

*Original Paper*

## An Interview with Lisa Hansel: Core Knowledge versus Common Core Curriculum

Michael F. Shaughnessy<sup>1\*</sup> & Bill Gaedke<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eastern New Mexico University, Portales, New Mexico

\* Michael F. Shaughnessy, E-mail: Michael.Shaughnessy@enmu.edu

Profile: Lisa Hansel is the director of communications for the Core Knowledge Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to the idea that every child should learn a core of content that spans language arts and literature, history and geography, mathematics, science, music, and the visual arts. Prior to joining the Foundation in 2013, she was the editor of *American Educator*, the quarterly journal of educational research and ideas published by the American Federation of Teachers. In that role, she often published articles jointly with E. D. Hirsch Jr., and Daniel T. Willingham that explained why reading comprehension, critical thinking, and problem solving depend on relevant prior knowledge—and why, as a result, all students need a rigorous, coherent, grade-by-grade curriculum that builds broad knowledge. Lisa has a B. S. in Psychology from Washington and Lee University and an Ed. D. in Education Policy from George Washington University, where she was also an adjunct Professor and the writer and editor for the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform. To learn more about Core Knowledge, please see [www.coreknowledge.org](http://www.coreknowledge.org) and [blog.coreknowledge.org](http://blog.coreknowledge.org). She expressed her views regarding the Core Knowledge and Common Core Curriculum:

Question 1: Lisa, at the current time, there is much debate about this Common Core Curriculum. Have you had time to review it and what do you think?

Answer: I appreciate you opening with the Common Core because I think that these standards have started an important national discussion. If you focus on what teachers are saying, you'll hear a lot of support for the Common Core—and a lot of concerns about implementation. These standards are rigorous; if we really expect teachers and students to meet them, we should focus a good bit more on instructional supports and, where needed, added learning time. For at least a few years, we should be assessing to gather information and inform implementation, but I don't think we should be holding people accountable for meeting these standards before all the necessary resources—for teachers and students—are in place.

Part of the problem with parents, policymakers, and the general public understanding that the real concerns are with implementation—not the standards—is all the jargon in education. People accidentally talk past each other. For example, your question has wording I hear a lot, “Common Core curriculum,” but standards and curriculum are very different things. Standards set goals for what students should be able to do. The curriculum specifies the knowledge and skills students should acquire on the path to meeting the standards. So, for instance, one of the third-grade English language arts (ELA) standards states, “Compare and contrast the most important points and key details presented in two texts on the same topic.” For this standard, the curriculum would at least specify the texts to be compared; ideally, it would specify a series of texts to compare at different points in the year (to systematically build knowledge and skills that will improve students’ comparisons). A teacher’s lesson plans would go further, including detailed learning objectives, a plan for how students will make comparisons, and some sort of criteria (e.g., a rubric) for both guiding and assessing the work.

These distinctions are important because most of the critiques are not really about the standards. The vast majority of the Common Core complaints are about curricula, textbooks, assignments, and assessments that claim to be aligned to the standards. These are indicators that early implementation is not going well, but that does not mean we should blame or give up on the standards. A more rational reaction would be to expect problems initially, and to put our collective energies into developing the best possible instructional resources.

As to the quality of the Common Core, I’ll only comment on the English language arts and literacy standards. Core Knowledge does offer materials that will help schools meet or exceed the Common Core mathematics standards, but my focus and Core Knowledge’s focus is on the broad knowledge everyone needs for language comprehension and critical thinking. I support the Common Core ELA and literacy standards because—like Core Knowledge—they are based on decades of research on how children become strong readers and thinkers. To boil it down, the ELA and literacy standards’ greatest strengths are their emphasis on mastering fluent and automatic decoding in the early grades, and on building academic knowledge and vocabulary throughout K-12.

Question 2: Core Knowledge however, has been around, has been successfully implemented with much success. What’s your opinion?

Answer: Core Knowledge has been around for almost 30 years, but the most important aspects of the idea are much older. The notion that communicating clearly and thinking analytically require broad, shared knowledge is at the heart of a liberal arts education. And the liberal arts tradition stretches back to the Greeks and Romans who considered what one needs to live in freedom.

In publishing *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* and establishing the Core Knowledge Foundation, E. D. Hirsch showed how modern cognitive science supports the ancient liberal arts tradition. As researchers have unlocked how our minds work, they’ve found that language comprehension, critical thinking, and problem solving depend on having relevant knowledge stored in

long-term memory. The more relevant knowledge you have, the better your comprehension and thinking will be.

