

Toward A Core Knowledge for Jewish Education

By Steven M. Brown



The Core Knowledge Sequence idea was developed to provide equality of opportunity in education in American public schools which often suffer from academic deprivation. Dr. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. first proposed in *Cultural Literacy* that the multi-cultural nature of American society demanded a shared body of knowledge of basic concepts, information, cultural ideas and history enabling Americans from varying backgrounds to communicate as a united people. He posited that most of the important information a literate human being needs as a basis for coping with the rapidly changing world does not change that radically. Knowledge at the cutting edge of disciplines is expanding rapidly, but the core concepts of most disciplines change little, and must be mastered before the innovations

in a field can be understood. The sense of mastery and enhanced self esteem seen in students who move through and absorb a well articulated, clearly defined, sequenced, specific body of knowledge is also a compelling, if somewhat "old fashioned" notion. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Foundation in Charlottesville, VA espouses the following mission: "Our hope at the Core Knowledge Foundation is that all children in American schools will have abundant opportunities to build strong, early foundations of knowledge. This can happen – as it is happening in the most effective and fair school systems in the world – if children learn a core of shared knowledge, defined in terms of specific content that builds grade by grade." There are now well over 300 Core Knowledge elementary schools
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throughout the United States.

Though he had been accused of being educationally conservative, even racist in proposing specific aspects of Western cultural heritage to be studied, when I met E.D. Hirsch, Jr. at the Foundation offices this past September, he impressed me as a remarkably sensitive political liberal who really cares about children. Hirsch explains the validity of his ideas in his latest book, *The Schools We Need: Why We Don't Have Them*, in which he tries to debunk the romantic ideas behind many educational methodologies and practices which haven't led us to the nirvana of quality schools for all America, particularly for those in culturally or materially deprived areas. Hirsch's notions of teacher planned and ratified cores of knowledge to be universally taught in all schools may have powerful implications for our work in Jewish education.

As far back as 1970, E. Jacoby in *Continuation and Dropout in Conservative Congregational Schools* (University of Judaism) showed that a key element in students' continuing their religious school education beyond bar or bat mitzvah was their sense of accomplishment, or mastery at the end of the elementary years. In recent years we have rarely asked ourselves the fundamental question: what should a teenager know Jewishly when graduating from day school high school or the synagogue school setting? What is the body of knowledge that would create a level of literacy such that it would enable a young person to move on to the next stage of life with a basic shared understanding of Jewish concepts, practice, ideas and values that make him or her a literate knowledgeable Jewish American human being? Though we may all assume a basic list of core concepts and knowledge, there is little articulation or any shared widespread vision to guide us in the production of curricular materials, teacher preparation and training, and ongoing school based development of learning units which could be shared across the continent.

If nothing else, the core knowledge sequence process would force us as educators to detail what students should know. We tend to deal so much with affective and self image issues in Jewish identity and education that we have given little attention to the core body of knowledge it takes to create an informed, knowledgeable Jew who feels mastery over at least a limited number of sources, and possesses a shared vocabulary and set of idioms that make him or her conversant with other Jews. Undertaking the process of creating a core curriculum such as has been done for grades K through 8 by the Core Knowledge Foundation may be a profoundly revealing exercise as to what are reasonable expectations which could be implemented in various Jewish educational times frames and milieux. The core knowledge curriculum process itself does not predetermine instructional techniques, how teachers deliver material, or how it will be planned or programmed. That is left to the faculty and school to develop and share together. It does not limit teacher creativity, or use of all of the techniques that have shown themselves to be helpful in creating exciting interactive learning opportunities.

For the synagogue school system, undertaking this project may lay out for us a reasonable set of scoped and sequenced knowledge that could then be the target of real curriculum development and certainly teacher training. If we had a clear cut body of knowledge to teach, it would be a bit less complicated to train teachers to teach it. Faculty could comfortably master the entire universe of knowledge. Now we have to teach all of Judaism to our teachers in training, not knowing what part and particularly what texts or vocabularies will indeed be taught by teachers. That becomes an almost impossible task. On the day school level our schools need to be very efficient since we have so much to do in both general and Jewish studies. A core knowledge approach to both general and Jewish studies would streamline the programs, avoid needless duplication of material, create a shared body of

knowledge amongst all of our day schools that would make student transfer from one school to another easier, and enable us to target curriculum development efforts in a national way towards a given body of knowledge that all schools teach. Clearly, there may be some differences in state requirements in general studies programs, but generally these are limited to certain areas like teaching state or local history. The power of core knowledge is that teachers in the same grade level can all work together to share units that are developed to transmit the various units and themes. Thus, a lesson plan developed for teaching ancient Biblical life style and culture to first graders in Philadelphia could easily be used by teachers teaching the same material in California.

Though Core Knowledge itself is not a panacea, the approach may clear away much of the complicated unknowns of how to best target our resources in developing materials and strategies in Jewish education. Core Knowledge would also allow us to really develop family based schools and educational programs, since thematic units could be expanded to involve whole congregations or whole school communities as they are taught on a monthly basis.

This exercise would enable us to isolate the body of knowledge that we believe ought to be communicated to our youth. It may also humble us and make us realize the complexity of the task, and perhaps even change the minds of those who would seek to lessen hours of Jewish study. Not having evidence of what it takes to be a literate Jew in any systematic way, reduces our effectiveness in arguing for more intensive hours of Jewish study and for more resources to develop programs which transmit that body of knowledge. In the coming months the Melton Research Center will undertake intensive deliberations with educators from the field and the academy to investigate whether Core Knowledge ideas can contribute to the Jewish Educational enterprise. ❁