

Tom Horne Reports

In Addition To Critical Thinking, Students Must Master A Substantial Body Of Specific Knowledge

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Parts of the following quotations, from an article in an educational journal, will probably strike you as true, but they are false. Their widespread acceptance is a key to some of the things that have gone wrong with public education in the last 60 years or so:

"With knowledge doubling every five years... every 73 days by the year 2020... we can no longer attempt to anticipate future information requirements.'

"Curriculum based on discrete disciplines emerged from a largely male -and western oriented way of thinking." "

"We must stop valuing right answers and learn how to behave when confronted with paradoxical and ambiguous situations. Doing so requires a shift from knowledge acquisition to valuing knowledge production." :

"Process is in fact the highest form of content." This kind of philosophy has lead to denigration of knowledge acquisition as mere "rote learning." In Paradise Valley, we have tried to take the view that, while critical thinking is important, acquisition of knowledge is equally important. Neither one can be sacrificed in the name of the other.

The reason for this is that studies show that the acquisition of knowledge has a kind of "Velcro" 'effect As you have probably found in your own experience, the more you know about a particular subject, the easier it is to acquire new knowledge about it, because the facts you have already learned serve as a kind of Velcro, or hook, to attach new knowledge to.

While students must be able to think critically and know how to acquire new knowledge, they must have a store of acquired knowledge, a kind of intellectual capital they bring to that activity. Similarly, in math, they must learn how to use calculators and computers, but they still must be able to do arithmetic, and have a sense for when a numerical answer makes sense and when it doesn't.

I have become an unpaid crusader for a book by E. D. Hirsch Jr., *The Schools We Need & Why We Don't Have Them*, and I am constantly urging the people I know to read this book. Kitsch describes himself as a political progressive and an educational conservative. His view is that only by conservative educational practices can children from disadvantaged homes secure the knowledge and that will enable them to improve their condition.

Educational conservatism, in this context, means that students are required to master a substantial body of specific knowledge.

Hirsch had previously written a book on cultural literacy, which set forth what people need to know to function properly in modern society. He then began a movement known as the core knowledge movement, which developed specific bodies of knowledge for students to learn at each grade level. This movement now has approximately 450 schools nationwide, and our district is experimenting with it in one of our schools.

The core knowledge movement operates on the belief that most state standards and school district standards are too vague. A standard such as "the student will learn the principal battles and generals of the civil war," leaves too much variation from class to class in what the students will learn. A standard that specifies what battles and what generals gives greater assurance that these students have learned what they need.

These specific standards of the core knowledge program take about 50% of the class time, giving the other 50% for teacher creativity. This assures that the students will acquire the intellectual capital they need. In addition, as the movement spreads, the country can begin to reacquire what it had in earlier centuries, but has lacked in recent years, which is a shared frame of preference that is the common property of all people. We cannot have public discourse without a shared background of knowledge.

Additional benefits relate to the fact that our country has become so transient. Students whose parents move must change schools, and the new school has no idea what the student already knows. If the student were moving from one core knowledge school to another, this problem

would be eliminated.

Desiring to experiment with this program, we sent the planning principal for Grayhawk Elementary School and five of his teachers to visit a Core Knowledge school in Texas. They would look at a standard/such as that first graders must know all of the continents. They would ask first grade students at random what the continents were and found that they uniformly knew the answers. They came back as enthusiastic supporters of the program and today Grayhawk is using Core Knowledge as the basis for its curriculum. The Grayhawk parents are already quite excited with this experiment. We are currently planning to extend the program to the district's next elementary school, scheduled to open in the Fall of .1999.

Hirsch's book substantiates a deep aversion and contempt for factual knowledge among many in Paradise Valley, we take the opposite point of view: Just as the presence or absence of financial capital causes the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer, the presence or absence of intellectual capital (knowledge), will have the same effect on the future of our students.