



# Poverty-Fighting Elementary Schools

## Knowledge Acquisition is Job One

Prepared for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's Education for Upward Mobility Conference,  
December 2, 2014. Draft and not for citation without author's permission.

Robert Pondiscio

*“For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.”*

Matthew 13:12

Upward mobility dies young in Mott Haven.

Located in the heart of New York City’s South Bronx, the neighborhood has long claimed the dubious distinction of being America’s poorest congressional district, and is a national symbol of urban decay. During the 1977 World Series, an ABC Sports aerial camera caught sight of a fire at PS 3, an abandoned elementary school a few blocks from Yankee Stadium. “There it is, ladies and gentlemen,” Howard Cosell famously intoned. “The Bronx is burning.” By the end of the decade, nearly half the neighborhood’s buildings had been lost to fire, primarily arson. President Carter walked the streets of Mott Haven to view the devastation as residents shouted, “Give us money!” and “We want jobs!”<sup>1</sup>

Much of what the fires didn’t destroy, the crack epidemic claimed in the 1980s. Crime soared to historic levels. The phrase “South Bronx” became synonymous with urban squalor, a reputation it struggles with to this day, even as neat rows of one- and two-family homes have filled in the gaps between the towering housing projects that loom over the neighborhood. The area is now largely Hispanic, heavily populated with immigrants, and still deeply impoverished. According to U.S. Census data, 38 percent of residents and 49 percent of children live below the poverty line. Not even in Detroit is poverty deeper or more widespread.

Today, hard by the front door of the Mott Haven Community Center and across the street from a large public housing project, a blue and orange banner greets visitors. “Opportunity Starts Now,” it reads in enormous letters. Smaller white type designates the site as an “Official NYC Department of Education Community-Based Early Childhood Center Pre-K Program.” This is one of 930 promised sites constituting New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio’s signature education effort: <sup>2</sup> a \$300 million universal pre-K program that promises to find seats for 70,000 four-year-olds by 2015.<sup>3</sup>

On a crisp Monday morning in November, parents file past the optimistic Department of Education banner and bring their four-year-old children upstairs to a classroom run by Julie Selby, a sixteen-year veteran preschool teacher.

“Come here Elizabeth,” Selby calls to a little girl in a princess dress and a pink birthday crown. “Let me see your tiara. What color is that? It’s gorgeous!” Selby maintains a constant patter, engaging her students with conversation and questions filled with words like “tiara” and “gorgeous”—words that her children, largely Hispanic and all low-income, are unlikely to hear from their parents at home.

The classroom bursts with bright colors, attractive displays and language, and play areas—window displays representing the five senses sit near a sand and water table, laminated alphabet cards with upper- and lower-cases letters, playsets and plastic carpentry tools,

numerous books, and blocks. Around the room, every possible object is labeled in English and Spanish: closet, easel, clock (“El reloj”). Selby gathers her twenty little ones around her, pointing out which children are sitting in the “middle” of the rug and wondering who is sitting “next to” whom, all before asking each of them about their weekend. One little girl tells how she “helped my mommy cook, then visited my grandma, and then I went shopping and bought a new dress.”

Selby seizes the teachable moment to present her children with yet another new word. “I like how you put those things in a *sequence*, Viviana,” she observes, explaining that “sequence” means an ordered set. “Nice sequence!” she exults, then asks, “What color is your new dress?”

At times, the happy chatter stalls; many of the children offer only cursory answers. One little boy says only, “I slept.” Others watched television or played video games. Selby is undaunted and nonjudgmental. When a boy named Abdulah says he watched a Curious George cartoon, Selby responds effusively, “I like how that little monkey is always looking for interesting things to do!” She points out that there are lots of Curious George books in the classroom.

By the time they leave her pre-K class, the twenty four-year-olds in Ms. Selby’s care will know their numbers, letters, and colors. They will be able to spell and write their names. They will be ready for kindergarten. But look an unpleasant truth in the eye: They will graduate from this bright and cheerful room to attend some of New York City’s lowest-performing elementary schools. The average Bronx elementary school has 15.5 percent of its students reading on grade level, compared to a citywide average of 28.4 percent.<sup>4</sup> The advocacy group Families for Excellent Schools identified 112 elementary and middle schools in which 90 percent of children read or do math below grade level.<sup>5</sup> Twenty-four of them—more than one in five—are in New York City’s District 7, the South Bronx.

### **The Rich Verbal Life of the Affluent Child**

Three subway stops and the East River separate Mott Haven from Manhattan’s Upper East Side, where parents eagerly spend north of \$15,000 tuition—more than the cost of many colleges—for a coveted slot at an elite preschool. The right preschool can be a feeder to some of the nation’s best private schools, and from there to elite colleges and universities. The grim competition and sense of purpose that attends admissions to schools like Dalton, Brearley, and Collegiate led to a cover story in *New York* magazine entitled “Give Me Harvard or Give Me Death.”

Opportunity for children on the Upper East Side does not begin in preschool. It’s largely a function of the lucky wombs from which they sprang. Language acquisition and kindergarten readiness isn’t the first thing on these parents’ minds. Nor should it be; to grow up as the child of well-educated parents in an affluent American home is to hit the verbal lottery. From their earliest days, these children reap the benefits of parents who speak in complete sentences, engage them in rich dinner table conversation, and read them to sleep at bedtime. Verbal parents chatter incessantly, offering a running commentary on

vegetable options in the produce aisle and pointing out letters and words in storefronts and street signs. Parents proceed, as Ginia Bellafante of the *New York Times* has described, “in a near constant mode of annotation. Reflexively, the affluent, ambitious parent is always talking, pointing out, explaining: Mommy is looking for her laptop; let’s put on your rain boots; that’s a pigeon, a sand dune, skyscraper, a pomegranate.”<sup>6</sup>

Such children exist, Bellafante writes, “in continuous receipt of dictation.” The rich cognitive input seldom rests. Weekends are filled with enrichment opportunities—playgroups, outings, museum visits, or birthday parties at pottery studios and the science center. When Mom and Dad need a break, they plunk the kids down in front of PBS Kids.

