

Knowledge Is the Engine of Comprehension

Why a knowledge rich curriculum raises reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is not a skill that floats free of content. It rides on what a student already knows. The more a reader knows about a topic, the more of a text they can understand, which means building knowledge is one of the most powerful things a reading program can do.

Knowledge beats general skill

In a now classic study, students read a passage about a baseball game, and their knowledge of baseball predicted their comprehension better than their measured reading ability did, so that students with lower reading ability who knew baseball outperformed students with higher reading ability who did not (**Recht & Leslie, 1988**). Knowledge did the heavy lifting.

A reader can only understand a new text to the degree that it connects to something they already know.

Building knowledge in the early grades

Because knowledge and comprehension are so tightly linked, content rich instruction in the primary grades supports both language and reading comprehension (**Cabell & Hwang, 2020**). And the effect reaches the students who need it most, since children who arrive with more background knowledge learn new words and understand new stories better than those who arrive with less (**Kaefer, Neuman, & Pinkham, 2015**).

Knowledge compounds

Knowledge grows like interest in a bank. The more a student knows, the easier it is to learn more, because new facts have somewhere to attach. A curriculum that builds

broad, connected knowledge is therefore not a detour from reading, it is the surest path to it.

What this means for Teach BIG

This is why our passages carry real content worth knowing, and why we anchor the year in coherent topics rather than a scatter of disconnected excerpts. Every passage builds the knowledge base that the next passage, and every future text, will stand on.

References

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- Recht, D. R., & Leslie, L. (1988). Effect of prior knowledge on good and poor readers' memory of text. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80(1), 16 to 20.