The brilliance of the liberal arts approach is that, by intentionally teaching broad knowledge, it maximizes the odds that you'll have some relevant knowledge no matter what the topic. Broad knowledge also enables creative analogies, which often lead to insights. At its heart, Core Knowledge is providing a liberal arts education in preschool through eighth grade.

Question 3: Comparing and contrasting Core Knowledge to Common Core, what do you see as the differences and similarities, if any?

Answer: Core Knowledge and the Common Core are different mainly in that the former provides the specific knowledge and skills while the latter provides the goals. Since Core Knowledge and the Common Core ELA standards rest on the same body of research, they are very compatible.

Almost any curriculum could claim to be aligned with the standards because the goals the standards set are content free (such as "Build on others' talk in conversations by linking their comments to the remarks of others" and "Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described"). The important way in which Core Knowledge and the Common Core are alike is in their calls for systematically building background knowledge. For example, the following "Note on range and content of student reading" is one of several explanations embedded in the standards that emphasize broad knowledge:

To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts. Through extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements. 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.

For nearly three decades, Core Knowledge has been helping schools develop curricula that coherently and cumulatively build knowledge and vocabulary from preschool through eighth grade.

Question 4: Math and science are obviously different than language arts and social studies. What should a good curriculum encompass?

Answer: In school academic subjects are distinct, but that's not necessarily so in life. Take carbon emissions or healthcare policies—these have economic, scientific, cultural, and political aspects. Only with broad knowledge can students grasp and analyze the multifaceted issues we face every day. To be good—to be useful—a curriculum must encompass literature, history, geography, science, mathematics, and the arts. And it should address issues through the lenses of multiple disciplines.

Because there is so much knowledge to impart, a good curriculum must be efficient. Core Knowledge accomplishes that through domain-based studies. Vocabulary acquisition is up to four times faster when students are immersed in a topic for two to three weeks (or more), so Core Knowledge strongly encourages schools to create units that are interdisciplinary yet still tightly focused on a topic.

In the early grades, a good curriculum capitalizes on children's intense curiosity about the world by introducing a great variety of topics orally (through read-alouds, discussions of images, projects, field trips, etc.). This begins to build children's knowledge and vocabulary, which will be essential for reading comprehension, which will then build more knowledge, which will increase analytical ability and further build knowledge, etc. At the same time, the early grades must also devote a good bit of time to basic reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Fluency and automaticity are essential so that students' minds are free to focus on content, not mechanics. When the early grades combine fluency in basic skills with an introduction to the world, students have a strong foundation for much richer academic experiences in later grades.

Lastly, a good curriculum needs to be flexible. Time should be preserved to pursue children's interests and to allow older students to choose topics they will research to build expertise.

Question 5: Most parents would think that their son or daughter, leaving high school would have a certain amount of general knowledge, or information. Does Common Core provide that knowledge?

Answer: Common Core does not specify the knowledge, but it sets forth goals that can't be met without building knowledge. Policymakers tend to focus on college and career, but I think parents have a more balanced perspective. They are also concerned about their children becoming responsible citizens and good neighbors. Many parents, regardless of their own formal education, seem to understand the liberal arts idea. Broad knowledge is really the only thing that prepares you for life.

Question 6: Does Core Knowledge also provide the structure to enable teachers to ask provocative, higher order thinking questions? Or critical thinking questions?

Answer: Absolutely. The *Core Knowledge Sequence* is an outline of knowledge and skills that schools use to write their own curriculum. In the *Teacher Handbooks* and *professional development* we offer, the Core Knowledge Foundation shows how to immerse students in domains of study, engage them in critical thinking (and writing), and ensure that instruction is meaningful.

To see how we bring higher-order thinking to the early grades, check out *Core Knowledge Language Arts* (which can be downloaded for free). This preschool through third-grade program, soon to be expanded to fifth grade, includes literary, historical, and scientific content taught through interactive read-alouds. Children don't just listen; they discuss text-based questions that range from literal to inferential to evaluative.

Question 7: What are the best ways to evaluate any curriculum?

Answer: Evaluating a curriculum is labor intensive and best done by multiple stakeholders with varying perspectives. I hope they'd all see these three questions as critical: Is the content accurate? Is the curriculum in keeping with well-established findings from cognitive science? Will students learn indispensable values of liberty, equality, and diversity? Any curriculum that accomplishes all three of these will at least be of decent quality.