These are the indelible thumbprints of what sociologist Annette Lareau, in her 2003 book *Unequal Childhoods*, described as “concerted cultivation,” a continuing state of engagement, development and stimulation.<sup>7</sup> This style of parenting is marked not merely by extensive organized activity, but also a verbal relationship among family members that encourages discussion, negotiation, and the questioning of authority. She contrasts this style of parenting with another she calls “natural growth,” much more common among working-class and economically disadvantaged families like those in Mott Haven. The children in “natural growth” homes hear much more directive language; negotiation is infrequent. Respect and trust for authority is expected and encouraged, and children are much more likely to direct their own play away from the constant oversight and monitoring of parents or caregivers.

To be clear, no value judgment is intended or implied in these contrasting parenting styles. In many significant ways, the “natural growth” families Lareau observed in her landmark work enjoyed greater independence, more intimate contact with their extended families, and enviable self-confidence. But they were also, as David Brooks noted in a 2006 column on Lareau’s work, “not as well prepared for the world of organizations and adulthood.”

Children, like their parents, were easily intimidated by and pushed around by verbally dexterous teachers and doctors. Middle-class kids felt entitled to individual treatment when entering the wider world, but working-class kids felt constrained and tongue-tied....The perhaps overprogrammed middle-class kids got into good colleges and are heading for careers as doctors and other professionals. The working-class kids are not doing well.

The working-class parents were not bad parents, Brooks astutely observed, “but they did not prepare their kids for a world in which verbal skills and the ability to thrive in organizations are so important.”<sup>8</sup>

This, then, is where any discussion of preparing low-income children for upward mobility must begin: by attending to their verbal skills and ability to thrive in the world we have—not the world we might wish for them.

Much has been made of the sheer cascade of words that the children of educated, affluent parents hear before day one of school. One of the most cited data points in educational

research is the so-called “30 million word gap” between the children of professional and working class families. In 1995, University of Kansas child psychologists Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley found that the way parents and caregivers talk to their children from ages zero to three has a significant effect on the child's literacy and academic success later in life.<sup>9</sup>

Their study of the words spoken in the homes of one- and two-year olds demonstrated that the frequency and quality of words a child hears during her first three years of life are critically important in shaping language development. Hart and Risley estimated that children of affluent, professional families hear 11 million words per year, while those in working class families hear approximately 6 million words. Most tellingly, children of families on public assistance hear a relative pittance—only 3 million words annually. Accrued over the first four years of life, this adds up to a verbal advantage of 30 million words for the children of educated, professional class children before they enter kindergarten.

It is no exaggeration to say that for low-income American children, early disadvantages in language—both the volume of words and the way in which they are employed—establishes a kind of educational inertia that is immensely difficult to address. Schools will spend every moment trying to make up for the verbal gaps kids bring with them to school, which tend to grow wider year after year.

New York City's answer is to bet heavily on preschool. But the investment in preschool—even high-quality, language-rich preschool—will come to no good end if it is not the first step in an unbroken chain of superior schools from kindergarten to high school, and then on to college or a strong career and technical education program following graduation. Nothing else—and nothing less—will suffice if we wish to restore the promise of upward mobility for the next generation of low-income American children.

### **It Pays to Increase Your Word Power**

Setting America's poorest children on the path of upward mobility is far harder to accomplish than we generally care to admit. Effective schools can have a considerable impact, but it requires a clear-eyed view of the enormity of the task. The job, already daunting, is made more difficult still because educating for upward mobility and economic self-sufficiency also challenges some of our most revered educational traditions (particularly local control of curriculum), as well as pedagogical fashions like “child-centered” or “culturally relevant” education.

There is no best way or magic bullet. But if you were to strive for one positive outcome—and one only—that would set a low-income child on a path for upward mobility, you would almost certainly wish for that child to have a big vocabulary.

Vocabulary size, as E.D. Hirsch, Jr. observed, “is a convenient proxy for a whole range of educational attainments and abilities.”<sup>10</sup> A wealth of words signals competence in reading and writing. A substantial working vocabulary also correlates with SAT success, which in

turn predicts the likelihood of college attendance, graduation, and the associated wage premium that has been fetishized by education reformers and has driven their agenda for decades. Hirsch noted that

[s]tudies have solidly established the correlation between vocabulary and real-world ability. Many of these studies examine the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT), which the military devised in 1950 as an entrance requirement and a job-allocating device....The military has determined that the test predicts real-world job performance most accurately when you *double* the verbal score and add it to the math score. Once you perform that adjustment, according to a 1999 study by Christopher Winship and Sanders Korenman, a gain of one standard deviation on the AFQT raises one's annual income by nearly \$10,000 (in 2012 dollars). Other studies show that much of the disparity in the black-white wage gap disappears when you take AFQT scores—again, weighted toward the verbal side—into account.<sup>11</sup>

In short, those old *Reader's Digest* vocabulary quizzes had it exactly right. It really *does* pay to increase your word power. College or no college, AFQT data tells an important story: Verbal proficiency is an essential precondition to upward mobility, even for enlisted members of the military. Raising it is as sure a bet as schools can make if their aim is to lift children from poverty.

