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Research into Practice

Recovery and Rebuilding for Unfinished Learning in English/Language Arts

by Elfrieda (Freddy) H. Hiebert, Ph.D.

The room hasn't changed much since you closed the door on Friday afternoon, March 13, 2020. True, the shades of green on the St. Patrick's Day display have faded, as has the typical classroom smell of whiteboard markers and kids. The room may be the same, but you and the students returning to it are not the same. We all have endured an unprecedented period of history.

For some students, the year away from in-person classes may have meant more free time, although they continued to have structured time where they "did school." For other students, schoolwork was not a priority because households have dealt with a host of challenges. My focus in this essay is on students in the latter group, at least those with some reading proficiency. For kindergartners and first graders who were in the early stages of learning to read, critical insights into the alphabetic system may be lacking. For students from second through 12th grade who had foundational reading proficiency but used it infrequently over the past year, solutions for addressing what they lost from sporadic English/Language Arts (ELA) experiences are similar. The examples in this essay will focus on grade four, but the principles apply across grades.

How Can Students' Lost ELA Learning Be Recovered and Rebuilt?

To understand what has been lost or left unfinished in ELA from an incomplete year of schooling, revisiting the ELA goals relative to other subject areas might help. In science, social studies, and mathematics, state and national standards are specific regarding the content that should be learned in distinct subject areas at different grade levels. For example, a typical standard for fourth-grade science is knowledge about how the young of mammals begin life relative to the young of fish, insects, or birds. Students whose learning experiences were erratic are likely not to have acquired such specific building blocks.

ELA standards describe processes such as the following for grade four: "Explain how an author uses reasons and evidence to support particular points in a text." Making connections between reasons and evidence to build conclusions is essential to comprehension. But typical standards such as these fail to describe the texts or

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topics to enable fourth graders to make these connections. On science assessments, fourth graders are likely to be quizzed about the distinguishing features of mammals. By contrast, the texts in which fourth graders are to locate reasons and evidence can be about new technologies for studying mummies one year and the challenges of a girl who enters an all-male wrestling contestå the next.

Simply practicing exercises for finding main ideas will not fill the gap left by a year of erratic reading. The knowledge and vocabulary that come from extensive reading have been lost. To illustrate what less reading over a school year means for students, consider the case of typical fourth graders. Fourth-grade readers are likely to read 300,000 words over a school year during ELA classroom sessions. About 3% of these words are predicted to be new for students and, of this group of 9,000 words, about 20% might be added to students' reading vocabularies. That is, typical students would have learned about 1,800 to 2,000 words from classroom reading. There is no precise list of 2,000 words associated with fourth grade (or any other grade), but an analysis of fourth-grade texts gives a sense of the kinds of words and underlying concepts that might be encountered, including words related to people (e.g., *phantom* and *hermit*) and to places (e.g., *belfry* and *atrium*).

How do teachers make up for this loss in vocabulary—and in the content the words represent? The answer is this: Students need to be immersed in reading texts that are rich in content and relevance. Only through extensive experience with texts will students gain new knowledge and vocabulary as well as the facility to apply strategies, such as finding evidence to support a text's main idea.

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There are no prescribed texts for all students, nor are there specific topics for specific grades as Hirsch (2020) has recommended. Students returning to school as fifth graders do not need to read a prescribed set of fourth-grade texts. They will encounter similar types of vocabulary—new words for people (e.g., *sage* and *urchin*) and places (e.g., *aqueduct* and *rookery*)—provided they read extensively; the specific words may differ. Through extensive reading, however, students' vocabularies will expand and deepen, as will their background knowledge and their strategies for using texts to acquire and integrate new ideas.

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The way to rebuild and recover literacy proficiency is extensive reading of content-rich, relevant, and meaningful texts. This exposure occurs in two contexts: (a) occasions where students read content-rich texts on their own and (b) community events where teachers read content-rich texts aloud.

Occasions Where Students Are Responsible for Reading Content-Rich Texts

One way to engage students in reading is to provide texts that are conceptually rich and relevant to their interests. The texts students are given to read during ELA periods often skip from one topic to another. A text during whole-group reading may be a story about a family stranded in a flood. In a small group, students may read about the causes of sneezes and sniffles, whereas their independent reading assignment addresses cave exploration. Unconnected content leaves students with a tenuous level of understanding of the reasons for reading. When the topics are connected, background knowledge and interest in the content develop.

