Practical ways to build background knowledge - with Meghan Hein

Triple R Teaching Podcast #226

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Today I'm excited to welcome Meghan Hein to the podcast. Meghan is a classroom teacher who shares wonderful examples and insights from teaching on her Instagram account, @alwaysmoretolearn, which I highly recommend following.

I'm excited today that she's here to talk to me all about background knowledge. This is part of our series of quick, actionable tips from teachers. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Meghan!

Meghan Hein:

Hi, Anna. Thank you so much for having me!

Anna Geiger:

Thank you for being here today to talk about background knowledge. Before we do that, could you introduce us to yourself and tell us what you've been doing in education?

Meghan Hein:

Absolutely. I am Meghan Hein, and I'm a second grade teacher in the San Diego County area. I work at a dual language school as a second grade teacher.

I've been in education for about 20 years now. Initially I was a second grade teacher for a few years, and then when Common Core standards came out, I was removed from my classroom to a more district-level role of supporting teachers with implementation of Common Core and did that for a few years. Then I found myself back at one site where I was working as a reading interventionist, supporting both teachers and groups of students with intervention.

Then in 2020, right at the heart of COVID, there was an opportunity to go back to the classroom. I had really missed that part of teaching. I was happy to jump back in, even though was a really difficult time to be back in the classroom, and I have gladly been there ever since learning new things and learning alongside my students.

Anna Geiger:

We're going to talk today about background knowledge because that is something that maybe teachers don't always think a lot about when having students read a passage or read to them, or maybe we just assume that they have this knowledge that they don't have. Let's talk about what background knowledge is and why it's so important.

Meghan Hein:

Background knowledge could be anything that a student has and knows… It's fact knowledge or background on a topic that's presented to them and whatever tasks they're doing. Whether they're reading about something or writing about something, it's everything that they bring with them to that task.

Anna Geiger:

Why is it so important that students have appropriate background knowledge when reading text or listening to it?

Meghan Hein:

I have been dipping a little bit into more of learning science. As I'm learning about that, I see even more of a need for background knowledge in understanding that students have, and all of us have, such a small working memory. And so when students don't have a lot of background knowledge on a topic that we're asking them to read about, they're focused so much on trying to make sense of what they're reading, as they're working to decode and do all the other things, that it really complicates the process.

It can be a really simple and easy way to help students by providing them with background knowledge as they are beginning to read or to write about a topic.

Anna Geiger:

Do you have any do's or don'ts for building background knowledge?

Meghan Hein:

Yes, I have plenty. When I'm thinking about some of the do's that have worked for me…

I'm lucky to have a high-quality, knowledge-building curriculum. I think a great start for teachers is having some kind of thematic units built around topics that really help support background knowledge. My students are reading different thematic stories throughout the year and complex texts related to those themes.

But if you don't have that, I always just say to prioritize things like your history standards and your science standards. You want to be looking at topics, like if you're learning about habitats, and then bringing literature in or writing in that relates to those kinds of topics. Then you're supporting their background knowledge on these kinds of thematic ideas that will support them as they go up through the grades and into secondary, and they'll carry that with them.

That goes along with the idea of also making sure that you're not siloing your writing. I have experienced that so much in my elementary teaching career. Our writing is often siloed. Students, when they're writing an opinion piece, they're writing about what pet would they rather have or their favorite flavor of something, or food.

We can get so much more out of students by having them use the academic vocabulary that they're learning, and the things that they're reading about, and using that information they're learning and building background knowledge on, when we incorporate writing topics into that kind of thematic idea that they're learning about.

Another idea I have would be... For me what works really well is just a different way of looking at *how* we're teaching. I'm still using the same types of text that I would generally that were with my curriculum. But before when it was so skill-based and skill-driven, I was missing a lot of what I wanted my students to get out of the whole purpose of why we were reading.

With that, now when I think about these texts that I'm presenting to my students, I think about the purpose of why the writer wrote them and humanizing the whole experience of why we're reading it and ourselves as the audience. I like to think about what my students need in order to make sense of what that writer has for us.

An easy way to do that is by giving them a quick little snippet of a multimedia presentation, or sometimes I'll look for read-alouds that are linked to that same topic. What can I front-load my students with?

