The content of the units was markedly different from the content children had studied before. The Core Knowledge Foundation refers to the content as "solid," and the students knew the topics were ones usually studied by students well beyond their own grade levels. The 5th/6th grade teacher discussed with her students the common impression that children of their age level were not ready to read and understand Shakespeare. The students replied that they were ready and, in their oral interpretations and their compositions about Macbeth, they demonstrated their increased understanding. The teacher was pleased with the manner in which her students were able to handle such challenging content and language as evidenced through the play writing.

The content also served to scaffold the literacy development of the students. All teachers were taking graduate courses on literacy development and used the Core Knowledge topics as vehicles for literacy activities. The 3rd grade teacher who implemented a unit on colonial America, a new topic for her and one that her students found of great interest, reported that her students varied greatly in their literacy proficiency. All students researched topics within the unit. They worked in cooperative groups and also completed individual research reports. The teacher used strategies to help children develop vocabulary by linking unfamiliar words and terms to known words. When the class began the colonial America unit, a girl who had struggled with reading and writing all year became intrigued with the information she was learning about colonial occupations. When the student presented her written report to her teacher, the teacher reported that she was "amazed at what she could do." The teacher attributed the student's strides in writing to the interest and background

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knowledge that she had built about the topic. "She knew the vocabu-
larv; she knew the stuff. She had experienced it, and she could write
about it."

At weekly meetings, teachers shared examples of their students' work and noted their students' advances in literacy. The students in
the 5th/6th grade class who studied Shakespeare prepared written
and oral reports on Shakespeare's life and times, on the Globe Thea-
tre, and on other Elizabethan literary figures. The teachers were im-
pressed with the content that their students engaged and with the so-
phistication of their oral and written expression.

At the end of the semester the students could share their work
with children in other classes and with visitors to the school at the
Core Knowledge Fest. A 5th grade teacher reported:

I let them select their own presentation format, and they got together and
created a play, or interviews, or skits, or a game. They wrote their own
scripts for the presentations. One child researched the underground rail-
road and really got into maps... [she] wrote her research paper and then
a 45-page book on what she thought it would have been like to be part of
the underground railroad. I couldn't get them to stop. They were so excited
about history.

This 5th grade teacher adapted the Hirsch curriculum by selecting
and modifying what to teach. Her students adapted the curriculum
further by choosing ways to share what they had learned.

RESULTS

Teacher Planning

Although the Core Knowledge Foundation recommends that
schools commit to teaching all the topics in the Core Knowledge Se-
quency, the teachers in this study modified this recommendation.
Even in the second year of working with the Hirsch curriculum, they
selected only those topics they wished to teach. The teachers criti-
cally reviewed the Hirsch books and selected topics of interest to
them and the children. They made moral choices. They included ma-
terial that they considered to be appropriate for their children and
discarded material that they considered inappropriate. They ex-
panded on the topics to accommodate related subjects of interest to
the teachers and their students.

After selecting topics, the teachers found a wide range of mate-
rials related to the topics. They adapted rather than adopted the

See the Core Foundation Web site: http://www.coreknowledge.org/.
Hirsch curriculum. They met in groups to talk about their selections and to share instructional ideas. The teachers found the Hirsch materials to be an important basis for discussion and critique of what they believed students should learn.

Connecting the Adapted Curriculum and Literacy Instruction

Sharp asserts that curriculum development is closely connected with teacher development. As teachers engage in curriculum work, they develop professionally, and, as they develop professionally, they understand more and become more adept at curriculum work. As teachers in this study devised instructional strategies based on current literacy theory to teach Core Knowledge content, they found the process to be a rich professional experience. Not only did the teachers learn new content themselves, they developed insights helpful to the design and implementation of new instructional strategies with their children and made decisions about what to teach. They described their deliberations on curriculum and literacy instruction with the university faculty members and with their fellow teachers as an effective and relevant form of staff development.

Teachers held rising expectations for their students. Moreover, they reported that their Hirsch-type units replaced content they considered to be less challenging in nature. For example, one 2nd grade teacher noted that her Hirsch-type unit on Aztec and Mayan civilizations replaced her usual unit on teddy bears; another reported that her in-depth study of the American colonies replaced a unit on community helpers. Furthermore, a unit on Shakespeare is not part of the offerings in most 5th or 6th grade classes. All teachers reported their surprise at students’ ability and desire to study material that teachers previously had thought “too difficult” for them to tackle, and to do so with interest and enthusiasm. Teachers reported that they observed capabilities in their students that they otherwise would not have seen. They agreed with Hirsch’s argument that children are capable of expending more intellectual energy than they typically are asked to expend.

