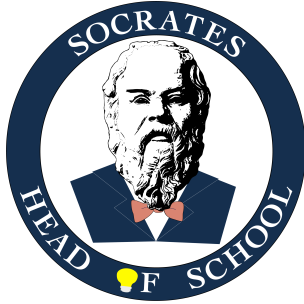


## *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System and How to Fix it* by Natalie Wexler



### **Think you might want to read this book?**

Are you concerned by the focus on skills rather than content? Do you worry that social studies and science are being neglected in the elementary classroom? Are you looking for resources to do something about it? If so, then The Knowledge Gap is a must-read. Natalie Wexler argues that taking a more rigorous approach to reading and writing starts with focusing on content rather than skills taught in a vacuum. For students to understand complex texts, they must first understand the complexities of the world around them.

Wexler bemoans the high-stakes testing that focuses mostly on reading and math leave limited time during the school day for students to learn about social studies, science, and advanced writing composition. This is a great read for anyone looking to deepend the learning in their classroom or school.

### **What would Socrates ask?**

- What would an elementary school curriculum look like that taught children to read to learn and not one that emphasized learning to read?
- Could teaching history and civics to elementary school students lead to a stronger democracy and civic engagement?
- What does an evidence-based reading comprehension program look like?
- Are teachers and school administrators spending time focusing on teaching reading strategies at the expense of building content knowledge in science and social studies?

### **Research**

- Despite many hours of practice and enormous expenditure, American students' reading scores have shown little improvement over the last twenty years with about two-thirds scoring below the proficient level.
- When Congress passed the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001, which required annual reading and math tests, schools responded by increasing time spent on reading and math and decreasing time spent on other subjects like science and social studies.

### **Concepts**

- It's important that teachers be given or create a sequence of skills and content to be taught to students so that knowledge builds throughout a child's school years.
- Dividing children into reading groups does have the benefit of giving them individualized attention and meeting them where they are in terms of reading fluency. However, the benefits that students derive from the small-group format are generally canceled out by the lack of learning that takes place in the rest of the class.

- Many believe that the Common Core is a curriculum, but it is a list of skills students are supposed to acquire at each grade level.
- The only way to expand vocabulary is to expand knowledge.
- The “balanced literacy” approach to reading instruction began in the 50s with the publication of *Why Johnny Can’t Read* by Rudolph Flesch. Today, one of its most prominent advocates of balanced reading is Lucy Calkins of Columbia Teachers College. This approach claimed to “balance” the best features of whole language and phonics instruction. This approach is not the systematic instruction in foundational skills that many children need.
- The foundation of **systematic reading instruction** is:
  - a robust phonics instruction program.
  - the assumption that acquiring reading skills is a different process than acquiring oral language.
  - exposure to *authentic* texts and not just readers that have words that conform to the phonics rules that students have already learned. Students need to be able to successfully understand texts that have words that use sophisticated vocabulary.
- For twenty years, E.D. Hirsch, Jr. has been arguing that children from less-educated families need a knowledge-building curriculum and began the Core Knowledge Foundation which began producing materials that schools could use to create their own content-focused curricula. Since the focus on standardized testing meant that time for science and social studies was squeezed out for more time spent on language arts, this curriculum was designed to take social studies to language arts.
- Writing is more challenging to teach than reading. Writing, reading and analytical ability are all connected; writing is the key to unlocking the other two.
- Students should be expected to compose in a variety of forms: narrative, argumentative paragraphs/essays, descriptions *etc.* They need to be exposed to the writing that is expected in an academic setting and in the modern workplace.

### Quotes from the author

- “Another iconic twentieth-century psychologist, Jerome Bruner, argued, ‘any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child in any stage of development’.”
- “The bottom line is that the test-score gap is, at its heart, a knowledge gap.”
- “...there’s a huge gulf between what scientists know about the learning process and what teachers believe.”

### Quotes from others

- “We can only infer, predict, and think critically with respect to specific subject matter, and if a subject is foreign to us then we will not be able to demonstrate any thinking ability.” Frank Smith, Psycholinguist
- “Reading tests are knowledge tests in disguise.” - Daniel Willingham, cognitive scientist

### Organizations/schools working on answers

- [Core Knowledge](#)
- [Achievement First](#)
- [Student Achievement Partners](#)
- [Engage NY](#)
- [EL Education](#)

**Gateways to further learning**

- [Ask the Cognitive Scientist column](#) by Daniel Willingham

**Referenced books with the potential to impact leading and learning in education**

Author(s) Last Name	Title
Willingham	<i><a href="#">The Reading Mind</a></i>
Seidenberg	<i><a href="#">Language at the Speed of Sight</a></i>
Hirsch	<i><a href="#">Why Knowledge Matters</a></i>
Hirsch	<i><a href="#">Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know</a></i>
Lemov	<i><a href="#">Reading Reconsidered</a></i>
Hochman	<i><a href="#">The Writing Revolution</a></i>
Ravitch	<i><a href="#">The Death and Life of the Great American School System</a></i>
Boser	<i><a href="#">Learn Better</a></i>

The applicability of this book to education is ....



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