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Content Literacy Research Paper

"Words are the model, words are the tools, words are the boards, words are the nails," quoted by Richard Rhodes introduces this research paper perfectly. The face of content literacy is changing day by day and educators are starting to focus more on the importance of encouraging content area literacy instruction starting at the earliest levels off education. "The term 'content area literacy' has come to mean more than simply reading and writing to learn with textbooks. It refers to all the literacies in students' lives whether in school or out of school and the myriad forms that today's texts can take, whether textbook or trade book, email, electronic messaging or internet sites." (Moss 47–48)

The question still remains with why should teachers give more attention to and focus to instruction that involves expository text and what is its value in the earlier stages of learning? There are three factors that show why elementary content area literacy instruction is vital to student's future success. These three factors include: Early Exposure, Informational texts that motivate children and informational texts that increase new knowledge domains. Early exposure can help students to build a foundation for student understanding of

expository text that they will come across later in their school years. Informational texts that motivate children help to give students "greater access to this body of literature which helps teacher's to provide students with new ways into literacy and greater motivation for reading." (Moss 49) Informational texts that increase new knowledge domains is critical in helping students to develop the ability to understand the languages of disciplines like mathematics, history, and science. "This content knowledge in a variety of subjects can contribute to schema development that can be invaluable to children as they progress through school." (Moss 49)

When asked to focus on an area of content area literacy, I chose to focus this paper on developing vocabulary and concepts. Research tells us a lot about vocabulary learning and teaching across the different content areas. Vocabulary is very unique to content areas because content area is distinguishable by its language and by the terms that label the different concepts and thoughts of any subject matter.

"Teaching words well means giving students multiple opportunities to develop word meanings and learn how words are conceptually related to one another in the texts they are studying." (Vacca 235) Teaching words well involves assisting students in making connections between their prior knowledge and the vocabulary they come across in the text. This should help to provide students with opportunities to "define, clarify and extend their

knowledge of words and concepts during the course of study." (Vacca 240) It is important to understand that words are labels for concepts which represents much more than the meaning of a single word. Students learn concepts best through meaningful experiences of direct, concrete and purposeful instruction.

Content areas can be a great tool for teachers to provide students with opportunities to learn rich contexts for developing vocabulary. Researchers can say that developing vocabulary while building understanding in the content areas is extremely effective for student growth. The importance of vocabulary development, facets of vocabulary acquisition, prevalent practices in vocabulary instruction and the potential of content areas as a context for vocabulary instruction set the stage for understanding a useful and effective approach to teaching vocabulary in the content areas.

"Researchers have described the powerful, positive relationship between vocabulary and comprehension. Children who know the meaning of most of the words they hear and read comprehend more than those who do not." (Spencer 206) When looking at facets of vocabulary acquisition studies indicate that it is a complex process for children to acquire vocabulary. "Word knowledge is incremental because there are limits to how much information children can learn about a word in a single exposure, word learning usually takes place in small steps over time." (Spencer 207) Word knowledge is

multidimensional and interrelated which can be hard for students to know and understand the meaning or meanings.

The content areas serve as a context for vocabulary development. Content areas provide students with opportunities to develop their vocabulary. "In the content areas, new words and concepts are central to instruction, and thus students need to learn specific meanings, to understand the terms when they hear and read them, to use them correctly in both oral and written communication, and to remember them over time." (Spencer 208) Content areas have specified vocabulary which exposes students to new words and concepts which can really help elementary teachers to gain instructional benefits of content areas that provide a fertile ground for vocabulary development by capitalizing on common principles of literacy and content areas which allows lessons to foster learning in both areas.

When teachers are able to engage their students in meaningful experiences that activate their prior knowledge it helps prepare students for exposure to new learning. "Through first hand experiences, students build the foundation for more sophisticated explanations of the natural world. Providing students with rich, firsthand experiences, then, provides them with bank of concepts that become their vocabulary store." (Spencer 208) When students are involved in rich and varied experiences that relate to concepts, they are able to understand related terms and concepts in a detailed manner as well. Teacher

talk and classroom discussion provides students with additional exposure to terms which can add to students understanding of words' multiple meanings and students are able to see words in different contexts which allow students to build shades of meaning. "When students are provided with text resources that are relevant to the topics they are investigating, they can extend firsthand experiences, providing a new but related context for students to apply effective strategies for gaining knowledge and increasing understanding." (Spencer 209)

When students collaborate they can build their vocabulary development through social interaction. "Interaction provides students with an opportunity to newly acquired terms in engaging contexts."(Spencer 209) This interaction provides students with exposure to hear new terms and use new terms which habitually move into their expressive language.