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Students’ Responses to the Hirsch Units

Many of the students in this project came from high-poverty neighborhoods. Their teachers regularly engaged in rhetoric encouraging the children to continue their schooling and to consider higher education. As the children successfully completed projects related to the challenging topics in the Hirsch-type curriculum, their teachers took many opportunities to point out to them that they were capable of handling difficult academic work. Along with the teachers, the children constantly were aware of their accomplishments in terms of literacy learning and knowledge acquisition. This feature occurred visibly on the day of the Core Knowledge Fest when students acted as docents for the visitors and demonstrated to them their acquisition of knowledge.

That students developed communicative competence was evident. As teachers developed their instructional plans, they encouraged students to choose from a variety of ways to communicate their knowledge. Through presentations (e.g., skits, plays, demonstrations), written work, and displays, students demonstrated their communicative competence as well as the knowledge they had learned. Students became more adept in their use of a formal register of discourse in speech and in writing to explain what they had learned. Observations indicated that connecting Core Knowledge with literacy practices proved important to the students’ literacy development. As Delpit has suggested, “students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life . . . within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors.”32 Teachers’ choices of Core Knowledge constituted the topics that the children found novel, interesting, and challenging. The teachers, studying literacy with their colleagues and their instructors, devised instructional strategies to engage their students in meaningful literacy efforts. If, as Watson contends, content is “grist for the literacy mill,”33 Core Knowledge certainly provided good “raw material” in this curriculum improvement effort.

DISCUSSION

Although Hirsch’s critics have raised important concerns about the implementation of his curriculum in a top-down fashion, teachers in this study adapted, rather than adopted, this curriculum. In-

deed, they found the Core Knowledge content to be a powerful curricular tool as they structured and organized the content for their individual classrooms. In this study, teachers did not find the Hirsch proposals to be prescriptive, nor did the proposals stifle teacher planning and student inquiry. Teachers simply did not regard the Hirsch materials as prescriptive. They recognized the Hirsch topics and readings as curricular possibilities and viable resources. Rather than serve as a constraint on teacher thinking, the Hirsch content served as a springboard for lively and sustained teacher discussion and decisions about appropriate curriculum for students. By their selection of paths and parts of the Hirsch curriculum, teachers tacitly addressed the arguments of critics who claim that the curriculum is rigid and lock-step. Rather, the classroom teachers built student inquiry and choice into their instructional strategies and used the topics to broaden and deepen the learning opportunities available to their students.

As noted earlier, 90 percent of the children in this elementary school were ethnic minorities, and 95 percent received free or reduced-price lunch. These children found the Hirsch-type curriculum to be an appropriate approach even though their background was not middle class nor European American. Dyson has referred to the tension between curriculum that provides access for students to knowledge and skills needed for success in school and work, and curriculum that is relevant and responsive. The teachers in this study overcame the apparent conflict between these notions. Ten of the 18 teachers were Hispanic or African American, and all were committed to a multicultural approach to curriculum. Consequently, when the teachers planned their units, they brought their own cultural understandings and their own sensitivities toward cultural diversity to that planning.

Studying literacy theory also proved an important part of the teachers' professional development. As they explored literacy theory, beliefs, and practices, the teachers noted how literacy/cognitive strategies help children learn content. They also began to note ways in which strong, interesting content enables children to become more skilled in literacy. The background knowledge that children were building about the topics under study scaffolded their comprehension of texts on the topics.

To be sure, the teachers at this school did not attempt to teach Hirsch's Core Knowledge curriculum in its entirety. Through their deliberations, they chose topics and transformed dimensions of his rec-

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ommended curriculum into their taught curriculum. Moreover, although their state-mandated requirements may have constrained some of these teachers' thinking at first, they quickly determined that they had more flexibility in their curriculum decisions than they once had believed they had. Consequently, in this project, they developed some increased sense of professional efficacy. Not only did the teachers recognize that their students learned new knowledge; they also understood that students improved in reading and writing. Consequently, the teachers decided to continue their project for a second year.

Students enthusiastically responded to the Hirsch-type units and, in the second year of the project, with anticipation. The 5th/6th grade teacher reported that her second-year students wanted to know in August when they would begin the Shakespeare unit. All teachers noted an increase in student interest when they implemented their Hirsch-type units. The learned curriculum, students' positive responses to and enactment of the taught curriculum, provided sufficient incentives for teachers to continue their use of Core Knowledge topics and to expect their students to succeed with this challenging material.

What topics should elementary students study? What do they need to know? Perhaps finding answers to such questions is less important than the conversations the questions provoke. The teachers did not agree that the Hirsch program was the definitive answer. Instead they assumed that the questions Hirsch raised were worthy of discussion and that their participation in the conversation was important. The curriculum units that teachers developed in the project were more inspired by than derived from the Hirsch materials. Consequently, their taught curriculum reflected both the teachers' decision making and their decisions.

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