

The Vocabulary Crisis

How Teachers Can Combat the Word Gap

Introduction

Anyone who asks a teacher about the importance of education should be ready for quite a lecture. After all, the reasons are endless.

Education expands our knowledge.

Education makes us better people.

Education pushes the world forward.

There is always a case to be made on the importance of school.

Many of these reasons simply come back to the idea that learning more is *always* good. Expanding our mind is never a bad thing.

But, there is a very **pragmatic** reason behind education as well. One that is especially important for students who have come poor or low-income families.

Put simply? More education means more income.

Even in an age with rising tuition costs and student loans, education has remained one of the most reliable ways to ensure a higher level of income.

It isn't hard to find studies that show a very close relationship between one's future level of income and their education. The more education someone has, the higher income they have.

Even in an age with rising tuition costs and student loans, education has remained one of the most reliable ways to ensure a higher level of income.

While you may find exceptions, the rule remains that the better education you have, the better your income will be.

Of course, this means the reverse is true. A child that does not manage to graduate from high school faces grim prospects when they look to the future. Without a high school diploma, they're likely to earn **six times less** than those with professional degrees. Worst still, they'll even have trouble *finding* a job. Unemployment rates are consistently higher for

those without further education. There's simply less demand for a less educated workforce.

The influence of education on one's income does not even begin at higher education. Even a high school diploma can have a major impact on income level. Those with a high school diploma earned **double** the median income of those without a high school diploma (\$41,190 compared to \$22,320).

Pragmatically, education is good. Generally, the more education you have, the better chance you'll have a higher income.

Now, this paints education as the perfect solution. To help our children do better, simply encourage education.

Like all things in life, it can never be that simple.

The Problem for Students from Low-Income Families

There are clear differences in the education rates of students of different backgrounds. Even with an <u>increasing number of Americans</u> <u>attending universities</u>, there's much work to be done.

One's socioeconomic status is defined by a variety of factors. Predominately income, but also the education level of their parents, financial security, and the social perceptions they have. A low SES is related to lower educational achievement, access to resources, and poverty.

Education (of any level) can provide a higher level of income, which can allow students from a lower SES to 'climb' to a new status. More income can provide security, access to educational and medical resources, and a better psychological well-being.

Unfortunately, the disadvantages faced by Americans of lower SES in regards to education are severe. In 2012, the rate of low SES students

"EVEN WITH LOW SCORES, STUDENTS FROM A BETTER SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND WERE FOUR TIMES AS LIKELY TO EARN A DEGREE who had not completed high school was higher than the rates of both the middle and high SES students *combined*.

However, if a student has a high socioeconomic status, then the odds are weighed heavily in their favor. For example, even though they scored in the lowest quartile of their academic tests, 21% of students with high SES earned a bachelor's degree. Compare that statistic to the measly 5 and 8% of students in the other levels. Even with low scores, students from a better socioeconomic background were **four times as likely** to earn a degree.

It's a clear problem. But why is there such a huge educational gap between students of various socioeconomic statuses?

There are many reasons. For one, schools that are attended by students from low-income families tend to have less funding. This means that there is a huge lack of resources available for their students such as textbooks, teachers, and college prep materials. Schools in more affluent regions, however, have access to more funding for materials and can even adopt new technology and teaching practices with more ease.

But, this academic gap extends beyond just the resources available at schools. Research indicates that children from low SES households and communities develop academic skills slower than children from higher SES groups.

So, it isn't just access to material, students from low-income backgrounds actually have a harder time just competing academically. This makes further education, and higher income potential in the future, even more difficult.

Why do these students develop academic skills slower? Is it a lack of resources? Outdated classroom methods?

The problem, research says, occurs before these students have even made it into the classrooms.

The Gap That Our Students Face

THE WORD GAP
IS ONE OF THE
MOST
IMPORTANT
ISSUES FACING
CHILDREN FROM
LOW-INCOME
BACKGROUNDS

During the first years of her life, a child with a low socioeconomic status hears <u>roughly thirty million words less</u> than children from more affluent families.

Dubbed **The Word Gap**, these thirty million words form a crucial part of a child's development. Their importance extends far beyond childhood, as the Gap can lead to disparities in <u>long-term educational and health outcomes</u>, <u>earnings</u>, <u>and family stability</u>.

Why are these words so important? Well, for one, they are vital as the vocabulary baseline within the child's brain. Not just for words that the child can say, but for how they interact and understand the world around them

As students draw from the knowledge they have already acquired, this puts children from low-income families at a disadvantage. Less than half of poor children show up to school prepared with the early math and reading skills required.

And the Gap doesn't close once children are enrolled in school.

Because they enter unprepared, students suffering due to the Gap find themselves struggling to keep up with students of other socioeconomic statuses. The Gap continuously widens over the years as students struggle academically. In fact, a student's academic success at age nine and ten can be <u>linked to the number of words they heard</u> in their early life.