For much of the past twenty years, most education debate has centered on the question of whether poverty matters—whether demographics are destiny or if schooling is enough to elevate the children of the poor into the world of work and opportunity. As in most tendentious education debates, both side have a strong claim. Of *course* poverty matters. And with equal certainty, schools can make a difference—if not for all, then certainly for many more of our poorest children and families. But doing so will require a clear focus on the instructional approaches most likely to bear fruit.

“If we want to reduce economic inequality in America,” Hirsch concluded succinctly, “a good place to start is the language-arts classroom.”<sup>12</sup>

### **The Matthew Effect**

If you went to college, chances are good that at some point during your junior or senior year of high school you devoted many tedious hours to rote memorization of SAT words. Perhaps some of them—*assiduous, enervating, perfidious*—worked their way into your working vocabulary, and you use them to this day. A college freshman has command, on average, of 60,000 to 100,000 words.<sup>13</sup> If you have a vocabulary of that size or larger, you owe no more than a tiny fraction of it to memorization. Learning that many words would require memorizing between ten and twenty new words every day from birth until freshman year in college. Under no circumstances should we be tempted to convert early childhood education into extended vocabulary enhancement exercises with word lists to be memorized. Rather, it's essential to understand how big vocabularies are created. We don't learn words through memorization, but by repeated exposure to unfamiliar words in

context.

Language growth is perhaps the clearest manifestation in K–8 education of the “Matthew effect,” a term coined by University of Toronto cognitive scientist Keith Stanovich after a passage in the Gospel of Matthew: “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.” Simply put, the verbally rich get richer in knowledge and language, while the verbally poor lose more ground.

The nature of knowledge and vocabulary acquisition all but assures that children raised in language-rich homes gain in reading comprehension, while the language-poor fall further behind. When schools fail to address gaps in knowledge and language, the deficits widen. Among educators, vocabulary is often described as “tiered.” Tier-one words include basic words that most native speakers come to school with, regardless of upbringing: “baby,” “dog,” “run,” “chair,” “happy.” Tier three represents specialized vocabulary associated with particular domains of knowledge and rarely heard elsewhere, such as “isotope” or “exposition.” The sweet spot for vocabulary growth and language proficiency are tier-two words, which occur in a variety of domains. Words like “verify,” “superior,” “negligent”—or “gorgeous” and “sequence”—are common to sophisticated adult speech and reading; we perceive them as ordinary, not specialized, language. Tier-two words are essential to reading comprehension and undergird more subtle and precise use of language, both receptive (reading, hearing) and expressive (writing, speaking).

Because we directly learn and memorize only a tiny fraction of the words in our working vocabulary, we can assume that the only reliable way to acquire new, sophisticated words is through repeated exposure—either through reading or hearing them. With each new encounter with the word, possible definitions are narrowed and refined until eventually the child has command of it and incorporates the word into his or her vocabulary. Consider now how a child might come to encounter, and hopefully add to her vocabulary, the tier-two word “durable.” She would need multiple exposures to the word. More importantly, she would need enough background knowledge to properly contextualize the unfamiliar word in each encounter. Only by repeated exposure with the meaning, correctly inferred, will she become familiar enough with it to understand it, use it correctly, and attain familiarity with the useful new word “durable.”

Here are some potential uses of the word she might encounter:

- “The Egyptians learned how to make durable sheets of parchment from the papyrus plant.”
- “With this lightweight and durable telescope, young scientists can explore the natural wonders of the earth or the craters of the moon and beyond.”
- “The Qing Empire/China is easily among the ranks of the most successful and durable empires of the modern period.”

- “Many durable ancient Roman concrete buildings are still in use after more than 2000 years.”
- “Instead of having to find caves or create makeshift shelters for protection from the weather, man started to look for more durable materials with which to build long-lasting dwellings.”

In order for the vocabulary-building process to work, she must be able to understand the gist of what she hears or reads to contextualize the unfamiliar new word. In the examples above, terms like Egyptians, parchment, papyrus, makeshift shelters, and concrete lend sense and meaning to the word “durable.” Without the enabling context, language growth stalls. This is the Matthew effect in action: Those who have the broadest general knowledge, whether acquired at home, school, or elsewhere in their lives, are most likely to possess the “schema” necessary to acquire more knowledge and language; those who do not fall further behind. Their opportunities for vocabulary acquisition are limited because they lack the background knowledge for language growth.

Seen through this lens, it is immediately and abundantly clear that the key to language growth is the broadest possible knowledge base. The more background knowledge a child possesses, the greater the likelihood that she will have the ability to correctly contextualize what she reads and hears, which in turn increases the odds that new and useful words will enter her working vocabulary. And it proceeds from this that the best way to ensure language growth is a primary education that is as rich and varied as possible.

The impulse to focus on the “skill” of reading rather than the act of reading is paradoxically wrong. Once basic skills of decoding—translating written symbols into words and sentences—are mastered, you build strong readers by increasing a child’s store of knowledge of the world.

The soul of language growth is the ability to contextualize and make correct inferences. Imagine how unlikely it would be for the word “durable” to enter the child’s vocabulary if, in the examples above, she didn’t know who the Egyptians were or what papyrus was; if she was unfamiliar with the Qing dynasty; or if she could not accurately infer from context what it means for a 2,000-year-old building to be durable. The background knowledge of these things makes the unique word stand out, its meaning inferable. In the absence of background knowledge, the word “durable” is one among many unfamiliar terms—“parchment,” “craters,” “makeshift,” “Roman,” “papyrus”—and unlikely to stick.

Once again, we see the advantage of growing up in a rich verbal stew with educated parents and a home full of books—and the challenge for those who do not. Unless schools address knowledge and language deficits directly and aggressively, there is no reason to expect anything other than for kids who grow up in a state of language poverty to remain there. Left unaddressed, this can be harshly determinative for low-income children and devastating to their educational opportunities and earning potential.



