

Progressive Versus Conservative Views in Education:

E. D. Hirsch and His Critics

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The chart below sets E. D. Hirsch's case for a shared core curriculum against the progressive tradition, issue by issue. The left column names the issue, the center column states Hirsch's position, and the right column presents the counterargument from a specific opposing theorist rather than from progressive thought in general.

Table 1

Conservative and Progressive Positions on Eight Issues in Education

Issue	E. D. Hirsch's View (Conservative)	Argument From Opposing Theorists (Progressive)
Core Knowledge and Curriculum Content	Hirsch contends that because comprehension relies on prior information most students would not otherwise possess, schools should explicitly teach a cohesive body of knowledge to every student. (Hirsch, 1987)	John Dewey: Progressive education places a strong emphasis on inquiry and experiential learning. Rather than being predetermined as a list of facts, the curriculum should develop from students' experiences and interests, with more emphasis on purposeful social learning than on strict subject lists. (Dewey, 1938)
Reading and Background Knowledge	According to Hirsch, students' ability to make sense of texts depends largely on underlying knowledge that teachers frequently assume they already possess. (Hirsch, 1987)	Lev Vygotsky: Social contact and scaffolding mediate between learning and comprehension. Learners develop meaning through guided language use and interaction with more competent others rather than through prior factual knowledge alone. (Vygotsky, 1978)
Standardized Testing and Assessment	According to Hirsch, knowledge-based tests are required to confirm that students have mastered fundamental concepts, which promotes equity by locating and filling gaps. (Hirsch, 2016)	John Dewey: Assessment should focus on processes and understanding rather than content recall alone. Performance should show how students think and solve problems, not only what they have memorized. (Dewey, 1938)
Purpose of Schooling	According to Hirsch, education should provide students with common cultural and civic knowledge so they can fully participate in society, and this shared	John Dewey: The primary purpose of education is to prepare learners for active democratic participation through reflective thought, problem-solving, and social

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	foundation promotes economic mobility and democratic engagement. (Hirsch, 1987)	interaction. Education is more than knowledge transmission; it is a process of growth. (Dewey, 1916)
Curriculum Breadth Versus Depth	Hirsch recommends thorough, sequential coverage of fundamental knowledge so that children build a broad foundation of core content across the elementary and middle grades. (Hirsch, 1996)	John Dewey: Rather than broad but superficial coverage, progressive theory stresses depth, meaningful inquiry, and contextual learning adapted to students' interests and real-world problems. (Dewey, 1938)
Teaching Methods	Hirsch favors explicit, teacher-led instruction in core content, in which teachers are responsible for methodically building knowledge rather than relying on discovery alone. (Hirsch, 1996)	Jean Piaget: In cognitive constructivism, children actively create knowledge by interacting with their surroundings. Teachers support understanding by facilitating rather than transmitting facts. (Piaget, 1952)
Individualization Versus Shared Knowledge	While acknowledging individual variation, Hirsch contends that mutual understanding and full participation in society depend on shared knowledge, which prevents the learning gaps that disadvantage some students. (Hirsch, 2016)	Lev Vygotsky: Learning should be scaffolded according to each student's zone of proximal development, with a strong emphasis on guided interaction and tailored support within social settings. (Vygotsky, 1978)
Equity and Access	Hirsch contends that equity is promoted by a shared, content-rich curriculum, particularly for disadvantaged students who may not acquire background knowledge outside school. (Hirsch, 2016)	Paulo Freire: Equity arises from enabling students to question and co-create knowledge rather than from prescribing what everyone should know. Education should equip students to critically examine and transform their world. (Freire, 1970)

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