

## **BROOKINGS PAPERS ON EDUCATION POLICY: 2005**

### ***Education Reform and Content: The Long View***

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Longitudinal analysis of early childhood education, such as that in Project Follow Through, shows the superiority of explicit skill instruction for the acquisition of basic reading skills. But these early gains do not eventuate in significant progress in reading achievement in later grades, especially among disadvantaged youth. This is not for lack of trying, or lack of accountability or competition, but primarily for lack of an adequate guiding theory. The content-indifferent theories of formalism (reading ability is a general, transferable skill) and naturalism (reading is learned naturally, as we learn to speak) are inadequate. Nonetheless, the theories are protected and their failures glossed over by a third theory, social determinism, which argues that social factors outside the school must determine reading results. In fact, naturalism and formalism are themselves the chief causes of low reading achievement after grade 3 because they protect a content-indifferent and content-incoherent curriculum that cannot develop knowledge and vocabulary effectively. Significant vocabulary growth is inherently slow, a matter of years rather than months, and so, therefore, is growth in reading comprehension. This language growth can be accelerated for all students only by a carefully devised, coherent, and cumulative curriculum. This is illustrated in comparative longitudinal studies of Core Knowledge schools against controls. Based on these considerations, more studies of Core Knowledge schools should be undertaken. Meanwhile, we need to recognize that language growth is slow, and so, too, is the process of changing wrong ideas.