
Democracy & Education

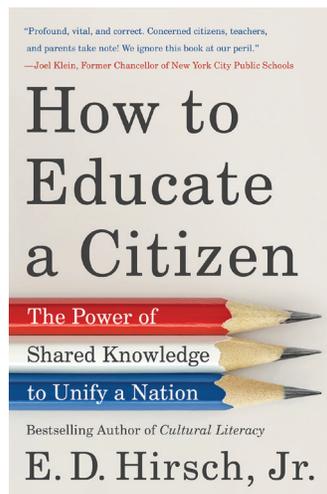
Prioritizing Patriotism.

A Book Review of *How to Educate a Citizen:
The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation*

Heather E. Gerker (University of Cincinnati)

E. D. HIRSCH, JR., IS commonly known as the founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation. His most recent book, *How to Educate a Citizen: The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation* (2020), is an ode to the work of the foundation's mission, "to advance excellence and equity in education for all children" (Core Knowledge Foundation, 2021). Hirsch firmly believes in knowledge-based schools, focusing on shared knowledge, such as the 5,000 subjects and concepts that he suggests every student should learn in K–6 (Hirsch et al., 1988). While the title, *How to Educate a Citizen*, might encourage the reader to assume the book includes new information on shared knowledge, it primarily paints a negative picture of child-centered education. Hirsch's central argument in the book is that child-centered education is causing American public schools to decline, and "shared knowledge is the only foundation for competence, for equality of opportunity and the renewal of the American dream" (Hirsch, 2020, p. 187).

How to Educate a Citizen offers readers a look at the historical context of American public schooling while perpetuating an enduring argument over the best approaches to curriculum. It is a call to parents, teachers, and educational leaders to return to the roots of America's public education system, "to not just assimilate the many immigrants that pour into the nation but also to assimilate native-born Americans who came from different regions and social strata into the common language and the common American idea" (Hirsch, 2020, p. 149). His firm belief in nationalist patriotic education stands against those who call for deep pluralism in



education. Hirsch invites readers to consider how the content learned in K–6 could bind American citizens together, improve test scores, and mend declining patriotism. To get there, he offers a shared-knowledge approach—an approach that goes against skills-based education, child-centered learning, and world citizenship.

At 92 years old, Hirsch has likely written his farewell book—repeating many of his previous book's ideas with a few updated (but less-well-argued) statistics. At the same time, it is an invitation to consider how schools might educate students to behave responsibly in our democracy. As Hirsch (2020) claims, "schooling in a democracy is not just schooling. It's also citizen making" (p. 9). However, Hirsch is referring to educating citizens of America, rather than educating world citizens, as many are calling for in the American education system.

HEATHER GERKER is a second-year education policy Ph.D. student at the University of Cincinnati. She received a bachelor's degree in Electronic Media from the University of Cincinnati and a master's degree in early childhood education from Endicott College. She has worked in education for over 15 years. Her research interests include policy influences on progressive pedagogies in public schools, teachers as advocates for policy change, and the role of collective impact in shifting education policy.

It is important that I disclose my passion and commitment to child-centered learning. As a Montessori educator who spent ten years in the classroom and the past several years working in Montessori teacher education, I find it challenging to disconnect my experience from what Hirsch (2020) shares in this text regarding child-centered learning. There is an opportunity to present shared-knowledge schools and child-centered education not as either/or but as both/and. I believe Hirsch misses this opportunity in *How to Educate a Citizen*. While Montessori is often viewed as a constructivist method of education, Maria Montessori emphasized sequence in learning while following the child's lead. Further, Hirsch's either/or thinking throughout the book demonstrates his belief that child-centered and shared knowledge education are on opposite ends of a spectrum.

The book is organized into three parts, with the first part devoted to blaming child-centered education for the decline in public schooling. Hirsch (2020) sets up a false dichotomy, pitting child-centered education and shared-knowledge schools against each other. In chapter one, he builds readers' trust in his experience and lifelong work. Hirsch refers to himself as a "rather polite scholar" (p. 4) who has spent several decades explaining how American public schools are failing. He responds to critics of his previous book, *Cultural Literacy*, explicitly addressing how his intentions were misunderstood. Hirsch claims the focus of his work is, in fact, on social justice and equality—when *all* students learn from a common curriculum, *all* students are then provided with equal opportunity.

Chapters two and three juxtapose Hirsch's (2020) version of the child-centered classroom and the "dazzling success of shared-knowledge schools" (p. 57). The language he chose to use in the text further adds to the false dichotomy he creates. For example, he uses adjectives such as "dazzling" and "tradition" when discussing shared knowledge schools while using words such as "half-baked" and "inadequate" to discuss child-centered education. Through interviews with educators who have spent time teaching in both types of schools and through anecdotal stories, Hirsch further makes his case for shared-knowledge schools. The broad claims that he often makes are not supported with strong evidence, including in chapter five when he discredits Piaget and tells teachers and parents to "be wary of [the phrase] 'developmentally appropriate practice'" (p. 105).

Chapter four is dedicated to blaming teacher education institutes for declining scores in American public schools. Yet chapter five begins by stating it is not the fault of teachers but of child-centered ideas in education. This is the beginning of part two of the text, where Hirsch (2020) claims "science debunks child-centered education" (p. 101). Chapter six takes the reader around the world to learn about countries such as Germany, Sweden, and France and their implementation of either child-centered or

shared-knowledge education systems. Again, Hirsch seems to pick and choose what he shares, including graphs that do not cite the data source. The reader is left to wonder, where is the empirical evidence to his "evidence-based" teaching ideas?

The book's final section recommends next steps to "transform future citizens into loyal Americans" (Hirsch, 2020, p. 147). In this context, Hirsch views the school building where patriotism should be taught and prioritized. He feels that "patriotism is the universal civil religion that our schools need to support on moral and pragmatic grounds as the glue that holds us together" (Hirsch, 2020, p. 183). This is the message Hirsch has been promoting for decades. He believes the foundation of patriotism is in a shared knowledge base, which all citizens must have to participate together in a community or engage in communication. Throughout the final section of the book, Hirsch continues to assert the importance of a "speech community" and states, "we can create specific standards, so each classroom becomes a speech community whose members all understand what is being said, because they all possess the needed relevant background knowledge" (p. 160).

While Hirsch (2020) has strong recommendations for what each student should learn in school, he doesn't seem to have strong feelings about how content is taught. Further, the content he proposes has evolved to be more multicultural than his past suggestions. However, Hirsch's writing is confusing as it would seem he is staunchly opposed to anything but rote memorization and assembly-line teaching. With less stereotypical thinking and writing, readers might be more inclined to consider Hirsch's ideas more critically. His previous books include similar, if not the same, semi-reasoned arguments and broad claims positioned in anecdotal examples of teachers and schools following his train of thought.

Including *How to Educate a Citizen* as required reading in teacher education programs can help students think more critically about what content is taught and why. It could be a valuable addition when paired with books that are counter-narrative to the ideas Hirsch presents. The text could provide an opportunity for professors to guide preservice teachers through critical reading of Hirsch's ideas and understand them in the context of long-standing battles in curriculum and pedagogy.

References

- Core Knowledge Foundation. (2021). *Our mission: Excellence and equity in education*. <https://www.coreknowledge.org/about-us/our-mission/>.
- Hirsch, E. D. (2020). *How to educate a citizen: The power of shared knowledge to unify a nation*. HarperCollins.
- Hirsch, E. D. Jr., Kett, J. F., & Trefil, J. S. (1988). *Cultural literacy: What every American needs to know*. Vintage.