

## *Curriculum and Academics*

### Background Knowledge

Our Lake Highland students bring so many experiences and so much prior knowledge to the classroom, that teaching them and planning instruction for them is a joy!

We might be introducing the travels of Marco Polo and students already know about Mongolia because they have traveled to China with their families and have a wall map in their family room on which they highlight or flag their travels. They might already know that Marco Polo was Venetian because they watched a documentary of his journeys to the Far East on the PBS channel. We might begin a unit on the importance of the rain forest and students can already tell us about deforestation in Belize because they spend their summers in Belize. They know that the plants and microorganisms in the Amazon rainforests support our pharmaceutical antibiotic development because they spend a lot of time with an uncle who is a research scientist. We might ask our students to use an Excel spreadsheet or other computer application on a group project and the student who has a summer job or internship may have terrific practical experience already with common office computer programs therefore the new learning is accelerated or much more thorough due to these prior understandings. The power of this interplay of background knowledge, vocabulary, prior experience and learning can not be underestimated!

A student's academic success and confidence is closely related to the ability to make sense of new learning. New learning is "attached" to prior learning like Velcro. Prior learning and experiences, size of vocabulary and practice in discussing intellectual topics can all buoy a student's confidence and classroom success. Prior learning comes in a variety of ways from real life experiences, to listening to stories told by family members, friends or experts, to quality television or video, to classroom learning, to reading. Then having conversations about these learning experiences help to refine thinking, correct misconceptions and practice articulating understandings. More importantly, discussions and multiple experiences help all this that students learn move from a one-time experience and short-term memory to long-term memory and thus to a greater store of background knowledge.

Think about the cumulative effect of year after year of layering background knowledge and new learning and processing. A student's vocabulary has the potential to increase by the thousands each year! Likewise, a student's confidence and intellectual prowess will grow.

Now think about the inverse situation. A student is in a classroom where the teacher introduces a discussion of the judicial system. Some students have toured a county courthouse including the judges' chambers, some have had discussions with their parents about the role of the President and other current event topics, some students have toured Washington DC, some students have read *To Kill a Mockingbird* or about the Scopes trial. Some students have none of these experiences or discussions. The learning is brand

new for them, labored and may not move from short-term to long-term unless repeated three or four times.

Background knowledge is a framework for new understandings and creates the “climate” for long term retention. Parents can help students gain background knowledge and vocabulary by simply enjoying all kinds of interactions with their children and families: encourage intellectual interests, watch good television, read and talk about books, activate background knowledge by engaging in analytical discussions, travel, appreciate nature and all its depth, share your thoughts and childhood stories, and the list goes on.

Our whole community of learners reaps the benefits of students with a sizable store of prior knowledge and experience. When our teachers help their students activate this prior knowledge, vocabulary and understandings, we can accelerate lessons, explore more depth, teach higher level and more precise vocabulary usage, and facilitate livelier more complex discussions in our classrooms. What a welcome challenge! What a joy!

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