Next, I'd examine how carefully planned the knowledge and skills are; do they build on each other in a logical manner? Coherent, cumulative curricula will be efficient. In the long run, that means students will develop the broad knowledge they need and there will still be time for in-depth projects. If more than one curriculum is still on the table after passing through those lenses, I'd select the one that best meets my students' needs.

Question 8: How does a good school evaluate the Core Knowledge framework or curriculum?

Answer: Core Knowledge's materials are accurate, in keeping with mainstream cognitive science, and designed with our nation's values in mind. They are also extremely thoughtfully organized—the original *Sequence* was hashed out by over 200 teachers, and has been revised with feedback from hundreds more teachers.

So, the key question for a school to ask is, does it meet students' needs? Core Knowledge is especially important for students who have few books at home and, more generally, who are dependent on school to develop their academic knowledge and vocabulary. All children learn at home, but some have more academically relevant experiences, such as frequent trips to the library and museums or discussions about current events at dinner. If we want the door to college to be open (without remediation) to all students, then we need to make sure that all students build a strong academic foundation. (I'm not saying that all students must go to college; but all K-12 school systems must provide an education that makes college a genuine option.) Estimates vary, but teenagers who are ready for college have vocabularies somewhere around 80,000 to 100,000 words. For those children who are dependent on their schools for exposure to most of those words, their curriculum must be highly efficient in conveying essential academic knowledge. Most of all, it must start familiarizing children with a wide range of academic topics in the early grades.

Question 9: How dependent is any curriculum on the reading skills of the students enrolled in that school?

Answer: While instruction has to meet students where they are, virtually all students can and should be working with grade-level content. For students who are behind in reading, a large part of the problem is likely to be a lack of vocabulary and knowledge (in addition to foundational skills). Grade-level academic content can be delivered orally, with videos, and through projects to ensure progress in building vocabulary and broad knowledge, even as skill development proceeds intensively during other

parts of the day. Ideally, intensive remediation would happen outside of the regular school day so that students who are behind don't miss out on any part of the normal school day. The fact is, kids who are behind need more learning time. Evenings, weekends, summer school—whatever it takes to get them up to grade level.

At P. S. 124 in Queens, NY, for example, the student population is both high need and highly mobile. Instead of watering down its Core Knowledge-based curriculum, this school squeezes dollars from every corner so as to be open in the evenings and on weekends. That's what equal opportunity looks like: When students are behind, learning must accelerate.

But schools should not be expected to deliver such intensive remediation alone. Policymakers need to provide funding, and community groups should coordinate with schools to maximize their impact.

Question 10: Should teachers' evaluations be based on how well their students do on standardized tests?

Answer: Researchers can argue all they want about the trust worthiness of value-added models for evaluating teachers based on students' test scores. I would not entertain the idea unless the nature of the tests was radically altered. State tests, both current ones and new ones being developed for Common Core, are not tied to the specific content being studied in the classroom. They are *standards-based* tests—not curriculum-based tests. They assess general knowledge and skills—not the extent to which students have mastered what they have been taught. Such tests can provide an informative snapshot of students' and schools' relative performance (and thus which schools and communities are in need of added supports). They can't, however, indicate how any one student acquired her knowledge and skills (could be the teacher, the tutor that mom hired in October, the soccer coach who demands higher grades, the new librarian in town, finally being given eyeglasses, etc.). Therefore, they can't offer any precise indication of either teacher quality or how the student could improve.

If a state wants to give a standards-based test that measures general abilities and provides nothing more than a snapshot and a trend line, that's fine—provided the stakes and the prep time are minimized. But if a state wants to use test scores as one of several measures of teacher quality, then it needs to use curriculum-based tests. Testing what was actually taught seems to me to be the only logical way to hold teachers and students accountable (at least with scores). Advanced Placement is one potential model. AP course guides are very detailed, specifying the knowledge and skills students are expected to master; AP tests only cover content in the course guide. If the value-added model adequately controlled for students' initial knowledge and skills, then students' gains might offer a reasonable indicator of the teacher's performance. But I have to emphasize *might*. There will still be concerns regarding sample size, student mobility, school culture, and other factors that are outside the teacher's control. Even with curriculum-based tests, I would only use students' results as one of many indicators of instructional quality.

Question 11: There are surely regional differences in what states want and expect their students to learn—for example, Hawaii and Alaska. Should this be respected?

