

The Core Knowledge Foundation & the *Core Knowledge Sequence* Origins

Dr. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. founded the Core Knowledge Foundation over 30 years ago. While conducting research at a pair of Virginia colleges, he discovered:

- Community college students in Richmond, Virginia tested just as well as students at the prestigious University of Virginia – as long as the passages they were asked to read dealt with familiar topics.
- But when the community college students encountered passages that required prior knowledge they did not have, they faltered. For example, they had difficulty understanding a passage on Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee because many of them were unfamiliar with the details and context of the Civil War.
- These students did not have the background they needed to make sense of the unspoken knowledge many of the texts assumed. Since then, Dr. Hirsch has argued for without background knowledge of history, literature, art, music, science and math, students will read – but without real comprehension.
- Reading is more than an ability to decode, or "sound out," words, but one that also requires adequate background knowledge, or "cultural literacy."

In 1986, Dr. Hirsch founded the Core Knowledge Foundation, based on these ideas. A year later in 1987, he published *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, the first of many books on this topic. In the book, he argued that schools should teach a shared curriculum that would allow ALL children to understand the assumed knowledge writers and speakers take for granted. Educators wanted to develop curriculum that reflected this knowledge-building approach. In the early 1990s, a committee was formed to draft an instructional framework, which is now known as the CK Sequence. This involved a lengthy and rigorous process of research and consensus-building with multiple stakeholders groups taking several things into consideration:

- First, an INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE. The developers considered the knowledge and skills specified in the successful educational systems taught in other countries, including France, Japan, Sweden, and West Germany.
- Second, they examined NATIONAL REPORTS issued by state departments of education and by professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.
- Third, they considered STATE AND DISTRICT GUIDELINES, and today still allow for adjustments that align with these requirements.
- Additionally, the developers included both SUBJECT MATTER and MULTICULTURAL ADVISORS to contribute to the development and review process. In fact, an advisory board on multiculturalism was formed to propose a body of knowledge consisting of

diverse cultural traditions that American children should all share as part of their school experience. That information was sent to three concepts that children should have. About 150 teachers, college professors, scientists, and administrators were involved in this step.

- In the final stage of development, another 100 educators and specialists participated in a CONSENSUS BUILDING conference in which they hammered out a working agreement on a proposed core of knowledge. The participants in the conference included elementary school teachers, curriculum specialists, scientists, science writers, officers of national organizations, experts from a variety of ethnic groups, district superintendents, and school principals from across the country. A total of 24 working groups decided on the first draft of the *Sequence*.
- The resulting provisional sequence was FIELD TESTED and further fine-tuned during a year of implementation at a pioneering school, Three Oaks Elementary in Lee County, Florida.

Overtime, the *Sequence* has been updated (e.g. 1995, 1999, 2010, and an update is underway in 2020). For example, after astronomers voted to demote Pluto to dwarf planet status in 2006, the *Sequence* was revised to reflect this change. Overall, since it was first published, there has been more stability than change in the *Sequence*.

The intent of the *Sequence* was to spell out the shared knowledge literate students should have, and thereby provide equitable access for all students to the unspoken knowledge assumed by most writers. In essence, it is our estimation of what good readers know. There is also an intentional, coherent design to the *Sequence*. This provides explicit identification of what children should learn at each grade level.

Compared to most curriculum standards, the Core Knowledge Sequence embodies three essential but often overlooked qualities. The Sequence is:

Content Specific

A typical state or district curriculum standard might say, “Students will demonstrate knowledge of people, events, ideas, and movements that contributed to the development of the United States.” But which people and events? Which ideas and movements? Another standard says, “Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.” But what text in particular?

The Core Knowledge Sequence is distinguished by its specificity. By clearly specifying important knowledge in language arts, history, geography, math, science, and the fine arts, the Sequence presents a practical answer to the question, “What do our children need to know?”

The Sequence is not a list of facts, events, and dates to be memorized. It is a guide to content from grade to grade, designed to encourage steady academic growth and progress as children build knowledge and develop skills year after year.

Cumulative

The Core Knowledge Sequence provides a clear outline of content to be learned from preschool through grade eight. Knowledge, language, and skills build cumulatively from grade to grade. This cumulative building of knowledge helps ensure that children enter each new grade ready to learn.

Teachers in Core Knowledge schools can confidently predict the knowledge and skills children have been taught in prior grades, build on that learning, and prepare them for what comes next. That's because the Core Knowledge Sequence is built on the principle, firmly established by cognitive scientists, that we learn new knowledge by building on what we already know.

Individual students will differ in their degree of mastery, and mobility will require focused help for students who lack the expected prior knowledge. But the cumulative quality of the Core Knowledge Sequence greatly increases the likelihood that as children proceed from one grade to the next, they will emerge well prepared with a shared body of important knowledge and skills.

Coherent

In the United States, especially in language arts instruction, curriculum tends to be fragmentary and disconnected. Such incoherence can hinder learning and vocabulary acquisition. It also leads to the repetitions and gaps that too many children experience in their early education.

In contrast, the Core Knowledge Sequence provides a coherent approach to building knowledge within a grade level and across grade levels. In schools following the Sequence, there are no repeated units in multiple grades on, say, the rain forest or pioneer days, with little or no attention to the Bill of Rights, world geography, or exposure to other cultures.

The Sequence is organized to support coherent instruction that allows students to build and deepen their knowledge grade by grade, and to make cross-curricular connections across subjects.

For example, in a school following the Core Knowledge Sequence, students in fifth grade study the Renaissance. The word "renaissance" means "rebirth"—specifically, in Europe in the 1500s, a rebirth of interest in ancient Greece and Rome. Teachers in a Core Knowledge school can confidently build on students' prior learning about ancient Greece and Rome (grades 2 and 3) and the Middle Ages (grade 4). They can connect their historical studies to topics in Visual Arts (in which the Sequence specifies masterworks by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and others) and in Language Arts (in which the Sequence specifies episodes from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*).