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In early classes, U.S. schools value reading-understanding skills over knowledge. The results are devastating, especially for poor children. Natalie Wexler August 2019 The Justyna Stasik showAt first glance, the classroom I was visiting at a high-poverty school in Washington, D.C., seemed a model of hard work. The teacher sat at a corner office, overcoming the students' work, while first graders quietly completed a worksheet to develop their reading skills. When I looked around, I noticed a little girl drawing on a piece of paper. Ten minutes later, she sketched a string of human figures, and was busy coloring them yellow. I knelt next to her and asked, What are you drawing? Clowns, she replied confidently. Why do you draw clowns? Because it says right here, draw clowns, she explained. Running on the left side of the worksheet was a reading-understanding skills list: finding the main idea, making inferences, making predictions. The girl pointed to the phrase draws conclusions. She should have made inferences and drawn conclusions about a dense article describing Brazil, which lay face down on her desk. But she didn't know that the text was there until I handed it over. Moreover, she had never heard of Brazil and could not read the word. That girl's mission was just one example, albeit an extraordinary one, of a standard pedagogical approach. American elementary education has been shaped by a theory that goes like this: Reading – a term used to not only mean matching not only letters with sounds, but also understanding – can be taught in a way completely disconnected from content. Use simple texts to teach children to find the main idea, make inferences, draw conclusions and so on, and eventually they will be able to apply these skills to understand the meaning of something put in front of them. In the meantime, what children read doesn't really matter – it's better for them to acquire skills that will allow them to discover knowledge for themselves later than to be given information directly, or so it happens. That is, they need to spend their time learning to read before reading to learn. Science can wait; history, which is considered too abstract for young minds to understand, must wait. Reading time is filled, instead, with a variety of short books and passages not connected to each other, except for the comprehension skills they are meant to teach. Since 1977, early elementary teachers have spent more than twice as much time on reading as on combined scientific and social studies. But since 2001, when the federal no child left behind the legislation has made standardized reading and math scores the benchmark for measuring progress, the time devoted to both topics has only increased. In turn, the amount of spent on social studies and science has dropped-especially in schools where test scores are low. And yet, despite the enormous spending of time and resources on American kids haven't become better readers. In the last 20 years, only about a third of students have scored above the level of proficiency in national trials. For low-income and minority children, the picture is particularly bleak: their average test scores are well below those of their richer, largely white peers-a phenomenon usually referred to as the achievement gap. As this gap has narrowed, America's position in the already mediocre international literacy rankings has declined. It seems that we are in decline as other systems improve, a federal official who oversees the administration of such tests said Education Week.All of which raises a worrying question: What if the drug we were prescribing is just making things worse, especially for poor children? What if the best way to stimulate understanding reading is not to drill children on discrete skills, but to teach them, as soon as possible, the very things we have marginalized—including history, science, and other content that could build the knowledge and vocabulary they need to understand both the written texts and the world around them? In the late 1980s, two Wisconsin researchers, Donna Recht and Lauren Leslie, devised an ingenious experiment to try to determine the extent to which understanding a child's reading depends on his previous knowledge of a subject. To this end, they built a miniature baseball field and got it with wooden baseball players. They then brought in 64 fifth and eighth graders who were tested for both their reading ability and their baseball knowledge. Recht and Leslie chose baseball because they thought that many kids who weren't great readers still knew a fair amount about the game. Each student was asked to first read a description of a fictional baseball innings and then move the wooden figures to reconstruct it. (For example: Churniak swings and hits a slow vigorous towards the shortstop. Haley comes in, puts her in the field and throws first, but too late. Churniak is the first with one, Johnson remains on the third. The next dough is Whitcomb, who left the cougars.) Previous knowledge of baseball has been shown to have made a huge difference in students' ability to understand text – more than their supposed level of reading. Children who knew little about baseball, including good readers, all did badly. And everyone who knew a lot about baseball, whether they were good readers or bad readers, did well. In fact, bad readers who knew a lot about baseball outnumbered good readers who didn't. About 25 years later, a variation in baseball study shed further light on the relationship between knowledge and understanding. This team of researchers focused on preschoolers in a socio-economic environments. First they read them a book about birds, a subject that led children with higher incomes to know more about than those on lower incomes. When they tested the cartel, the researchers found that richer children significantly better. But then they read a story involving a subject no group knew anything about: invented animals called wuggs. When the children's previous knowledge was equal, their understanding was essentially the same. In other words, the gap in the understanding was not a gap in skills. There was a gap in knowledge. For a number of reasons, children from better educated families – who also tend to have higher incomes – end up in school with more knowledge and vocabulary. In early classes, teachers told me, children from less educated families can't know basic words like behind; I saw a first grader struggling with a simple math problem because he didn't know what it meant before. As the years go by, the children of educated parents continue to acquire more knowledge and vocabulary outside of school, making it easier for them to acquire even more knowledge – because, like Velcro, knowledge sticks best to other related knowledge. Meanwhile, their less fortunate peers are still falling further and further behind, especially if their schools aren't providing them with knowledge. This snowball was called the Matthew effect after passing into the gospel according to Matthew about getting rich getting richer and poor getting poorer. Every year that the Matthew effect is allowed to continue, it becomes harder to reverse. The earlier we start building children's knowledge, the greater our chances of bridging the gap. While in some respects American schools vary enormously, in almost all elementary classrooms, you will find the same basic structure. The day is divided into a math block and a reading block, the latter of which consumes anywhere from 90 minutes to three hours. In probably half of all elementary schools, teachers should use a reading manual, which includes a variety of passages, discussion