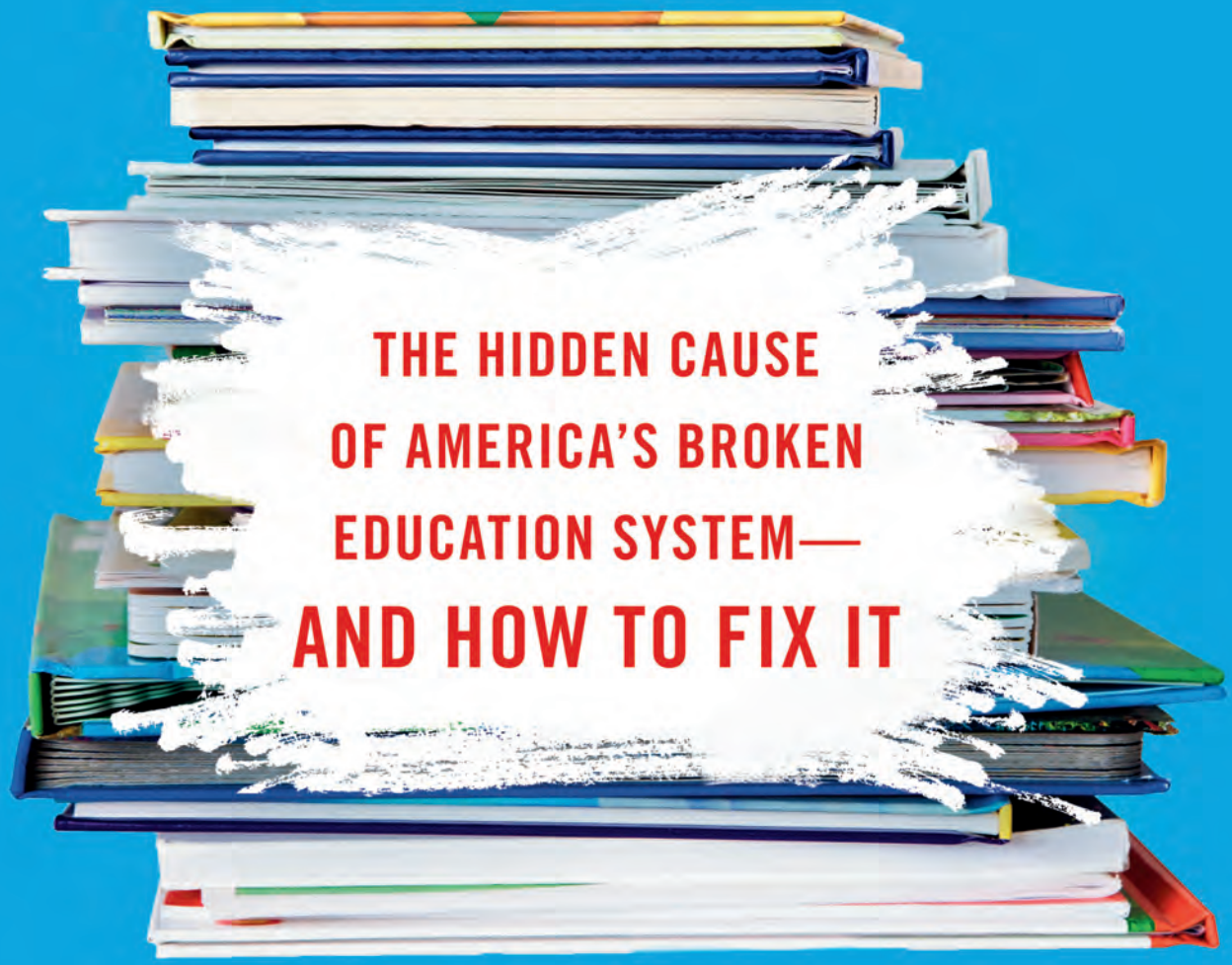
"This critical volume, in which Natalie Wexler deftly lays out the case for knowledge, should begin tipping the scales back toward what best serves students of every age and background."

—DOUG LEMOV, author of *TEACH LIKE A CHAMPION 2.0*

The Knowledge GAP



THE HIDDEN CAUSE OF AMERICA'S BROKEN EDUCATION SYSTEM— AND HOW TO FIX IT

Natalie Wexler

DISCUSSION GUIDE

AVERY

PART ONE:
The Way We Teach Now: All You Need is Skills

COVERING

Chapter 1: The Water They've Been Swimming In

Chapter 2: A Problem Hiding in Plain Sight

1. Why did you find yourself drawn to this book? What did you think the term "knowledge gap" would refer to? As a parent, educator, administrator, and/or community member, what was your starting perspective on the state of education in the United States, and did it differ from the view presented in the book so far?

