The Gap that Impedes Making Meaning

Wexler identifies another factor contributing to the de-emphasis on content knowledge, namely the dominance of Balanced Literacy (BL) practices. BL limits students by confining reading to basic skills and neglecting the transfer of knowledge. Misunderstandings about the Common Core State Standards have contributed to the current emphasis on 'teaching as usual.' Teachers don't explicitly teach the vocabulary and content that would help students grapple with higher-level texts.

Balanced Literacy emphasizes comprehension strategies over content. For example, students are taught strategies to improve their comprehension through activities such as summarizing, predicting, and inferring. Although these strategies are important for building reading skills, they do not necessarily improve students' understanding of complex texts. Teachers need to actively engage students in the acquisition of background knowledge through content-rich nonfiction.

Extensive Exposure to Content-Rich Non-Fiction is Essential

Wexler argues that students need to develop a deep understanding of the world in order to make meaning from what they read. This means that teachers need to explicitly teach vocabulary and content to help students grapple with complex texts. Teachers can use strategies such as the 5-paragraph essay to help students understand complex texts and develop their reading skills.

The Simple View of Reading

The Simple View of Reading proposes that reading is the product of two very broad skills, word-level reading and language comprehension. This view suggests that reading is a complex process that involves both decoding and language skills. Teachers need to explicitly teach these skills to help students build their reading abilities.

How to Build Background Knowledge

Choosing the right curriculum matters. Teachers need to use curriculum materials that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards and that provide opportunities for students to develop background knowledge. Teachers can use strategies such as project-based instruction and extensive exposure to nonfiction to help students build their background knowledge.

Reading comprehension is the product of four very broad skills: word-level reading, language comprehension, vocabulary, and reading stamina. Teachers need to explicitly teach these skills to help students build their reading abilities.

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