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Despite the claims of E.D. Hirsch, Jr. that “premature polarization” of their ideas is unnecessary and harmful to progress, he and Howard Gardner have found themselves on opposite sides of the curriculum fence. Hirsch is a strong advocate for a national “Core Knowledge” curriculum, particularly in the early grades. The elementary years are especially crucial in the acquisition of this knowledge because “the buildup of knowledge and vocabulary is a gradual, multiyear process that occurs at an almost imperceptible rate” (Hirsch, 2008); it is not something that can be crammed into just a few years of high school. Hirsch (2001) stated that students “cannot gain deep understanding without having broad knowledge of a lot of facts”, and cited research that indicates that students’ ability to learn is closely related to their prior knowledge. Speaking specifically to reading comprehension, Hirsch stated that “knowing something of the topic you’re reading about is the most important variable in comprehension” (2008). A Core Knowledge curriculum is also a matter of social justice and a way to close the achievement gap. Hirsch stated, “...the four-year-old children of rich, highly educated parents might be gaining academic knowledge at home that is unfairly being withheld at school (albeit with noble intentions) from the children of the poor” (2009). Ensuring all students have an equal exposure to important knowledge and vocabulary, then, is a way to put everyone on a level playing field. It is also a way to provide consistency in education since students in America move schools more frequently than those in other nations (Hirsch, 2009).

Howard Gardner (2000) preaches the need for a curriculum motivated by existential questions, which is “firmly centered on understanding” (pp. 118-119). Unlike Hirsch, he believes the way to gain deep understanding is to study a few “substantial topics” within the disciplines of science/math, the arts, and history in great depth so that students can “draw on these modes of thinking in coming to understand their world” (p. 118). Children often develop “misconceptions” that must be corrected in order to obtain true understanding of a topic, and this can only be accomplished with comprehensive study of the topic. Gardner also believes that studying many topics to a lesser degree will result in a lack of retention due to their lack of cohesion (p.118). Gardner’s goal is that the learner would be able to actually think like a scientist, historian or artist, not merely know about science, history, and art. He argues that this will more likely happen “if they probe deeply into an area...than if they jet by a hundred different examples...” (p.125). He argues that the “facts, definitions, lists, and details” one might learn through a Core Knowledge curriculum will be “at one’s fingertips” in the future, therefore rendering their memorization pointless (p. 126). In contrast, Gardner’s study of the aforementioned disciplines can take us to a much higher level of discovery, understanding, and synthesis through the exploration of “key human achievements captured in the venerable phrase ‘the true, the beautiful, and the good’” (p. 19).