## **K-8's Unforgivable Blunder**

If it seems obvious that drenching students in context-giving knowledge and language throughout the foundational elementary years of school is the surest way to boost language proficiency, the message has been largely lost on the American education system. The gravest mistake made in our schools is teaching and testing reading as if it is a skill, like riding a bike or throwing a ball, which can be applied to any random piece of text regardless of subject matter or context. The annual reading tests that we use to measure student proficiency—and increasingly teacher effectiveness—would be more accurately described as tests of background knowledge than of reading comprehension. It is not an exaggeration to say that there's no such thing as a reading test.<sup>14</sup>

Reading is best understood as a two-part process. First, children learn to “decode” the words on a printed page, ideally through rich and comprehensive phonics instruction. But when low-income children struggle with reading, the issue tends not to be decoding, but rather the second part of the process: comprehension. Unlike decoding, reading comprehension is not a skill, or even a suite of skills that can be practiced or mastered in the abstract and applied to any passage or piece of text. It tends to be “domain specific,” or grounded in context. In order to fully comprehend a reading passage about architecture or football, you need to know at least a little about those topics—and sometimes quite a lot. In sum, there is much wisdom in the idea that “first you learn to read, then you read to learn.”

The dominant methods of teaching reading comprehension in American elementary schools tend to assume that reading comprehension is a transferable skill. Reading instruction often involves teaching and practicing “reading strategies” such as visualizing, predicting, and finding the main idea, which students typically learn and practice on texts of their own choosing and at their “just-right” reading level. When reading failure occurs, or when children remain stubbornly stuck at low reading levels, it is very often a failure of reading with comprehension, rather than one of decoding. This has little to do with the “skill” of reading, which is really not a skill at all, but a lack of background knowledge about the topic at hand.

The connection between background knowledge and reading comprehension is firmly established and readily demonstrated. A 1988 study by Donna Recht and Lauren Leslie looked at the importance of background knowledge on reading comprehension of a baseball-related text. The authors arranged a clever experiment in which students were divided into four groups according to reading ability (high or low) and domain knowledge concerning baseball (high or low). They found that students with high domain knowledge performed better on all assessment tasks. Most critically, students with low reading skills outperformed “strong” readers when they had high domain knowledge of baseball. The authors wrote, “It appears that knowledge of a content domain is a powerful determinant of the amount and quality of the information recalled, powerful enough for poor readers to compensate for their generally low reading ability.”<sup>15</sup>

In short, knowing a lot about the subject turned the poor readers into good readers—a powerful argument for re-orienting elementary and middle school education around knowledge development, thus increasing the number of subjects about which children can read with comprehension and mitigating the worst of the Matthew effect.

What this means for schools hoping to educate for upward mobility is that they should do everything in their power to make children richer in knowledge and language. The ability to read for understanding, write with clarity, and communicate with ease and fluency is essential not just for the college-bound. Language proficiency is an essential component of a productive work life in nearly all careers and jobs, and it is highly predictive of future earnings, as the data from the Armed Forces Qualification Test demonstrates.

The correlation of general knowledge and language proficiency—and of language proficiency and earning power—implies that schools should avoid at all costs any impulse to narrow curricula to an ill-conceived regimen of reading skills and strategies at the expense of a well-defined program constructed around coherent, sequential, and domain-based content. Low-income children especially need more science, social studies, art, and music—the better to build “schema” for assistance in comprehension and language growth. Robust, substantial, and coherent content, not skills and strategies, should be at the very heart of literacy instruction from the first days of school. They lay the foundation for language growth, which is critical for further college and career opportunities.

The foundational role of knowledge acquisition across subject areas has been neglected for too long by American elementary and middle schools. A skills-focused orientation has led most schools to focus almost exclusively on “leveled reading”—establishing a child’s reading level and encouraging him or her to read “high-interest” books at that level. The dominant approach to building reading comprehension ability is to teach and practice metacognitive “reading strategies” as students read independently or in small groups. Students are encouraged as they read, to “visualize,” to “activate prior knowledge,” and to “make connections” between what they know and what they are reading about, among other strategies. Broadly speaking, the idea is to encourage children to read with maximum engagement in the hope of developing in each child a “lifelong love of reading.” To be clear, there is much wisdom to the idea that the best way to ensure reading competence is simply to spur children to read a lot. Schools need to encourage an enormous amount of reading, both at “instructional” (a stretch for kids to read) and “independent” (kids can read it on their own) levels. The language of children’s books, in fact, has been found to be more linguistically rich and complex than the conversation of even college graduates.<sup>16</sup>

More is better, therefore, when it comes to reading. But schools can optimize vocabulary growth by organizing curriculum and instruction coherently across a wide variety of subjects. Studies have demonstrated that vocabulary growth is accelerated when children read within familiar knowledge domains (remember, as in the “durable” example, that correct inferences enable developing readers to intuit and learn unfamiliar words in context).<sup>17</sup> This suggests that schools would be wise to stay on topics for extended periods (perhaps two weeks), creating optimal conditions for language growth.

Since broadening a child’s knowledge base makes her more likely to be able to contextualize and understand new words, the principle can be summarized this way: Reading comprehension is not a skill you teach, it’s a condition you create.

The most egregious error made by too many schools, however, is to worship nearly exclusively at the altar of student engagement. Too often we condescend to children by assuming that if a book or subject is not directly relevant to their own interests or experience, they will become bored and disengaged. Equally damaging is the idea that children will not or cannot engage if what they read is not pleasurable and makes too many demands of them. The clear connection between background knowledge, language growth, and reading comprehension makes it quite clear that these are self-limiting assumptions, however well-intentioned.