2. If you're a teacher or a parent, do you see connections between your own experience of the education system and Ms. Arredondo's, Ms. Bauer's, and/or Ms. Williams' classrooms? Have you seen the curriculum narrowing to reading and math, as described in the book? Have you believed that focus was necessary to boost test scores, or have you felt that too much time has been spent on test prep and testing?

3. How did the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation bring to light inequities in the education system? In what ways might it have unintentionally perpetuated or even exacerbated those inequities?

4. "An understanding of civics fundamentally depends on an understanding of history. It's hard to grasp how the system operates if you have no idea where it came from and no context in which to place it." (10) Were you surprised by the kinds of things some students in high-poverty high schools—and even college—don't know about history and geography? Have you seen evidence that Americans lack this kind of knowledge? Do you see connections between the current state of politics and Americans' generally weak grasp of civics?

5. "For the most part . . . parent activism has been focused on getting rid of or reducing testing rather than on what the curriculum should look like if testing disappeared." (18) Did you find this observation to ring true? When it comes to reforming the education system, where do you think parent activism has been focused, and do you feel it's been effective?

6. "[Education] represents our best hope for breaking the cycle of multigenerational poverty. Really it is our only hope." (22) Do you agree? Are there other avenues that you feel are more promising in addressing multigenerational poverty?

7. "At the same time, teaching disconnected comprehension skills boosts neither comprehension nor reading scores. It's just empty calories. In effect kids are clamoring for broccoli and spinach while adults insist on a steady diet of donuts." (29) What does the author mean by this metaphor? Do you feel that it's apt?

8. The author quotes another commentator as saying that people need to have enough facts in their heads to have a "knowledge party." (31) What do think the phrase means, and do you agree that it's important for people to have a critical mass of factual information stored in their long-term memories?

9. "The bottom line is that the test-score gap is, at its heart, a knowledge gap." (31) Does this core observation make sense to you and align with what you've seen in the classroom? How might a lack of knowledge hold students back on standardized tests? How do teachers try to compensate for gaps in their students' background knowledge, and how effective do you think those efforts can be? What are the risks of either overestimating or underestimating what students are capable of understanding?

10. "Children of wealthier and more educated parents may not be gaining much knowledge of the world at school, but they typically acquire more of it *outside* school than their disadvantaged peers." (31) While Ms. Arredondo and Ms. Bauer adopt similar approaches to teaching reading comprehension, do you think the long-term effects will be different because of their students' different experiences outside of school? How does this relate to "the Matthew effect"? (35) How might a knowledge-building curriculum like the one used at Center City help to reverse that effect?

11. "What the vast majority of educators, reformers, commentators, and government officials still haven't realized is that elementary school is where the real problem has been hiding, in plain sight." (36) What does the author mean by this? If this is true, why do you think "the real problem" has been overlooked by so many observers?

12. For decades, education experts have debated whether it's reasonable to expect schools to compensate for societal inequality. (37-39) Why do you think the recent wave of education reformers rejected the argument that the home and neighborhood environments were more important than anything schools could accomplish? Why have some now apparently changed their minds? What light does cognitive science shed on this debate? What does "the example of France" imply about the power of education to reduce inequality, and do you find it convincing?

13. While Ms. Arredondo's students are mostly from low-income native-born families, the students in Ms. Williams' and then Ms. Masi's class are mostly from low-income immigrant families. Do you think that demographic difference makes it difficult to compare the two classrooms? Do you think it's important for children still learning English—like some in Ms. Williams' classroom—to learn words like *bacteria*, *soil*, and *crops*? Do you think it's important for any first-graders to learn words of that kind?

14. If you're a parent, which of the classrooms described in the book so far would you prefer for your own children? If you're a teacher, which would you prefer to teach in? As a member of the public, which would you prefer your tax dollars to support? Why?

COVERING

Chapter 3: Everything Was Surprising and Novel

1. What are the key differences between what cognitive scientists have discovered about the process of reading and the way most educators have been trained to view it? In what ways have the two groups come to "exactly the opposite conclusions" about what is involved? (47) How do these different perspectives lead to different conclusions about the best way to teach reading?

2. The divergence between cognitive scientists and educators on reading instruction is just one aspect of a broader disagreement between the two groups. What theories have been offered to explain this divergence? (50) Do you find them convincing?

3. According to Daniel Willingham, problems in comprehension generally arise because "authors inevitably leave out information." (52) In your own writing, how aware are you of the assumptions you're making about the reader's background knowledge? Do your assumptions vary depending on the intended audience? When you read, how aware are you of the background knowledge you're using to make sense of the text? Does your comprehension vary depending on your familiarity with the topic?

4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of Willingham's stance as a neutral scientist when it comes to communicating with teachers? Do you think his strategy of taking his message directly to teachers and bypassing schools of education makes sense? Why or why not?

