

PC6 Building Knowledge: The Missing Ingredient in Comprehension and Literacy

Chair: Natalie Wexler

Decades of research have shown that background knowledge is the most important factor in reading comprehension. Similarly, writing ability is inextricably linked to knowledge of the topic at hand. Yet, our elementary system has long failed to build children’s knowledge from the earliest grade levels, treating literacy as a set of transferable skills. To ensure that all children reach their full potential, literacy instruction must begin to include a focus on knowledge and skills.

Knowledge-building must begin in the early years, using a coherent plan that employs listening, discussion, and other modes that do not limit students to the information that they can access through their own reading. Presenters summarize the research, establishing the key role that background knowledge plays in comprehension; address the ways in which writing both depends on and deepens knowledge; and describe what a knowledge-building curriculum looks like in the classroom—as they provide a personal perspective from the parent of a child with dyslexia.

The Vital Role of Knowledge in Comprehension: What the Research Says

Natalie Wexler

Numerous studies by cognitive psychologists have shown that background knowledge trumps general reading skills. Educators know that if readers can activate prior knowledge stored in long-term memory, they will have more space in working memory for comprehension and analysis. This presentation addresses the equally important need to build knowledge in the first place, beginning in the early grades, so it can be activated—a need that current approaches to literacy instruction generally overlook.

Writing: A Pathway to Knowledge

Judith C. Hochman, Ed.D.

Writing is often taught as a skill, isolated from content, and students are encouraged to write at length before mastering the fundamentals, overwhelming their working memory. But when writing instruction is embedded in a content-rich curriculum and delivered as a sequence of evidence-based strategies, beginning at the sentence level, it’s a powerful tool for enabling students to synthesize information and develop analytical skills. Regardless of grade or subject, students benefit when they write about what they’re learning or prepare for writing through oral activities.



How All Children Can Realize Their Potential: The View of a Curriculum Developer and Parent of a Child with Dyslexia

Lynne Munson

Ms. Munson, the parent of a child with dyslexia, has developed a curriculum that engages all students in the same rich content, regardless of reading level, through teacher read-alouds and whole-class discussion of high-quality texts. Using questions focused on content rather than comprehension skills, teachers build the knowledge and vocabulary that allow students to access and analyze complex text. Ms. Munson describes the experiences of schools that have adopted the curriculum, called Wit & Wisdom, and the factors that can lead to its success with all learners.