If school does not submerge a child in knowledge of the world—if she is encouraged, for reasons that are deeply humane, to explore her own interests and read exclusively about topics that interest and entertain her—she will remain in a state of language poverty, likely cementing her in economic poverty for life.

### **How Common Core Might Help**

If schools understood the connection between knowledge and literacy, and between vocabulary and upward mobility, much of American education might look very different. Elementary education in particular would change from a “student-centered,” skills-driven approach to one that sees its role as foundational, even determinative, of educational and economic success. Knowledge and language acquisition (which really cannot be separated from each other) would be at its core.

The long, skills-driven “literacy blocks” that chew up as much as two hours of the typical elementary school student’s day would be reordered around coherent content across content areas like science, history, fiction and literature, geography, art, music. Elementary school teachers, especially those who work with our poorest children, would be restored, in David Coleman’s lovely and apt phrase, “to their rightful place as guides to the universe.”<sup>18</sup>

At present, we know surprisingly little about what children do all day in school, as well as the degree to which teachers understand and act upon the imperative to help children—particularly the disadvantaged—build background knowledge. But what we do know is not encouraging. Studies by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development have revealed that only 4 percent of first-grade class time in American elementary schools is spent on science, and just 2 percent on social studies.<sup>19</sup> In third grade, about 5 percent of class time goes to each of these subjects. Meanwhile a whopping 62 percent in first grade and 47 percent in third grade is spent on language arts.<sup>20</sup>

This is something of a black hole. There is no way to know with any certainty whether there is any caloric value in the reading children do during the long hours of the literacy block—whether they are reading challenging texts aimed at building background

knowledge and vocabulary or simply reading “leveled texts” pitched at each student’s ostensible reading level.<sup>21</sup> In the absence of established curricula, it is impossible to know whether a second grader, for example, is spending those many hours with a basal reading program, tackling a nonfiction unit on the solar system, or idling away time reading *Captain Underpants* on the theory that all reading is good reading.

A shift in reading instruction from a skills-based approach to a content-based one is a signature feature of the Common Core State Standards in English language arts, which make it clear that all reading instruction should take place within the context of a knowledge-rich curriculum. In their “Anchor Standards for Reading,” the Common Core’s authors specify their purpose:

By reading texts in history/social studies, science, and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas. Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades.<sup>22</sup>

Because standards are not curriculum, the Common Core cannot prescribe, let alone dictate, the scope and sequence of a well-rounded K–8 education. Yet the architects of the Common Core have done all in their power to establish the standards’ intent:

Building knowledge systematically in English language arts is like giving children various pieces of a puzzle in each grade that, over time, will form one big picture. At a curricular or instructional level, texts—within and across grade levels—need to be selected around topics or themes that systematically develop the knowledge base of students.<sup>23</sup>

There has been in recent decades—and especially in the era of No Child Left Behind and its annual reading tests for grades 3–8—a tendency to see teaching a rich curriculum in science, history, art, and music as something to be done either after or in addition to teaching reading. It is more accurate to view this knowledge-building function of education as the indispensable wellspring of reading proficiency. “The mistaken idea that reading is a skill—learn to crack the code, practice comprehension strategies, and you can read anything—may be the single biggest factor holding back reading achievement in the country,” University of Virginia cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham has observed. “Students will not meet standards that way. The knowledge base problem must be solved.”<sup>24</sup>

By placing a premium on a coherent, sequential, knowledge-rich curriculum, the Common Core State Standards make it clear that all language arts instruction should take place against a curricular backdrop that (correctly) conceives of verbal proficiency as a function of background knowledge. While this is an essential conceptual pushback against the dominant skills-and-strategies approach prevalent in most U.S. elementary schools, it also places a considerable burden on districts and schools to embrace the spirit of the standards and not merely the letter, pushing back against a general anti-curriculum ethos of

American education that has dominated schools for the last half-century or more.<sup>25</sup> If we retain the same random, incoherent, skills-based approach that dominates reading instruction and merely increase the amount of nonfiction kids read, there is no reason to suspect it will enhance reading ability—or drive the vocabulary gains one would expect from a coherent, sequential curriculum.

### **Resistance to a Coherent Curriculum**

To readers of a certain age—say, forty or older—one suspects that nothing of what has been suggested above will seem even mildly controversial. Of course elementary and middle schools should offer children a rich blend of geography, science, history, art, and music. Of course they should introduce them to the best of what has been thought, written, and said. “Why,” they might be thinking, “that’s what school is for!”

For the children of low-income parents, a foundational education rich in knowledge and language is an essential key to upward mobility. The long odds of upward mobility are made longer by a set of incorrect assumptions we make about schools and a general hostility toward an established curriculum.

Indeed, perhaps the stiffest challenge parents of low-income children face—even under Common Core—is the distinctly old-fashioned flavor of an education with knowledge and vocabulary acquisition at its heart. Districts, schools, and even (or especially) teachers generally eschew a fixed curriculum. They are far likelier to want to tailor instruction to subjects they or their students enjoy, or default to what they have taught for years. Likewise, education in the elementary and middle school levels broadly favors privileging skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication over any particular body of knowledge.

The popular homilies that guide teachers reinforce the general disregard shown to a content-rich education “Be the guide on the side, not the sage on the stage,” teachers are advised. “Teach the child, not the lesson.” We unthinkingly repeat these clichés not because they are correct, but because they are inspiring and ennobling. Of all the maxims in education, though, none rankles more than this one: “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” The quote is typically (and mistakenly) attributed to the poet William Butler Yeats.