COVERING

Chapter 4: The Reading Wars

Chapter 5: Unbalanced Literacy

1. Why have proponents of "whole language" and its successor, "balanced literacy," argued that drilling children in phonics isn't necessary—and isn't even part of teaching reading? Do you find the counterarguments made by scientists convincing? If you're an educator, did you learn about the evidence supporting phonics instruction during your training? If you're a parent, do you think your child was taught to read through systematic phonics instruction or some other approach? Do you think it's possible that such instruction can "kill a child's interest in reading"? How might that be avoided?

2. The author says that despite the overwhelming evidence in favor of teaching phonics, "whole-language proponents dismissed the research on the ground that it was conducted by cloistered academics who knew little of the realities of the classroom." (70) How important are "the realities of the classroom" in figuring out the best way to teach? Do you understand teachers' skepticism about scientific findings on education? How can teachers' own experience help them determine what works, and how might it mislead them about what is working?

3. Why do you think the whole-language movement spread so quickly among teachers in the 1980s, and why do you think many teachers have continued to embrace its tenets in the face of scientific evidence to the contrary?

4. How does the scientific evidence on "metacognitive" reading comprehension strategies differ from the way it has been interpreted by educators? When might those strategies boost a reader's comprehension and when might they be useless—or even detrimental?

5. "Scripts themselves aren't the problem. . . . The real question is whether the script foregrounds skills and strategies at the expense of knowledge." (94) Do you agree? If you're a teacher, do you see advantages to having a "scripted" curriculum, or do you feel it unnecessarily constrains a teacher's autonomy?

COVERING

Chapter 6:
Billions for Education Reform, but Barely a Cent for Knowledge

1. Do you agree with critics like Diane Ravitch who believe that philanthropists and other non-educators have had an outsize and detrimental influence on education? Or do you think that given longstanding deficiencies in the system, especially in regard to low-income students, education needed an injection of new ideas from the business world and elsewhere? Has your perspective changed as a result of reading this book?

2. Both the Gates Foundation and Doug Lemov—along with many others in the education reform movement—initially concluded that teacher quality was the key to improving outcomes for low-income students. To what extent were they right? How and why have each of their perspectives shifted?

3. How is the lack of content in the elementary curriculum connected to other issues that education reformers have focused on, like teacher quality and school choice? How might it relate to newer initiatives such as personalized learning, social-emotional learning, and project-based learning?

PART TWO:

How We Got Here: The History Behind the Content-Free Curriculum

COVERING

Chapter 7: Émile Meets the Common Core,

Chapter 8: Politics and the Quest for Content

1. "A lack of familiarity with history and the world beyond one's experience might not have been such a terrible handicap for a young eighteenth-century aristocrat like Émile. But for a teenager today, it can represent a serious obstacle to success." (142) How have ideas and theories from the past influenced current approaches to education? How do these ideas match up to what we currently expect education to provide for children from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds?

2. Over the years, various arguments have been put forward to justify the "expanding environments" curriculum used in the early elementary grades, culminating in the idea that topics like history and science are "developmentally inappropriate" for young children. (134-35) In your experience, is it true that children in this age group are primarily interested in topics related to their own lives? Do you think social studies should focus on those kinds of topics in the early grades? What are the consequences of that approach for children from different socioeconomic backgrounds?

3. Do you see areas of possible agreement between progressive or constructivist educators and those who advocate for knowledge-building curriculum? How do you think each group can best approach the other in seeking to bring about change?

4. How has the work of E. D. Hirsch, Jr. both helped and possibly held back the effort to build knowledge beginning in the elementary grades? Given the evidence that specificity about curriculum is crucial for equity—and that it's also likely to set off political controversy—can you think of a different and possibly more successful approach than creating something like "the List"? (153)

5. Is education a "non-partisan issue"? (158) Do the controversies over Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* and the national history standards show that efforts to provide a content-rich education inevitably become entangled in politics? Discuss the perspectives of Gary Nash and Lynne Cheney on how history should be taught to American students.

6. "Hirsch's goal was to provide disadvantaged students with access to references understood by the elite—whatever they might be—and knit the country together through a shared culture that could change over time. Cheney, on the other hand, was making a value judgment: American history and culture were superior." (161) Do you agree with the author that this difference is important? Why or why not?

7. Many education reformers have pinned their hopes on national or state standards. What does the experience of Massachusetts suggest about the limits of standards-based reform? Are standards necessary or helpful, or would it make sense to focus reform efforts on curriculum instead? How much difference does it make if the standards specify content?

PART THREE:
How We Can Change: Creating and Delivering Content-Focused Curriculum

COVERING

Chapter 9:
The Common Core: New Life for Knowledge, or Another Nail in its Coffin?