For example, we do a unit on learning about things long ago. Within that, my students are tasked with reading this complex text of a fictional narrative of a pioneer girl living on the Oregon Trail. I know my seven and eight year olds have very little to connect with that historical time period, but there's a little clip I find on YouTube that's about the life of a pioneer. We watch that, it's like a five minute clip, and it gives them all of this background knowledge. Then they're asking questions about it, and they're perceiving all of this new information visually that they then can bring into the text that they're reading.

Then when we're reading this narrative, they have so much more to connect to it. I just imagine that these little movies are running through their mind as they're reading her experience now. It makes that reading so much easier for them, again, freeing up that cognitive load so that they can actually make sense of the nitty gritty things I need them to look at in the text as they read it.

Anna Geiger:

There's a lot of good stuff there, so I'm going to pull some of it out. I love how you talked about how the point of this is front-loading so that they can make sense of what the author is trying to tell them. That's the whole point, right?

In the past, in balanced literacy days, there was a lot of strategy of the week or strategy of the month. We were focused on the strategy versus the content.

But when you are choosing quality literature or, as you said, choosing quality literature that also fits a theme... When you build background knowledge, it helps for a variety of texts they're going to be reading, not just for a single text, so then you're thinking about things differently. You're focused on the content versus a strategy. You're thinking more about what strategies can I do to help them understand this text?

One of those may be building background knowledge. One way you mentioned doing that was showing a quick YouTube video.

You also mentioned reading a simple book. I know there are so many of those really simple nonfiction books that you can get that you could read aloud to your kids, even probably up to third grade. One of them I think was Pebble Books, and I don't remember all of them, but I used to read them to my kids when they were little. There are a lot of really simple nonfiction books that are like a sentence a page, but they've got great pictures and they just basically give you the overview that you could read in just two minutes.

Then maybe before you read, tell the students that you want them to think about one thing they learned from this really simple book, because it's going to help them understand this harder text.

Then you also talked about not siloing writing. In other words, the writing work they do should be connected to the reading. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Meghan Hein:

Yeah, so it's just creating topics for them to write on that are still aligned to your standards, but that are connected to the text or the topics that they're reading about. Then when we're asking them to cite evidence, they're going back into their texts, and they have a lot of thoughtful things to think and to say about what they've been reading because they have an abundant amount of knowledge to bring to what they're writing about.

It really levels the playing field for all of our students, whereas sometimes when we have them write about topics that are unrelated, we don't know what our students are bringing with them in terms of background knowledge.

Whatever's present in their minds about *this* topic, we know what they have because we've been the ones that have been crafting this environment for them to learn about it so they have so much more to say.

I was going to connect, too, to what you were saying about the read alouds. One thing that's been really helpful for me is giving students a coherent set of texts to read on their own independently.

There are still components of my curriculum that I use that are balanced literacy driven, so I've got all of these leveled texts that are aligned to the topic. Rather than use them in my small groups the way that they were intended, I've just been breaking them up into what I call "expert bins" so that my students have all sorts of different levels of texts on these similar topics.

Then they're building their vocabulary and they're not limited to what they can be reading and which books they have to read. They can read whatever books they want to, and they're more motivated to look at them because now they think of themselves as experts on these topics. They're really interested and curious about looking into them. They make so many connections like, "We just read about this!" or "We watched a video on this. Look, it's in this book too!"

It's been a really fun thing to see their motivation increase and their learning. Truly kids aren't excited to learn about the strategies that help them to be better readers, but they're excited to talk about the topics that they're learning about and the knowledge that they're building with you.

Anna Geiger:

What do you do when you have, as every teacher does, kids with vastly different background knowledge on a particular topic? How do you handle that when you're thinking about how to plan your lessons and building that background knowledge piece?

Meghan Hein:

That's a great question. I always do. Those students love to share out, and we just receive their information.

I use a lot of strategies like an inquiry chart at the beginning of whatever thematic topic we're doing. An inquiry chart is kind of activating their current knowledge. What do we know about this topic? We're getting into a whole series of texts about government. What do we think we know about government already? It's kind of like the old KWL structure. Then what are some things that we're still wondering as we approach this unit?

Then we can go back, because sometimes these experts that have things that they're bringing to the unit, and sometimes those ideas need to be corrected.

We can look at the evidence of things that we've learned and go back to that and ask, "Okay, so and so shared this earlier in the unit. Did we find any evidence in the unit, anything that we've read that can confirm that is true? Yes, that was true!" They brought that with them and they are confirmed in what they know.

