**Building Background Knowledge**

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**Why is background knowledge so important?**

It makes good sense that to comprehend a story or text, readers will need a threshold of knowledge about the topic. Sometimes we call it domain-specific knowledge or topical knowledge. Without such knowledge, it becomes difficult to construct a meaningful mental model of what the text is about. Consider the following examples.

**Background knowledge enables readers to choose between multiple meanings of words**

**Reading and listening require readers to make inferences from text that rely on background knowledge**

Understanding text depends on readers supplying enough of the unstated premises to make coherent sense of what is being read. But to do this well, readers need to have a foundation of knowledge about the topic. Otherwise, as studies have shown, they can get caught on the “seductive details” (Garner, Gillingham, & White, 1989) of a text—highly interesting and entertaining information that is only tangentially related to the topic—which can distract the reader and disrupt the comprehension of text.

**Literacy language requires background knowledge**

Second-language learners know for certain that many metaphors, idioms, and other literary devices are based on background knowledge. For example, if we say that you “really hit the ball out of the park” after you gave a presentation to your colleagues, you would quickly understand the compliment.

**Informational text requires background knowledge**

Informational text tends to have a greater density of vocabulary and concepts that are directly related to students' background knowledge (Price, Bradley, & Smith, 2012). And these demands placed on background knowledge only accelerate as students progress through the grade levels.

**Consequently, in much of the literature in reading, we have focused on** skills associated with comprehension: decoding, vocabulary development, strategy instruction, and metacognition, among many others. But what we can see from this brief summary is that we have given very little instructional time to a skill that can play an enormous role in comprehending text. We would venture to guess that students' understanding of text is unlikely to improve unless we begin to more deliberately teach background knowledge.

**How to build background knowledge**

The question then becomes, how do we build children's background knowledge? Core reading materials often encourage us to activate, support, build on, and tie to children's existing knowledge base. But what do we do when there is no existing knowledge base? Or when there is little to build on? If you asked us, for example, to read an elementary physics text building on our previous knowledge base of physics, you would likely see blank stares, akin to a deer in headlights.

This issue becomes even more complicated in the age of Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS place a premium on the amount of background knowledge we provide to children prior to reading a text. It's not that the standards negate background knowledge or its contribution to comprehension; rather, the authors of the publishers' guidance to the CCSS emphasize close reading, developing knowledge through text, regarding the deliberate and careful analysis of text as the gateway for developing independent readers (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers,2010).

Although at times, this clash of perspectives might seem like a catch-22, the problem is solvable. Teachers can effectively build children's background knowledge early on (Neuman & Wright, 2013). However, at the same time, we must recognize that knowledge is not just accumulating facts; rather, children need to develop knowledge networks, comprised of clusters of concepts that are coherent, generative, and supportive of future learning in a domain. Here's how we do it:

* Begin by teaching words in categories. For example, you can try something as simple as this: “I'm going to say the following words:strawberries, bananas, papayas, pineapples. They all are a type of… (fruit).” Categories of objects begin to develop concepts, and the use of generic nouns (fruit) has been shown to be highly related to language and vocabulary development.
* Use contrasts and comparisons. For example, you can give children puzzlers like, “Is an artichoke a type of fruit? Why is it or is it not a kind of fruit?” Puzzlers help children think outside the immediate context and consider the reasoning behind these contrasts and comparisons, which can further their understanding of categories and concepts.
* Use analogies. An analogy is another type of comparison, but this time the comparison is made between two things that are usually thought to be different from each other. Analogies help children build knowledge because they compare something new to something we already know. For example, try something like, “bird is to feather as dog is to… (fur).” Children can use similes (comparisons using the words like or as) or metaphors (comparisons without using like or as) to build new knowledge.
* Encourage topic-focused wide reading. Reading builds knowledge, but wide reading has typically been interpreted as reading about a lot of different topics, demonstrating breadth rather than depth in reading. Try this variation: Encourage children to identify an interest and read as many books as they can on one topic. What you find is that children will develop a deeper knowledge and expertise on a topic. These interests will drive children to read more.
* Embrace multimedia. We often think that direct experiences are the most compelling ways to build knowledge. As many teachers can attest, there is nothing more thrilling than watching children engage in learning through direct experiences or seeing their delight and excitement on field trips and other activities. Although it is certainly not a replacement for real-life experiences, multimedia can often provide a wealth of information that we could only wish to experience firsthand. Further, it can introduce children to important words and concepts in a highly motivating way and build a shared knowledge base among all of your students.