Chapter 10: No More Jackpot Standards

1. "Perhaps the most widespread misconception about the Common Core is that it requires specific content." (179) Did you share this misconception? If so, what was it based on? Before reading this book, did you have a generally positive or negative view of the Common Core? Has your opinion changed?

2. On balance, do you think the Common Core has advanced efforts to inject content into the elementary curriculum—for example, by helping to spark the development of EngageNY? Or do you think the standards' call for more nonfiction, combined with the existing skills-focused approach to comprehension, has had the effect of making a bad situation worse?

3. "While close reading has gotten far more attention, [David] Coleman insists he has devoted just as much time and effort to spreading the message about knowledge." (185) Why have so many educators and members of the general public nevertheless failed to see the connection between the Common Core and the need to build knowledge? Is there anything the authors of the standards could have done to make the message clearer, given that they wanted to avoid specifying content for political reasons? Was there any way to overcome what the author calls the Common Core's "original sin" of equating literacy and math skills? (186)

4. Why did the teachers involved in Reno's Core Task Project begin with close reading of complex text rather than building knowledge? How did teachers benefit from beginning in that way? Is it better or worse for teachers to begin by building students' knowledge through a coherent curriculum, as at Center City, and only then asking them to grapple with complex text relating to the topics they've learned about?

5. The author quotes teacher Linnea Wolters as saying, "For an adult, reading is the most efficient way to gain new knowledge. For a child who is gaining the skills of literacy, it is a completely inefficient way for them to gain knowledge and vocabulary." (208) Do you agree? How does this observation relate to the standard approach of teaching reading through comprehension skills and strategies and leveled texts? How does it relate to David Coleman's belief that close reading is a way of building knowledge?

6. "Westergard's experience suggests that adopting content-rich curriculum could address a long-standing and seemingly intractable problem: educational segregation." (210) How might it do that? Is the author's argument undercut by the fact that Cannan, a low-income school with a content-rich curriculum, has failed to attract affluent families? On the other hand, even if an elementary school is socioeconomically diverse, are the benefits of integration at least partially undercut by a system of leveled reading that amounts to tracking?

COVERING

Chapter 11: Don't Forget to Write

Chapter 12: Scaling Up: Can it Be Done?

Epilogue

1. Is written English really "a second language"? (218) If all educators adopted that perspective, how might it change their approach to teaching writing? If you're a teacher, how much training did you receive in how to teach writing? If you're a parent, do you feel your children are getting or have gotten effective writing instruction?

2. "Hochman discovered that writing, reading comprehension, and analytical ability were all connected—and that writing was the key to unlocking the other two." (219) Do you agree? How can writing boost comprehension and lead students to make connections between bits of information? Is the knowledge gap exacerbated by a lack of writing instruction?

3. Judith Hochman and Lucy Calkins began with similar perceptions about what was missing from writing instruction but ended up with very different approaches. What are the main differences between their methods? Why do you think their paths diverged? To what extent was each of them influenced by the students she was working with?

4. Do you see parallels between the standard approach to reading comprehension and the writer's workshop approach to writing instruction? Does the assumption that skills can be taught independently of content make more sense in one context than the other?

5. Should children be encouraged to write at length about their own experiences and develop their "voice" without worrying much about the conventions of written language? Or do you agree with Hochman that most students will only learn to write if instruction is grounded in the content of the curriculum and they're explicitly taught how to construct sentences and plan and revise paragraphs and essays?

6. How did New York's efforts to inject content into the elementary curriculum and change instruction differ from Louisiana's? Which approach do you see as more promising for large-scale change and why?

7. Discuss the effects of the internet and technology on curriculum and instruction. On balance, has the availability of free online resources—including both coherent knowledge-building curricula and isolated teacher-created activities and lesson plans—helped or hindered the effort to move away from a focus on comprehension "skills"? What are the potential advantages and pitfalls?

8. "One huge question is what to do about our system of high-stakes testing. That well-intentioned regime is not only narrowing the curriculum to reading and math . . . ; it's also contributing to the departure of gifted, dedicated teachers—like Ms. Masi and Ms. Townsell—from classrooms that need them." (261) What do you think should be done about testing? Do you share the concern of some reformers that if test scores aren't factored into teacher evaluation, we'll "return to the days when the lower achievement of disadvantaged students was invisible"? (253) Or do you think the focus on scores has unintentionally harmed those very students and deprived them of good teachers? Is there a way to reliably evaluate schools and teachers without either rendering vulnerable students invisible or limiting their access to knowledge?

9. Have your views changed as a result of reading the book? Did anything surprise you? Were you left with a sense of optimism, or do the obstacles to reorienting our decentralized education system seem insurmountable? Do you agree with the author that it's best to proceed gradually, or do you feel it's important to move more quickly, given the stakes involved?