Or maybe we have to look at it more closely and take a look more evaluatively and say, "Okay, wait, do you remember that text that we read? So and so said this about government. Did that confirm it, or is there something that we need to correct there in their original thoughts?" It's an amazing experience that we can use text to help us evolve in our understanding of something. They knew something about it, but we certainly learned more that has helped us to correct our thinking.

Yeah, there are always students that have a lot to say. I find that in doing this, they're motivated just as much as the students who are learning from the start and maybe don't have as much. It just opens these opportunities for them to communicate and talk about it and get motivated and excited about the different things that we share.

Anna Geiger:

Do you want to share a little bit about the baseball study and how that helps you think about building background knowledge?

Meghan Hein:

Yeah, absolutely. When I first started learning about knowledge building, I had read about the baseball study and I've been hearing about it.

This goes back all the way to 1988. It was the work of Recht and Leslie, I believe, that took a group of seventh and eighth graders and they divided them up into categories. They looked at their reading abilities, and they put the proficient readers in one group and the students that were struggling with reading in another group. But they also grouped the students in those categories by those that had a substantial amount of background knowledge about baseball and those that did not.

What's so interesting about that study is that they found that regardless of their reading ability, their decoding, and their fluency, it was their knowledge of baseball that was the key indicator for their comprehension outcomes. Their background knowledge was a greater source of helping them to comprehend text than their overall reading ability.

This is really important for us to know as teachers so that we can provide them with background knowledge as they get ready to read. It can support them so much more with understanding what they're reading, rather than by just letting them bring what they already have existing knowledge about to whatever they're reading or doing in class.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and I'm sure people listening know this, but just to be clear, building background knowledge is *one* strategy that teachers use to help kids understand text, but there are many more. It's not just about knowledge. I know you wouldn't say that. It's also about teaching them to get the gist of a text, or, like you said, teaching them to write about the text. But building background knowledge is an important piece.

Let's close out by talking about when teachers are planning a read aloud or a complex text reading, what questions might they ask themselves as they decide how to build background knowledge?

Meghan Hein:

I think it's looking at the text as a whole and just anticipating, what are my students going to struggle with? What is going to be hard for them? Let me free up the cognitive capacity it's going to take to understand what this is and how it's going to present itself by front-loading in some capacity. Then what they know can bring that barrier down for them.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and this is maybe five minutes, but it doesn't have to be much longer than that. This is not a spoiler. We're not telling them everything that's in there, but we're getting them prepared to make sense of what the author has to share.

Meghan Hein:

Absolutely, and if it's just to get into a read aloud, it can be just seconds of front-loading them with information.

In my class, it looks like a four-week unit, so we do spend a little bit more time building up our background knowledge for that.

One example is looking at a unit we did on inventors, looking at what they invented and why they invented it. When I was looking through that unit and all of the texts that were offered from my curriculum for that unit, I noticed that most of the texts my students were going to be reading were biographies, and I anticipated that most of them had not had any experience really looking at what biographies were.

I could front-load that for them in a really quick presentation. I just did a quick anchor chart. "We're going to look at a new genre that is informational text, but it's a different type of informational text that we probably haven't talked about yet. Let me explain to you what you can expect from the structure of these types of texts. We're going to be learning about their early life. We're going to be learning about why they created the inventions that they created and maybe some of their hardships."

Now my students could anticipate that, and sure enough, in every text that we read their brains were set and ready for what they could anticipate the structure of the text to be like. It helped them make so much more sense of what they were being asked to read about these inventors as they went along.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and sometimes teachers might not anticipate what students have trouble with. Of course it happens to everybody, so we can use any of those lessons as a learning opportunity. When kids are struggling to retell it or answer our questions, we might ask ourselves, "Is this because they didn't have the right background knowledge for this or that?" It's so hard to think about that from their perspective because these are things we've known forever.

Where can people find you and learn from you?

Meghan Hein:

Yeah, so I am always oversharing my learning alongside my student experience at @alwaysmoretolearn on Instagram. I'd be excited for you guys to join me there and jump into learning alongside me!

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much, Meghan.

Meghan Hein:

Thank you, Anna. I'm so excited to be here with you today. I appreciate the time.

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode226. Talk to you next time!