Students' vocabularies also grow when texts are topically connected, but this does not occur when topics are scattered. For example, new vocabulary in the story about a flood-stranded family may include *evacuate* and *launch*; in the text on sneezes and sniffles, *mucus* and *ache*; and *stalagmites* and *stalactites* in the text on cave exploration. A deep understanding of the concepts these words represent is unlikely to develop from such superficial exposure.

By contrast, consider students' experience with the set of texts on the topic "Rebuilding and Restoring Our Environment" in Table 1. Topic-specific words such as *biodegradable* and *toxic* and general academic words such as *product* and *production* or *reduce* and *reduction* often occur once or twice in a single text. These words have features that can make them challenging for students to read, including complex and abstract meanings, especially when the words are several syllables long. One or two encounters with complex, abstract, and long words are unlikely to result in word ownership. Across a topically connected set of texts, however, the same words can be expected to appear. A critical group of topically related words is repeated in the text set on Recycling in Table 1. Each word in the semantic map in Figure 1 appears an average of eight times across the text set. As students encounter the same words in different contexts, their understanding of a word's meaning becomes more nuanced and automatic—as does their knowledge of the topic.

Table 1: Illustrations of Topically Connected Text Sets

Topic	Passage	Text Type & Length
Rebuilding & Restoring Our Environment	*The top 10 ways you can reduce waste* (Winnick, 2021)	Informational book
	Trashing paradise (Khan, 2021)	Extended Informational Article
	Recycled Island (2021)	Informational Article
	Facts for now—Recycling (2021)	Informational Article
	Recycle that Gum (2019)	Informational Article
	Ban on Plastic (Hiebert, 2013)	Set of Informational Articles
How People Accomplish Goals & Persevere	*Reaching for the moon* (Alwdrin, 2008)	Biographical book
	Life at the top (Ellis, 2021)	Extended Informational Article
	Out of my mind (Draper, 2012)	Realistic fiction
	Mama's window (Rubright, 2002)	Realistic fiction
	Barbed wire baseball: *How one man brought hope to the Japanese internment camps of WW II* (Moss, 2016)	Biographical narrative
	Young Heroes: Katie Stagliano's Dream (Hiebert & Kloss, 2014)	Informational Article

The semantic map in Figure 1 also illustrates a way for students to keep a record of new ideas from a text set. This recognition of what they learn can sustain their reading habits.

In selecting and assigning texts, we must be attentive to the lengths of reading assignments. As students transition back to classrooms, sustaining attention to tasks may be challenging for some students. When lengths of reading period are appropriate, students can establish a pattern of successfully focusing on tasks. A sense of accomplishment goes a long way toward wanting to read again. The texts on recycling in Table 1 were chosen because they can be chunked into meaningful sections. For example, each of The *Top 10 Ways You Can Reduce Waste* consists of an intact section of approximately 350 words.

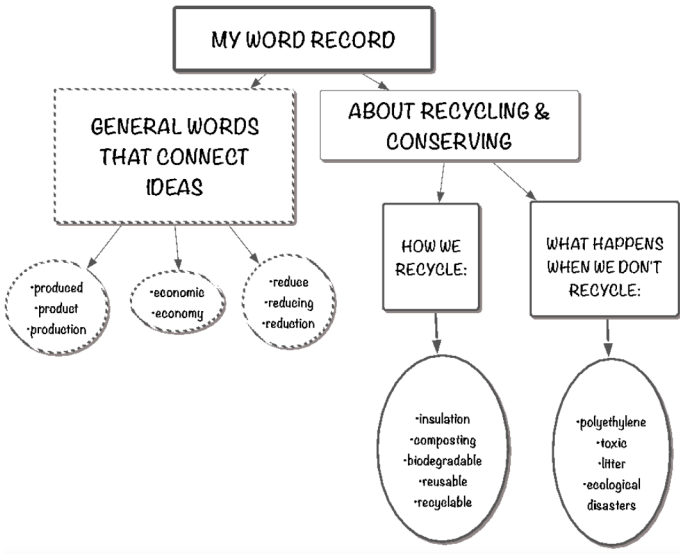

Figure 1: A student's record of words learned from topically connected texts on "Rebuilding and Restoring Our Environment"

The chunks of texts that students read grow longer over time, but attention to task length does not mean less proficient readers should receive shorter texts as a long-term solution. Some programs deliberately provide shorter texts for students under the guise of support. Challenged readers have been found to benefit from receiving longer and more conceptually coherent texts (Lupo et al., 2019), which makes sense. After all, reading less is not the way to get better at reading. Students gain proficiency only through engaging in the activity.