Writing at the *Washington Post’s Answer Sheet* blog, Carol Corbett Burris, a high school principal and an outspoken Common Core detractor, uses the aphorism to formulate her criticism of the standards:

[T]he pail fillers are determining the fate of our schools. The ‘filling of the pail’ is the philosophy of those who see students as vessels into which facts and knowledge are poured. The better the teacher, the more stuff in the pail. How do we measure what is in the pail? With a standardized test, of course. Not enough in the pail? No excuses. We must identify the teachers who best fill the pail, and dismiss the rest.<sup>26</sup>

The damage done by those who denigrate the importance of a knowledge-rich classroom—especially for our most disadvantaged learners—can scarcely be overstated. Education is neither the filling of a bucket nor the lighting of a fire. It’s both. You can’t light a fire in an empty bucket. When leading practitioners fail to grasp this notion at even a rudimentary level, it underscores the difficulty of any endeavor to raise the achievement level of our most disadvantaged children.

The most recent version of the skills delusion is the “twenty-first-century skills” movement. The appeal of such schemes is intuitive, seductive, and almost invariably wrong. Like reading comprehension, the ability to solve problems and think critically or creatively are not transferable skills that can be developed in the abstract and applied to novel areas of expertise. It is easy to be gulled into believing we can teach children to “think like a scientist” or “read like a historian.” But they must first know what the scientist or historian knows.

Further resistance to a well-defined foundational curriculum comes from those who favor mass, technology-driven customization of curricula. There’s a surface plausibility to allowing a student to chart his or her own academic path; it stands to reason that all students will be more engaged and persistent in their studies if they are intrinsically motivated and interested in subject matter they choose themselves. But it is critical to recognize the degree to which, like it or not, language proficiency rests on a foundation of common knowledge. Individualization that begins too early is likely to do more harm than good, leaving low-income students in particular at a serious disadvantage when it comes to competing for educational and vocational opportunities. In the critical foundational years of K–8, the onus is on educators to ensure that every child has sufficient common knowledge and vocabulary to communicate clearly and with understanding with all other members of the speech community. Hyper-individualization of content risks leaving children with glaring gaps in their background knowledge that will interfere with mature language proficiency, hamper academic achievement *and* engagement, and stop upward mobility in its tracks.

Schools that would educate for upward mobility must resist the siren song of content-free skills. All of the goals we have for education, and thus for upward mobility, are grounded in broad general knowledge. In sum, a school without a well-defined scope and sequence describing a broad body of content across subject areas—at least from kindergarten to the fifth grade, and ideally to the eighth grade—can scarcely be described as having a curriculum at all. The absence of a coherent curriculum undergirding reading instruction can be fatal to mature language acquisition and proficiency.

The idea that there should be a firmly established core curriculum in the foundational years of schooling goes against the grain of much contemporary education thought and practice, both among those who favor strong local control of curriculum and among progressive educators. Progressives who resist the notion that a coherently sequenced, knowledge-rich core curriculum is necessary to address income inequality might heed the words of one of their intellectual polestars, Diane Ravitch, who has argued for a voluntary national curriculum. “Many educators and parents worry that a national curriculum might

be captured by ‘the wrong people,’ that is, someone whose views they do not share,” she has written. But despite these concerns, Ravitch was persuaded of the need for common content as a means to “release us from the shackles of test-based accountability.”<sup>27</sup>

Ravitch has famously repudiated nearly all of her previously held positions on testing and accountability. It is important to note, therefore, that the following provocative passages come not from her early work, but from her 2010 book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, published long after she had “switched sides”:

“If it is impossible to reach a consensus about a national curriculum, then every state should make sure that every child receives an education that includes history, geography, literature, the arts, the sciences, civics, foreign languages, health, and physical education. The subjects should not be discretionary or left to chance. Every state should have a curriculum that is rich in knowledge, issues, and ideas, while leaving teachers free to use their own methods, with enough time to introduce topics and activities of their own choosing.”

Ravitch continues,

“To have no curriculum, as is so often the case in American schools, leaves schools at the mercy of those who demand a regime of basic skills and no content at all. To have no curriculum is to leave the decision about what matters to the ubiquitous textbooks, which function as our de facto national curriculum. To have no curriculum on which assessments may be based is to tighten the grip of test-based accountability, testing only generic skills, not knowledge or comprehension.”<sup>28</sup>

## **Culture and Language**

An additional impediment to education for language proficiency and upward mobility—and one that is particularly sensitive—is cultural. To a degree that can be awkward to acknowledge, language is a cultural artifact, filled with assumed knowledge, allusion, and idioms that are a reflection of the culture that created it. Not for nothing did E.D. Hirsch Jr. title his 1987 bestseller on reading and language *Cultural Literacy*. That book, and Hirsch’s subsequent volumes, have tended to ignite firestorms of controversy, but its critics have largely misunderstood Hirsch’s thrust. His object has not been to establish a canon. Rather, his is a curatorial effort aimed at cataloging the knowledge that literate speakers and writers know—and take for granted that their audiences know as well.

The idea that American schools should explicitly familiarize children—especially those from other countries, cultures, or traditions—with a uniform body of knowledge in elementary and middle school falls upon contemporary ears as awkward, anachronistic, even inappropriate. We are far more likely to honor or even revere home language, culture, and dialect. But we must seriously consider the possibility that this impulse is wrong for all the right reasons.

Lisa Delpit, an African American literacy researcher and a 1990 MacArthur grantee, has written persuasively for many years about the “culture of power” in American schools and classrooms and the “schism between liberal educational movements and that of non-White, non-middle class teachers and communities.” In her seminal essay, “The Silenced Dialogue,” she explains the implications of the culture of power:

This means that success in institutions—schools, workplaces, and so on—is predicated upon acquisition of the culture of those who are in power. Children from middle-class homes tend to do better in school than those from non-middle-class homes because the culture of the school is based on the culture of the upper and middle classes—of those in power. The upper and middle classes send their children to school with all the accouterments of the culture of power; children from other kinds of families operate within perfectly wonderful and viable cultures but not cultures that carry the codes or rules of power.<sup>29</sup>

To say this is an uncomfortable topic among teachers and others in education is to vastly understate things, especially among those who are equally and earnestly committed to progressive ideals and progressive pedagogy. “The Silenced Dialogue” and the book it spawned, *Other People’s Children*, are staples on the syllabus of teacher-education programs and often spark heated debate and wounded egos. “Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence,” Delpit insists.

