

Why American Students Haven't Gotten Better at Reading in 20 Years



Teaching Comprehension Skills vs. Building Content Knowledge

Is it possible to comprehend text about a topic you know little or nothing about? This question arose when the expert panel that oversees the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) gathered to discuss the lack of progress in 2017 NAEP reading scores. Grade 4 scores fell by a point nationwide and in Connecticut, with no state making gains.

Since No Child Left Behind legislation was enacted in 2001, many elementary schools have intensified their focus on math and reading, with little attention to background-knowledge-building subjects such as history, science, and the arts. "One component of reading is, like math, primarily a set of skills: the part that involves decoding, or making connections between sounds and the letters that represent them. But educators have also treated the other component of reading—comprehension—as a set of skills, when in fact it depends primarily on what readers already know" (Wexler, 2018, para. 8). In fact, if

reading scores fail to rise after grade three—when children are expected to transition from learning to read to reading to learn—some schools (especially high poverty ones) may maintain their focus on reading through middle school, further pushing back the acquisition of content knowledge.

Our nation's approach to acquiring content knowledge stands in stark contrast to that of countries which specify grade-level content and therefore, can more readily assess its acquisition. With no common curriculum on which to base reading exam questions, American students may be asked to comprehend passages on a variety of topics that don't coincide with what they have learned in school. In spite of repeated instructional practice answering comprehension questions such as, "What is the main idea of the passage?" and "What inferences can you make?," students will be challenged to make sense of topics they know little or nothing about.

Wexler explains that, according to NAEP panelist and cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham, "Whether or not readers understand a text depends far more on how much background knowledge and vocabulary they have relating to the topic than on how much they've practiced comprehension skills. That's because writers leave out a lot of information that they assume readers will know. But if readers can't supply the missing information, they have a hard time making sense of the text" (Wexler, 2018, para.12-13).

The Importance of Using Grade-level Texts for Comprehension Skills

Other NAEP panelists concurred. As Wexler reported, Tim Shanahan debunked the approach of helping students practice their skills by using text at their supposed reading level rather than grade-level texts. "Recent research indicates that students actually learn more from reading texts that are considered too difficult for them ... What struggling students need is guidance from a teacher in how to make sense of texts designed for kids at their respective grade levels—the kinds of texts those kids may otherwise only see on standardized tests, when they have to grapple with them on their own," says Shanahan. Marilyn Jager Adams agrees, "Giving children easier texts when they're weak readers serves to deny them the very language and information they need to catch up and move on."

What's a Teacher to Do?

- When working on *comprehension* skills, support struggling students in using grade-level texts. (Note, this is different than appropriately using decodable texts when working on specific decoding skills.)
- Adhere to the Common Core State Standards which place equal emphasis on narrative and informational texts; the latter build content knowledge.

- Use evidence-based instructional practices.
- Develop your students' mental models or schema as a way to build vocabulary and content knowledge.
- Finally, accept your role in helping to close the widening reading achievement gap. Remember that your wealthier students' families may have the resources for academic enrichment, whereas your students from less educated or lower income families may rely on school to provide the knowledge needed for academic and lifelong success.

Adapted from Wexler, N. (2018, April 13). Why American students haven't gotten better at reading in 20 years. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/04/-american-students-reading/557915/>.

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