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Whatever their source, texts should build knowledge around a topic. Remember: Building a body of knowledge and having students recognize and retain that knowledge are critical. When students understand how to use texts to attain knowledge, they can extend that knowledge to other topics. The amount of information currently available to human beings is astounding. The instructional aim is to give

students the tools they need to use texts to learn, and own new knowledge.

Organizing texts around bodies of knowledge does not mean texts must always be informational. Narrative texts are the means whereby humans share their challenges and perceptions of the social world. The pandemic's circumstances make stories especially appropriate for understanding how people have solved problems and met challenges in the past.

A group of narrative texts anchors the theme of accomplishment and perseverance (see Table 1). This topic seems especially relevant to this unprecedented time. The perseverance and accomplishment topic lets students' pandemic experiences be acknowledged within the classroom community.

Among the texts included on this topic in Table 1 are stories of actual people, Buzz Aldrin and Kenichi Zenimura, who have faced obstacles and persevered. There are also informational articles, such as a description of the Kalenjin of Kenya, a group that has produced many successful long-distance runners. Fictionalized stories are also included; by definition, fiction is a construction of an author, not a factual summary or commentary. Realistic fiction, however, can deal with insights into the human experience that can be difficult to capture, even in biographies and autobiographies. As an example, consider Sharon Draper's *Out of My Mind* (2012). Draper described her book as a work of fiction, but she also acknowledged her copious research on disabilities and her own experience as the mother of a disabled daughter.

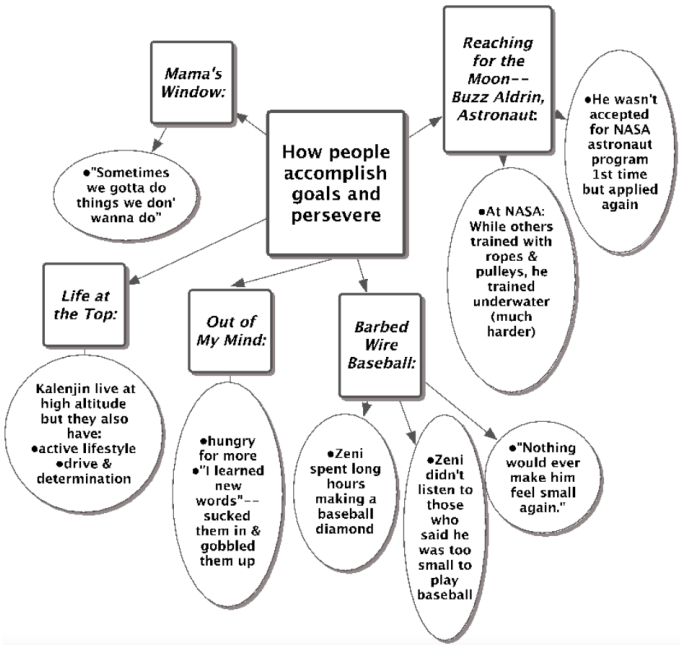

Figure 2: Student's notes for Topically connected texts on "How people accomplish goals and persevere"

> "…support them in responding to texts in meaningful ways that do not drain the joy from reading."

When students are engaged with worthwhile texts, a critical part of the process is keeping a record of what they have read. The follow-up activities can be overwhelming. Our goal as educators, especially as students readjust to classroom life, should be to support them in responding to texts in meaningful ways that do not drain the joy from reading. Journals and semantic maps can be two means of keeping a record. Figure 2 depicts a student's notes in the form of a semantic map; the notes are derived from texts on human accomplishment and perseverance.

Community Events Where Teachers Read Content-Rich Texts Aloud

We need to do more than simply get students back on track. We must recognize that children, like adults, need to feel the vibrancy of community and a sense of hope. What can create community and inspire us? Literature. Literature is where human beings have told their stories for centuries—stories of resilience and resourcefulness in the face of social, racial, gendered, political, and economic challenges.