The previous Presidential administration (under President Barack Obama) saw the Word Gap as an opportunity in the fight against economic inequality. They launched various initiatives to help educate parents about the importance of a child's early development. The hope is that children who enroll in school will be better prepared to learn and will not fall behind just because of their background.

However, most initiatives looking to close the Word Gap focus on a child's early development. What about children that have already begun their schooling? What can schools and teachers do to help the students under their care?

The Vocabulary Crisis

One of the most prominent effects the Word Gap has on a child is on their reading comprehension.

Reading requires a vocabulary stockpile. For us to read and comprehend a text, we need to be familiar with almost every word on the page. The better acquainted we are with the words we do know, then the higher chance we have to infer the meaning of words we don't know.

If a student possesses strong reading comprehension, then they will be much more equipped to succeed academically.

Essentially, the better our sense of vocabulary, the better we can read. If a student possesses strong reading comprehension, then they will be much more equipped to succeed academically.

Unfortunately, our sense of vocabulary starts very early, the same time the Word Gap begins to appear. What we hear when we are young forms the basis of our knowledge, and we draw from it when we learn new words. The smaller that basis, the less we learn.

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When it comes to vocabulary acquisition, a small early advantage grows into a much bigger one unless we intervene very intelligently to help the disadvantaged student learn words at an accelerated rate.

It's a trend that continues throughout a student's career. A first grader that performs well will know twice as many words as a low-performing one, and then this gap will grow. By 12th grade, the high performer knows about four times as many words as her counterpart. This is because most vocabulary growth comes from immersion. As we encounter new words throughout our life, our current vocabulary is what allows us to understand and adopt them. The more vocabulary we have, the easier it is.

So, there is a Catch-22 for students. The more vocabulary you know, the more vocabulary you can learn. But, enter school without a strong sense of vocabulary, and you'll fall behind.

This creates a **Vocabulary Crisis** for students of low-income families. Children from lower income homes have less of an opportunity to learn vocabulary, and then when they enter school, they're already behind other children.

Without an adequate baseline of vocabulary, students with a low SES will only drift further behind academically.

Facing the Crisis and Giving Students a Chance

The most obvious way to combat this is to improve a student's baseline of vocabulary. Even if they're victims of the Word Gap, by focusing on vocabulary acquisition teachers can give their students an opportunity to increase their academic performance. After all, a stronger knowledge of vocabulary will allow students to increase their reading comprehension, which allows them to become more easily immersed in text.

Unfortunately, there is a major problem with this. Our current methods of learning vocabulary have become outdated.

Everyone who has attended school is familiar with flash cards and rote learning. Through brute repetition, we can learn new things.

Rote learning has years of study behind it to strengthen its case. If you're looking to learn and recall facts, there are few better ways to do so. And if our goal is to have students recite the definitions of a vocabulary word, then rote learning is ideal.

However, when it comes to increasing a student's sense of vocabulary to improve their long-term academic success, rote learning comes with a price.

There must be a focused attempt to increase a student' vocabulary without resorting solely to drills or rigid memorization.

Vocabulary that has been memorized through drills, but not immersion, is likely to be forgotten soon after it has been learned. This is because our brain removes information that is not accessed after learning. Immersion allows us to continuously recall information, helping to solidify it our brain and establish new neural connections.

Instead, there must be a focused way to increase a student's vocabulary without resorting solely to drills or rigid memorization. Students must be able to not just *recite* the words they learn, but understand them.

The ideal way would consist of a student capable of:

- Understanding the word when they encounter it
- Using the word in a variety of settings or casual conversation
- Considering the word in the major idea of a text
- Using the word as a context clue for unfamiliar words

Resolving this Vocabulary Crisis extends beyond just teaching vocabulary for vocabulary's sake. If a student <u>attempts to learn a new word in isolation</u>, such as through flash cards, without connecting the word to other words or idea, they'll forget them. This is particularly true when learning words for use on a test, with no purpose or consideration of the word once the exam has passed.

By adjusting how we teach students vocabulary, such as focusing on various methods in order to create multiple connections in the brain for each word, multiple victories can be achieved.

- For one, students will have a greater chance at recalling the word in the future. Since they have not just forced the word and its associated definition into their memory, but rather connected it to various ideas. Once learned, it is there to stay
- 2) Students will possess a greater understanding of their own vocabulary. For example, the word "Victory" does not just mean "to win". It is the opposite of losing, it means to do well on a test that you thought you

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- would fail, it means resolving a conflict. The meaning of words extends beyond their dictionary definitions
- 3) An eventual overall improvement in literacy. Focusing on vocabulary is a slow burn, and will not see overall academic improvements immediately after implementation. However, by giving students the opportunity to increase their baseline of vocabulary, you can improve overall reading comprehension