To provide schooling for everyone’s children that reflects liberal, middle-class values and aspirations is to ensure the maintenance of the status quo, to ensure that power, the culture of power, remains in the hands of those who already have it. Some children come to school with more accouterments of the culture of power already in place—“cultural capital,” as some critical theorists refer to it (for example, Apple, 1979)—some with less. Many liberal educators hold that the primary goal for education is for children to become autonomous, to develop fully who they are in the classroom setting without having arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them. This is a very reasonable goal for people whose children are already participants in the culture of power and who have already internalized its codes.

But parents who don’t function within that culture often want something else. It’s not that they disagree with the former aim, it’s just that they want something more. They want to ensure that the school provides their children with discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society.<sup>30</sup>

To be highly proficient in English requires mastery over not just an alphabet and rules of grammar, but also an enormous range of assumed knowledge, historical references, and cultural allusions commonly held by members of a speech community. “My kids know how to be Black,” one parent tells Delpit. “You all teach them how to be successful in the White man’s world.”<sup>31</sup>



American education remains deeply reluctant to do this, since it requires overthrowing any number of traditions and practices: from child-centered pedagogies, assumptions about student engagement, and other progressive education ideals to local control of curriculum, the privileging of skills over content, and the movement toward mass customization of education. Each of these in ways great or small work against the cause of language proficiency; in doing so, they make the task of educating for upward mobility more difficult.

## Conclusion

In 1994, Ron Suskind published *A Hope in the Unseen*, the story of a bright, ambitious young man from one of the worst high schools in Washington, D.C. who defies the odds to win acceptance at Brown University. The book became one of the touchstones of the education-reform movement because it appeared to demonstrate that demographics need not be destiny. You can grow up as dirt poor as its protagonist, Cedric Jennings, and still achieve at the highest levels academically—all the way to the Ivy League.

There is a brief but telling moment in the book when a Brown professor asks his class how many of them have ever been to Ellis Island. Cedric has never heard of it. “Ellis Island is not a core concept in Southeast Washington,” Suskind wrote. Rather it is “the sort of white people’s history passed over in favor of Afrocentric studies.”<sup>32</sup>

Because of his lack of background knowledge, Cedric is at a decided disadvantage. He struggles through a lecture in which some students barely take notes and others literally sleep in class. “So many class discussions are full of references he doesn’t understand,” Suskind reports. “Maura knows what to write on her pad and the sleepers will be able to skim the required readings, all of them guided by some mysterious encoded knowledge of history, economics, and education, of culture and social events, that they picked up in school or at home or God knows where.”<sup>33</sup>

The author does not dwell on the anecdote, but it is a critical insight. Jennings is a smart, driven young man who wants badly to succeed. He may be the grittiest in class and have first-rate work habits. But he has to work much harder, and his simple lack of background knowledge nearly derails his chance of succeeding in college. In the end, he succeeds not because of his education, but in spite of it. His journey from poor urban schools, through the Ivy League, and onward to a life of economic mobility is made far more difficult than it needed to be. This remains the case in too many schools that serve almost exclusively low-income children.

It cuts against the received wisdom of pedagogical fashion and political tradition, but regardless of where one attends school—for reasons of language development, skills acquisition, and civic engagement—there should be far more similarities than differences in K–8 education in the United States. The promise of preparing children for academic achievement and upward mobility depends upon a base level of language proficiency. Elementary and middle school education should prepare students for independent exploration. It should not *be* independent exploration. Insisting on hyper-local choice and encouraging wild experimentation in content is like promoting the use of different

alphabets. Foundational knowledge across the curriculum not only sets the stage for further independent exploration, it provides the basis for communication, collaboration and cooperation between and among disparate people.

In short, language cares little about education trends toward child-centered schools and culturally relevant pedagogy. Language cares even less about local control of curriculum. There is a language of upward mobility in America. It has an expansive and nuanced vocabulary that it employs to nimbly navigate the world of organizations, institutions, and opportunities.

The most influential figure in the history of American education was, without question, the philosopher John Dewey. “What the best and wisest parent wants for his child,” he famously observed, “that must we want for all the children of the community. Anything less is unlovely, and left unchecked, destroys our democracy.”<sup>34</sup>

Dewey was wrong. We should not want what the best and wisest parent wants for his child. We should want what that parent gives to his child without even realizing it: a childhood rich in both words and knowledge. Anything else is inequitable and destroys any chance of upward mobility. At the very least, Dewey may have simply assumed that a sound basic education would endow every child with the knowledge and language that would propel him through a successful education and a lifetime of productive citizenship. We can no longer afford to take this for granted.