Answer: There should be time for local and/or regional history, geography, culture, science projects—whatever is locally significant. If we use the K-12 years well, all students across the country will have time to acquire broad knowledge of a great variety of content areas as well as in-depth knowledge of local issues and personal interests. A school in Florida may do an extended unit on wetlands, for example. It may teach the basic information about wetlands that all students should master, and then it may add two weeks to do a science project at a local wetland. Meanwhile, a school in Oklahoma may do a basic unit on wetlands, but extended units on Westward Expansion and the Dust Bowl. Hawaii could take a deeper look at Japanese history while Alaska expands studies of glaciers; both might want students to have expertise on volcanoes. Nonetheless, all students in all states need to have some knowledge of each of these topics.

Question 12: Are expectations as to curricular mastery different in different states? And should they be different?

Answer: I can only answer this anecdotally. I think they are different in different classrooms and different schools. I don't see this as a state issue so much as a societal issue. Some students are expected to master rigorous coursework; others are not. Many are not even given the opportunity to find out what rigorous coursework is. Culturally, from parents to policymakers, I think we need to focus more on getting all students to mastery—and we need to accept that some students will get to mastery faster than others. Then, we need to focus on providing the learning time and supports each child needs to reach mastery. Right now, we use test scores as an indicator of success or failure. That's not very productive. Assessments should show you where you are on the path to mastery and should highlight what you need next.

Ideally, there should be some specific, minimum set of knowledge and skills that students across the country should have to demonstrate to earn a high school diploma. As citizens, the most important issues we face are national if not global in nature. I don't see any reason why there should not be a minimum set of knowledge and skills that all US high school graduates have mastered.

However, students do come to school with different knowledge and skills and they don't all progress at the same rate. I'd love to see the United States do a 180 in terms of time and learning targets. Right now, each state is very specific on how long students must be in school, but no state is really specific on what students must learn. States have tests, but until those tests are directly related to what has been taught inside the classroom, they will be inherently unfair and inadequate. I'd like to see each state be specific as to what students must learn, and be flexible on the time and resources students receive to achieve mastery.

Question 13: What about English Language learners—are they at a disadvantage—in either Core Knowledge or Common Core State Standards?

Answer: English Language Learners certainly face greater challenges simply by the fact that they have to learn conversational and academic English while mastering academic subject matter. That's really hard! I had a small taste of it during a term in Spain my senior year of high school. But I would not say that the challenge is a disadvantage. I would rather see our schools—and society—value our ELLs and support bilingualism and bi-literacy. As for Core Knowledge and the Common Core, they are designed to deliver the knowledge and skills needed to be college, career, and citizenship ready in the US. For ELLs, or for any students who are not on grade level for any reason, we should not lower our expectations for them. We must raise our expectations for how we are going to help them get to grade level.

As Stanford's Claude Goldenberg has explained, instructional practices that are good for all students are especially good for ELs. These students need more time and more supports; they do not need less-rigorous standards or watered-down curriculum.

Question 14: Should a curriculum such as Core Knowledge or Common Core be periodically revised and revisited over time?

Answer: Of course. Everything can be improved—especially with feedback from teachers. Those who have been dedicated to implementation have so much expertise that needs to be captured. This spring I've had the real pleasure of visiting schools in New York City that are using Core Knowledge Language Arts to find out what's going well, what has been challenging, and how the program can be revised and enhanced. I am so grateful to all the teachers and administrators who shared their experiences.

Question 15: What have we neglected to ask?

Answer: One issue I'd like to raise is the great challenge faced by highly mobile students. Some have parents in the military, others are in foster care. Many shuffle around as their families are unable to find stable, safe, affordable housing. Whatever the reason, these children's education is disrupted far more than it has to be. If all schools—or even just all schools with high mobility rates—were willing to agree to certain knowledge and skills to be taught in each grade, then mobile students would not fall so far behind. Teachers could still create their own lesson plans. But José, just starting third grade in his new school, would not hear *Charlotte's Web* read aloud again—something his old school did in second grade. And fifth-grader Chantall would not miss the introduction to fractions because her old school hadn't gotten to it yet, but her new school did it in fourth grade. These things happen to mobile students across every subject—and these content repetitions and gaps have devastating consequences. José gets bored and starts acting out. Chantall assumes she is bad at math and gives up.

Coordinating curriculum would be hard. But it's nowhere near as hard as what José, Chantall, and



millions of other highly mobile students face each day.

Michael F. Shaughnessy is currently Professor of Educational Studies at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, New Mexico. He has been involved in education as a social studies teacher, guidance counselor, school psychologist and trainer of special education personnel.

Bill Gaedke is an Instructor in the School of Education at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, New Mexico. He has been involved in the training of more than 5,000 teachers over the course of his career.