



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Submitting as a: Teacher
State: Vic.

Summary

comprehension is 63% vocabulary” and that “the size of a student’s vocabulary is the single best predictor of success on state tests.” This finding has been substantiated in primary grades by Baker, Simmons & Kame’euni (1998), in intermediate grades by Beck, Perfetti & McKewon (1982) and in high school by Cunningham & Stanovich (1997).

The problem is that there are profound differences in vocabulary knowledge among learners from different socioeconomic (SES) groups. According to E. D. Hirsch, by second grade, a child in the middle of the family income spectrum will know, on average, 6,020 words; whereas, a child in the bottom 25% of the income range will know just 4,168. Cunningham & Stanovich (1997) found that first-grade vocabulary predicted reading achievement of Year 9s.

The Australian Curriculum currently represents a lost opportunity for maximising the development of student vocabulary. The investment in a content-rich curriculum; particularly in the area of Humanities and Social Science, which emphasises providing students with knowledge of the world would support the development of vocabulary.

Main submission

Dr. Roger Farr, former president of the International Reading Association, has stated that “reading comprehension is 63% vocabulary” and that “the size of a student’s vocabulary is the single best predictor of success on state tests.” This finding has been substantiated in primary grades by Baker, Simmons & Kame’euni (1998), in intermediate grades by Beck, Perfetti & McKewon (1982) and in high school by Cunningham & Stanovich (1997).

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Submission to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence

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What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

At present the Humanities and Social Science curriculum has too great an emphasis on skill development in contexts that are closely related to student's current knowledge. This is particularly evident in Foundation to Year 3. It is not until Year 4 that students are taught any sustained History. As a result, there is no systematic approach to teaching students knowledge about the world which results in a lack of sustained vocabulary growth through their studies.

Educational success for Australian students requires the education system to intentionally provide students with the knowledge necessary to be able to forge new knowledge of the world. As Daniel Willingham suggests small children are capable of thinking critically with content they are familiar with; at the moment our curriculum does not increase the volume of content that students are familiar with – this means that the content they can think about is also diminished as a result. The focus on the general capability of critical thinking at the expense of building knowledge is ill guided because if we do not provide students with knowledge we are not equipping them with the tools necessary to think critically.

What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

One potential barrier to creating a knowledge rich curriculum is fear of teachers' knowledge to be able to enact the curriculum.

That is why investment in a well thought out sequenced curriculum with detailed curriculum materials is necessary. The Core Knowledge Foundation, in the US, provides a framework for what this could look like.

We know proficient reading requires an adequate vocabulary. We know that children's vocabularies will get bigger when they hear or read rich material. So

sustained immersion in content rich topics provides students with the opportunity to increase their general knowledge and vocabulary faster.

Creating an Australian specific Core Knowledge sequence would provide students with rich domains to engage in. By investing in experts to write the curriculum materials, it would be possible to ensure that teachers have the support necessary to enact the curriculum within the classrooms. Fundamentally, this would assist in reducing the differences in outcomes for students from low SES backgrounds. As Hirsch has argued, 'the achievement gap is chiefly a knowledge gap and a language gap. It can be greatly ameliorated by knowledge-based schooling.' Investing in ensuring that all students receive knowledge-based school is pivotal in driving improvement in Australian education.