It is not an overstatement to suggest that without a common body of knowledge and its associated gains in vocabulary and language proficiency as a first purpose of American education, the achievement gap will remain a permanent fixture of American society, and that the challenge of upward mobility, always difficult, will be insurmountable.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dembart, Lee, “Carter Takes ‘Sobering’ Trip to South Bronx,” *New York Times*, October 6, 1997, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9C07E3D9153DE034BC4E53DFB667838C669EDE>

<sup>2</sup> New York City Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood Education, “Ready to Launch: Progress Report on Program and Space Application,” NYC DOE Press Release, February 2014, [http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/home/downloads/pdf/press-releases/2014/ready\\_to\\_launch\\_progress\\_report.pdf](http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/home/downloads/pdf/press-releases/2014/ready_to_launch_progress_report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> “De Blasio Calls Universal Pre-K Deal ‘Historic,’ Incredible,” CBS New York, March 31, 2014, <http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2014/03/31/de-blasio-calls-universal-pre-k-deal-historic-incredible/>

<sup>4</sup> NYC Department of Education, “New New York State Common Core English Language Arts (ELA) & Mathematics Tests Grades 3-8 New York City Results,” (2014). <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/TestResults/ELAandMathTestResults>

<sup>5</sup> Families for Excellent Schools. “The Forgotten Fourth,” [http://39sf0512acpc3iz0941zln5.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TheForgottenFourth\\_V4.pdf](http://39sf0512acpc3iz0941zln5.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TheForgottenFourth_V4.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Bellafante, Ginia, “Before a Test, a Poverty of Words,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/nyregion/for-poor-schoolchildren-a-poverty-of-words.html>

<sup>7</sup> Lareau, Annette, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (California: University of California Press, 2003).

- 
- <sup>8</sup> Brooks, David, "Both Sides of Inequality," *New York Times*, March 9, 2006.  
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A0CEFDB1231F93AA35750C0A9609C8B63&module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C%7B%221%22%3A%22RI%3A8%22%7D>
- <sup>9</sup> Hart, Betty and Risley, Todd R., "The Early Catastrophe," *American Educator*, 2003.  
<https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/TheEarlyCatastrophe.pdf>
- <sup>10</sup> Hirsch, Jr., E.D., "A Wealth of Words," *City Journal*, 2013, [http://www.city-journal.org/2013/23\\_1\\_vocabulary.html](http://www.city-journal.org/2013/23_1_vocabulary.html)
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Pondiscio, Robert, "How to Get a Big Vocabulary," *Core Knowledge*, December 20, 2012,  
<http://blog.coreknowledge.org/2012/12/20/vocabulary-is-the-new-black/>
- <sup>14</sup> Hirsch, E.D. and Pondiscio, Robert, "There's No Such Thing as a Reading Test," *The American Prospect*, June 13, 2010, <http://prospect.org/article/theres-no-such-thing-reading-test>
- <sup>15</sup> Recht, Donna, and Leslie, Lauren, "Effects of Prior Knowledge on Good and Poor Readers' Memory of Text," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 1988.
- <sup>16</sup> Cunningham, Anne E. and Stanovich, Keith E., "What Reading Does for the Mind," *Journal of Direct Instruction* 1, no. 2 (2001).  
[http://www.csun.edu/~krowlands/Content/Academic\\_Resources/Reading/Useful%20Articles/Cunningham-What%20Reading%20Does%20for%20the%20Mind.pdf](http://www.csun.edu/~krowlands/Content/Academic_Resources/Reading/Useful%20Articles/Cunningham-What%20Reading%20Does%20for%20the%20Mind.pdf)
- <sup>17</sup> Hirsch, Jr., E.D., "Reading Comprehension Requires Knowledge—of Words and the World," *American Educator*, 2003, [https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/AE\\_SPRNG.pdf](https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/AE_SPRNG.pdf)
- <sup>18</sup> Pondiscio, Robert, "Nobody loves standards (and that's O.K.)," *Common Core Watch* (blog), June 13, 2012,  
<http://edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-daily/common-core-watch/2012/nobody-loves-standards-and-thats-ok.html>
- <sup>19</sup> NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, "The Relation of Global First-Grade Classroom Environment to Structural Classroom Features and Teacher and Student Behaviors," *The Elementary School Journal* 102, no. 5 (2002).
- <sup>20</sup> NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, "A Day in Third Grade: A Large-Scale Study of Classroom Quality and Teacher and Student Behavior," *The Elementary School Journal* 105, no. 3 (2005).  
<http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ696848>
- <sup>21</sup> Pondiscio, Robert and Mahnken, Kevin, "Leveled reading: The making of a literacy myth," *Common Core Watch* (blog), September 24, 2014, <http://edexcellence.net/articles/leveled-reading-the-making-of-a-literacy-myth>
- <sup>22</sup> Common Core State Standards Initiative, "College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading." <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/R/>
- <sup>23</sup> Common Core State Standards Initiative, "Standard 10: Range, Quality, and Complexity." <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/standard-10-range-quality-complexity/staying-on-topic-within-a-grade-across-grades/>
- <sup>24</sup> Willingham, Daniel, "Willingham: Reading Is Not a Skill—And Why This Is a Problem for the Draft National Standards," *The Answer Sheet* (blog), *The Washington Post*, September 28, 2009,  
<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/daniel-willingham/willingham-reading-is-not-a-sk.html>
- <sup>25</sup> Hirsch, Jr., E.D., "Sixty Years without a Curriculum" in *The Making of Americans: Democracy and our Schools* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).
- <sup>26</sup> Burris, Carol Corbett, "Is 'filling the pail' any way to train teachers?," *The Answer Sheet* (blog), *The Washington Post*, July 5, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/is-filling-the-pail-any-way-to-train-teachers/2012/07/04/gJQADViVOW\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/is-filling-the-pail-any-way-to-train-teachers/2012/07/04/gJQADViVOW_blog.html)
- <sup>27</sup> Ravitch, Diane, "In need of a renaissance: real reform will renew, not abandon, our neighborhood schools," *American Educator* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2010).
- <sup>28</sup> Ravitch, Diane, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011).
- <sup>29</sup> Delpit, Lisa, "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 3 (Fall 1988).
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.

---

<sup>32</sup> Suskind, Ron, *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Dewey, John, *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1907).