"Content literacy instruction can be described in terms of strategies for developing student's skills in several major areas: vocabulary, comprehension, study strategies, and writing." (Misulis 13) Instructional strategies that teachers use should be enhancing students learning in all content areas. Teachers see effective instruction as a matter of learning about strategies and learning how to choose and implement them into their classroom.

"The need for rich and meaningful vocabulary knowledge in developing concepts in content areas is documented by research and is generally accepted by classroom teachers." (Monroe 538)   It has been an ongoing effort to figure

out effective ways to provide students with the best instruction in different content areas.

Graphic organizers can be used to activate student's prior knowledge of vocabulary words in assignments as well as clarify the meaning of concepts. "From a strategy perspective, students need to learn how to ask the question, 'What do I know about these words?" (Vacca 250) When teachers use graphic organizers before reading or talking about specific concepts, students are able to build strategy awareness by exploring key terms before assigning text for the students to read. "Graphic organizers are two-dimensional visual arrays showing relationships among concepts." (Monroe 539) These organizers serve as retrieval reminders for information and higher level thinking patterns. When students are able to make their own graphic organizers they are able to actively participate and process their ideas. Ideas that are presented within a graphic organizer uses content vocabulary which can help students anticipate concepts and make connections and see relationships amongst the different material. Teachers also can share with students teacher-constructed graphic organizers from previous lessons which will create awareness and provide models for the instructional strategies.

It is important that teachers prepare before using this strategy by carefully analyzing the vocabulary of the concepts being taught. Teachers should make a list of the terms that are most important for students to

understand and then add any relevant terms that will help students relate what they know to the new material. Teachers must keep in mind that it is important for the graphic organizer to support students' abilities to anticipate connections through the key vocabulary terms in the content.

The next strategy that is important to teaching vocabulary to students is the self-collection strategy. This activity invites students to use their texts to determine how words are defined in their context. "Vocabulary self-collection strategy (VSS) promotes the long-term acquisition of language in an academic discipline. As a result of the repeated use of the strategy, students learn how to make decisions related to the importance of concepts and how to use context to determine what words mean. The VSS strategy has been found to be effective for teaching word meaning in context to students across ability levels and for helping students build independence as word learners." (Vacca 255) Teacher should present the vocabulary self-collection strategy by announcing his or her nominated word to the class and modeling for students on how to respond to three questions. During the presentations the teacher should facilitate the discussion and write the words on the board and their meanings so that students can see them and make clarifications if necessary. Students lastly record the words and their meanings. The vocabulary self-collection strategy allows the teacher to have a set of student-generated words that can be implemented into future vocabulary activities.

"Showing learners how to construct meaning for unfamiliar words encountered during reading helps them develop strategies needed to monitor comprehension and increase their own vocabularies." (Vacca 266) When students develop their own strategies they are able to use them across all content areas.

"The research-based content area vocabulary assessments can help teachers feel confident in taking an assertive stance in developing vocabulary assessments based on their own curriculum needs." (Stahl 566) Vocabulary instruction plays a key role in content area literacy. "One of the challenges of teaching disciplinary vocabulary effectively is the paucity of available, classroom-friendly vocabulary assessments that can be used to inform instruction and to measure vocabulary growth, especially with the fastest growing sector of the school-age population—ELLs (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2007)." (Stahl 566)

Vocabulary is often assessed at an end of a unit by using the fill in blank, matching or multiple choice tasks which are shallow measures of word knowledge. Word knowledge can make assessment somewhat difficult. "Knowing a word involves more than knowing a word's definition. Word knowledge is multifaceted and can be characterized in various ways." (Stahl 567)   These facets include incrementality, multidimensionality and receptive duality.

"Assessments may emphasize the measurement of vocabulary breadth or vocabulary depth. As defined by Anderson and Freebody (1981), vocabulary breadth refers to the quantity of words for which students may have some level of knowledge. Multiple-choice tests at the end of units or standardized tests tend to measure breadth only. The breadth of the test itself may be extremely selective if it is testing only the knowledge of words from a particular story, a science unit, or some passive understanding of the word like a basic definition or synonym." (Stahl 569) It is important that the vocabulary test's purpose is in arrangement with each participant's purpose.

Teachers should feel confident in taking an assertive stance in developing vocabulary assessments based on their own curriculum and what works for their classes' needs.

In my opinion, if today's teachers are looking to help students meet the literacy demands of the 21st century it is vital that the elementary curriculum is reinvented to give content area literacy a place across all subjects. Students need to learn strategies and learning tools that will assist them throughout their lives. The age that we are coming into is very technologically sound. I think teachers need to start to get familiar with new technology and different internet tools that can really engage students. Technology is familiar to students and they are motivated and can relate using technology to their lives. Computers create new opportunities for reading, writing and collaborating. Students are being presented the same information but in a way that is a bit

more a familiar to them. By changing the way the information is absorbed,

processed and used, technology has a huge influence on students learning.

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