questions, and a teacher's guide. In other schools, teachers are left to their own devices to figure out how to teach reading, and rely on commercially available children's books. In both cases, when it comes to understanding teaching, the emphasis is on skills. And the overwhelming majority of teachers turn to the internet to fill in these materials, despite the fact that they have not been trained in curriculum design. A Rand Corporation survey of teachers found that 95 percent of elementary school teachers use Google for materials and lesson plans; 86 percent is listening to Pinterest. Usually, a teacher will focus on a skill of the week, reading aloud books or passages chosen not for their content, but on how well they lend themselves to demonstrate a particular ability. Demonstrating this ability cannot involve reading at all. A common way of the ability to compare and contrast, for example, is to bring two children to the front of the room and lead a discussion about the similarities and differences in what it carries. Students will then practice their ability on their own or in small groups, under the guidance of a teacher, teacher, at their individual reading level, which may be well below their grade level. Again, the books do not coexist around any particular topic; many are simple fiction. The theory is that if students just read enough, and spend enough time practicing comprehension skills, eventually they will be able to understand more complex texts. Many teachers have told me that they would love to spend more time on social studies and science, because their students clearly enjoy learning real content. But they were informed that teaching skills is the way to stimulate reading comprehension. Education decision-makers and reformers have generally not questioned this approach and, in fact, by increasing the importance of reading scores, have stepped it up. Parents, like teachers, may object to the emphasis on test preparation, but have not focused on the more fundamental issue. If students do not have the knowledge and vocabulary to understand passages on reading tests, they will not have an opportunity to demonstrate their skills in making inferences or finding the main idea. And if they get to high school without being exposed to history or science, that's the case for many students from low-income families, they won't be able to read and understand high school-level materials. Common Core literacy standards, which since 2010 have influenced classroom practice in most states, have in many ways made a worse situation worse. In an effort to expand children's knowledge, standards call for elementary school teachers to expose all students to more complex writing and more nonfiction. This may seem like a step in the right direction, but nonfiction generally requires even more background knowledge and vocabulary than fiction does. When nonfiction is combined with the skills-based approach – so it has been in most classrooms – the results can be disastrous. Teachers can put impenetrable text in front of children and let them struggle. Or maybe draw clowns. In a small number of American schools, things are starting to change. A few years ago, there was no such thing as an elementary literacy curriculum that focused on building knowledge. Now there are several, including a few available online at no cost. Some have been adopted by entire school districts, including those with high poverty, such as Baltimore and Detroit, while others are implemented by charter networks or individual schools. The curriculum varies in their details, but all are organized on topics or topics rather than skills. In one, first graders learn about ancient Mesopotamia and second graders study Greek myths. In another, kindergarteners spend months learning about trees, and first graders explore birds. Children usually find these topics, including probably especially historical ones - much more engaging than a constant diet of skills. In schools that use these new curricula, all students struggle with the same texts, some of which are read aloud by teachers. Children also spend time reading the day independently at different levels of complexity. But struggling readers are not limited to simple concepts and vocabulary that they can access through their own reading. Teachers tend to be amazed at how quickly children absorb sophisticated vocabulary (such as fertile and adversary) and learn to make connections between different subjects. As promising as some of the first results are, it seems reasonable to ask: With rising inequality and a growing share of American students coming from low-income families, can any truly level curriculum play? Relatively few schools that have acquired knowledge of basic curriculum building can have problems using test scores to prove that the approach can work, because it could take years for low-income students to acquire enough general knowledge to perform, as well as their richer peers. And yet, there is evidence – on a large scale – that this type of elementary curriculum can reduce inequality, thanks to an unintentional experiment conducted in France. According to E. D. Hirsch Jr. in his book Why Knowledge Matters, until 1989, all French schools were required to adhering to a detailed, content-focused national curriculum. If a child from a low-income family had started public kindergarten at the age of 2, by the age of 10, they would almost have reached a very advantageous child who started at the age of 4. Then, a new law encouraged elementary schools to adopt the American approach, forethought skills, would be critical thinking and learning to learn. The results were dramatic. Over the next 20 years, achievement levels dropped sharply for all students - and the drop was the largest of the most needy. The United States cannot simply adopt the kind of comprehensive national curriculum that France once had (and that countries have surpassed us on international tests still have). By American law and custom, the curriculum is determined at the local level. However, much can be done through individual schools and districts – and even states – to help build the knowledge that all children need to thrive. A few years ago, in a low-income suburb of Dayton, Ohio, a fourth-grade teacher named Sarah Webb decided to try a new curriculum focused on content that her district was thinking of adopting. Adjusting from a skill focus was not easy, but soon Webb could see that students at all levels of reading ability were thriving. They wanted to know more about certain topics presented in the curriculum, so webb took books from the public library to satisfy their curiosity. She told me that after the drive on What makes a big heart? A girl's been talking about plasma all year. That's how Webb wanted to teach, but he never managed to to have that happen. Like other teachers I spoke to, she said children who were previously considered low achievers were particularly captivated. He remembers a cute kid I'm going to call Matt, who's had a history of reading difficulties. As the year went by, Matt woke up, interested in everything the class studied and became a leader in class discussions. He wrote an entire paragraph about Clara Barton - more than she has ever written before - which he proudly read to his parents. His mother said she'd never seen him so excited about school. Before, Webb says, Matt felt permanently sent to what children see as the bad group. But at the end of the year, he wrote Webb a thank-you note. Reading, he told her, it wasn't a fight anymore. This article is adapted from Natalie Wexler's book The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System-And How to Fix It. Stuff.