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Read-aloud events aren't optional or special events in virtual, blended, or face-to-face classrooms. Read-alouds are now central to the building of community. Students

of all ages can benefit from literature that inspires and gives hope and from the camaraderie that occurs when literature is read aloud to a group. For a fourth-grade teacher, the stories might revolve around the ways people support their communities, such as *Schomburg: The Man Who Built a Library* (Weatherford, 2019) or *Wangari Maathai: The Woman Who Planted Millions of Trees* (Prevot, 2017). A middle-grade teacher might read poetry presented with beautiful illustrations, such as Box: *Henry Brown Mails Himself to Freedom* (Weatherford, 2020) or *The Undefeated* (Alexander, 2019). For first graders, literature might direct their attention to the beauty found in nature, such as *They Say Blue* (Tamaki, 2017) or *Tiny Perfect Things* (Clark, 2018).

Read-alouds are not just for elementary students. Students of all ages need to be inspired and have their hopes rekindled. With older students, short stories such as those in *Flying Lessons* (Oh, 2018) or *Hope Nation* (Brock, 2018) can be a source. But I've found that even with young adults, high-quality picture books with their compelling content and beautiful illustrations can be a source of inspiration and community building.

> "Students of all ages need to be inspired and have their hopes rekindled."

The first question teachers ask is "Which books?" Frankly, there's no list of perfect books for every student everywhere. Literature is meant to inspire community and hope, which means the more immediately relevant a book is to a particular community, the more hope it will inspire. When the story is relevant to us, it makes us smile and laugh. It can provide respite from our challenges as well as possible directions.

When finding where to begin, we can look at themes that unite us as humans. Two fairly universal themes are music and food. These are topics that can draw on students' experiences during the pandemic, when food and music could be the highlights of otherwise monotonous days. Table 2 illustrates some favorites of mine on these topics. Most are oriented to elementary students, but several will especially interest older students, such as the story of John Lennon in *John's Secret Dreams*, which includes lyrics by Lennon (Rappaport, 2014). Similarly, *Chef Roy Choi and the Street Food Remix* relates the experience of Roy Choi, who was born in Korea but grew up in the United States.

Table 2: Examples of Topically Connected Books for Read-Alouds

Music	*Ada's Violin: The story of the recycled orchestra of Paraguay* (Hood, 2016)
	Esquivel! Space-Age Sound Artist (Wood, 2016)
	Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue (Celenza, 2006)
	Hold on to Your Music: The Inspiring True Story of the Children of Willesden Lane (Golabeck & Cohen, 2021)
	John's Secret Dreams: The John Lennon Story (Rappaport, 2004)
	Trombone Shorty (Andrews, 2015)
	When Angels Sing: The Story of Rock Legend Carlos Santana (Mahin, 2018)
	When Marian Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson (Ryan, 2002)
Food	*Alice Waters and the Trip to Delicious* (Martin,2014)
	Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic (Lo, 2017)
	Bring Me Some Apples and I'll Make You a Pie: A Story About Edna Lewis (Gourley, 2016)
	Chef Roy Choi and the street food remix (Martin, 2017)
	Diana's White House Garden (Carbone, 2016)
	Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table (Martin, 2016)
	The Tortilla Factory (Paulsen, 1998)

It tells a story about creation as Choi combines the cuisine of his home culture with that of the Central and South American neighborhoods of Los Angeles (Martin, 2017).

The title choices and book levels for a topic, even one as universal as music or food, will vary considerably as teachers and students discuss their personal experiences and preferences. Including student-created texts and art can make read-aloud events particularly compelling. Multiple topics can be sources of inspiration and joy. Read-alouds of high-quality books are essential at this point in history—to remember what is beautiful and good and noble. And in the process, we can create communities of hope and inspiration.

> "Read-alouds of high-quality books are essential at this point in history—to remember what is beautiful and good and noble."

Conclusion

Over centuries, human beings have recorded their experiences and knowledge in texts, first with inscriptions in stone, then paper, and now bytes. A time of rebuilding allows us to revisit our ELA programs to ensure that learning from texts—both about the social and physical worlds—is at the center. The aim of ELA instruction is to ensure strong vocabularies and background knowledge in students, not simply a set of unrelated pieces of information and a scattershot repertoire of skills and strategies.

> “Recognition of the effects and experiences of the pandemic are part of this rebuilding process.”

Recognition of the effects and experiences of the pandemic are part of this rebuilding process. The learning of children and young people may not have been academic but the experiences of the pandemic need to be integrated and recognized as part of the rebuilding process. Through narrative and informational texts, teachers can support students in gaining understanding and perspective. Through literature, discussions, and writing, classroom communities can be built that fill students with hope, inspiration, recognition of shared values, and visions of possibility for the future.

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From *myView Literacy:*

Recycled island (2021)

Facts for now—Recycling (2021)

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