

telac times

Teaching English Learners Academic Content

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Building and Activating Background Knowledge

By Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher

Start with what you know is good advice in lesson planning. When teachers begin with known information, they can build students' understanding of new content. Unfortunately, in too many classrooms teachers begin with new information and students are left behind. For example, we observed a well-meaning teacher introduce the topic of radioactive decay by talking about energy loss, parent nuclides, and daughter nuclides. The students in the class

dutifully took notes, but when asked , they said that they had no idea what their teacher was talking about.

As part of the lesson, students worked in groups to read their assigned text. One of the sentences in the text read, "One Becquerel is defined as one transformation (or Decay) per second." The sentence is fairly straightforward. It defines a term, a "Becquerel." But the definition assumes tremendous background knowledge and understanding of vocabulary. What's a "transformation," anyway?

In many classrooms where text difficulty is a problem, students are taught comprehension strategies, such as predicting, visualizing, questioning, and inferring. But would any of those cognitive strategies help students understand the sentence from the book? Probably not. Comprehension strategies cannot compensate for missing background information.

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Thinking About Poverty

By Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers in Education Week December 19, 2013

Have you seen television holiday specials that take place in the inner city? Probably not. Holiday shows are about white families and happy endings. Commercials bombard us with expectations for abundant giving and receiving. Even cars are suggested Christmas presents! Tables are filled with food, presents abound under the tree, and happiness and awe appear on faces. One just has to search on YouTube for Christmas commercials or watch an evening of television to see what is missing.

In their [report](#) on poverty based on 2012 findings, the United States Census Bureau shows an alarming number of children in poverty. 22.3% of girls and 21.3% of boys under the age of 18 live in poverty. Children from Black (27.2%) and Hispanic (25.6%) households are twice as likely to live in poverty than those from white households (12.7%). The lives of this youth population are not reflected in the media. They are keenly aware of what they do not have and whom they are not like. Eric Jensen writes:

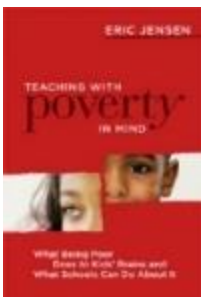
"Although childhood is generally considered a time of joyful, carefree exploration, children living in poverty tend to spend less time finding out about the world around them and more time struggling to survive within it." (p.8)

These children are more likely to be less able to handle the challenges they face because of an inherent lack of resilient behavior. "Chronic socioeconomic deprivation can create environments that undermine the development of self and the capacity for self-determination and self-efficacy." (pp. 8-9)

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Resources:

Jensen, Eric. *Teaching With Poverty in Mind* (2009) Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD



Read Chapter 2 of [Teaching With Poverty in Mind](#) by Eric Jensen (2009) ASCD



A teacher reviews Robert Marzano's "Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement" and describes implications for students of poverty

By Julie Dermody

Over 20 years of classroom experience has demonstrated clearly to me that poverty has a profound impact on academic achievement. What I didn't know was how to effectively build background knowledge in students coming from poverty so that they could more easily and quickly experience academic success. Thanks to Robert Marzano, I now have a plan that I'm sharing with my entire school so we can help close the achievement gap and enable all students to succeed.

Building Background Knowledge is the fifth book in the What works for Schools Resources Series (which also includes six audios, two videos, and a professional development online course.) The previous books, with their research-based strategies, have been top sellers for ASCD because of the specific action steps provided to implement what the past 35 years of educational research has demonstrated.

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Read a preview of [Building Background for Academic Achievement](#) by Robert J. Marzano (2004) ASCD



Learning about Your Students' Backgrounds

Where do my students come from?

The English language learners (ELLs) in your classroom may represent diverse languages and cultures from around the world. The majority of ELL families in the United States come from Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America. These Hispanic families may have many things in common, such as customs, foods, dances, values and the Spanish language. However, there are also many rich cultural differences within and between countries like Argentina, Mexico, Cuba, and El Salvador.

The more you learn about where your students come from, the easier your job will become. This includes learning more about their language, culture, values, family, and home environment.

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TEACHERS CORNER



Differentiated Learning

- Get Real. It's impossible to look at any classroom and pretend that all students are alike. Instead, focus on the differences that exist, [value the](#)

[diversity](#), and **allow each student the opportunity to shine**. Teachers should be open to different approaches and strategies as long as students are able to explain their reasoning. Students want the chance to be original, resourceful, or ingenious.

- **Blend whole-class, group, and individual instruction.** It is more effective and efficient to use different strategies in different situations. When using groups, rotate students based on demonstrated knowledge, interest, and/or learning style preferences with the aim of moving all students to a higher level of achievement. Use the groups to set up learning activities that: teach new concepts, apply concepts previously learned, and also revisit skills not mastered.

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