Welcome to RAPSA’s Quarterly Journal

RAPSA 2021 Journal Strands

The Reaching At-Promise Students Association

The RAPSA Journal consists of a network of committed professionals to establish best practices for serving at-promise students and advocate for policies that support student success. These publications provide articles about research and initiatives across the country that explore solutions for serving out-of-school and other high-risk youth.

In this inaugural edition, we introduce you to the expectations of the RAPSA Journal, and the four major strands, or focal points, that serve as the framework for the 2021 – 2020 journal. Each article you read will reflect the challenges and promises inherent in each strand. We ask that you review each strand and share your expertise, in the form of submitting your article, to build knowledge and instructional approaches designed to support at-promise students. Again, and only for this inaugural edition, thought leaders from Renaissance, each writing from their years, if not decades, of deep study of the research and practitioner guidance, share what they are learning.

Expectation of the RAPSA Journal

This quarterly journal is designed bridge the gap between research and practice across four critical strands.

• Reengage Learners
• Build Knowledge, Vocabulary, and Equity
• Beyond School
• Endorse Biliteracy

Each journal will include articles from these strands that share best practices in teaching, what makes the greatest difference among learners, and how the impacts of factors outside of school—economic, demographic, and geographic disparity—can be mitigated through powerful instruction and abundant opportunity inside the school.
STRAND 1: Reengaging Students

While multiple reports document the impact of the global pandemic, we have failed to examine decades of sustained, perhaps exponential, learning loss in reading and mathematics. These opportunities for learning are sometimes evident among at-promise students learning through the lenses of racial, geographic, and economic disparities and inequities. The pandemic exacerbated the level of reengagement. As schools across the nation shut down, so did, through no choice of their own, did learners. Bellwether education estimates 3 million students have yet to return to school, whether in person, on-line, or in a hybrid model. This nation must restore the promise of 3,000,000 students—not only in reenrolling them in school, but in fully reengaging them in their own learning.

In this strand, we focus on ways to reengage students who are at work in some model of teaching and learning (remote, in-person, or hybrid), but have yet to become fully reengaged in the process of learning. Primarily, we focus on instructional techniques and practices that leads students to share their voice, via active participation, in their learning, their assessment of learning, and in their ongoing growth.

Request for articles within this strand—Reengage Each At-Promise Student—should reflect the evidence, and authentic experiences related to effective approaches, techniques, and resources designed to reengage At Promise learners in instruction, classroom discourse, and providing evidence of their learning. See the Journal Submission Form to access submissions guidelines and submit your article for consideration.

STRAND 2: Knowledge, Vocabulary, and Equity

Educational journalist, Emily Hanford, states that “equity in education begins with early decoding skills.” Indeed, for most learners, mastering the mechanics of a sound-based language, is the pathway to literacy; however, once these mechanics are developed, reading growth depends, more than anything else, on each reader’s vocabulary and background knowledge. Efforts to measure reading comprehension often fail, in part, because, comprehension, more than anything else, is a measure of a person’s vocabulary and background knowledge. If equity in education begins with early decoding skills, then continuing to build throughout each phase of education must, in part, focus on vocabulary and background knowledge acquisition. Additionally, equity must be established in access to books, resources, and learning tools, in both print and digital formats, devices, connectivity, and meaningful content that building both vocabulary and background knowledge.

Request for articles within the Knowledge, Vocabulary, and Equity strand—should reflect the critical importance of building a vast repertoire of knowledge, and an exceptionally deep vocabulary. Articles regarding best practices in digital reading would add depth to this strand. See the Journal Submission Form to access submissions guidelines and submit your article for consideration.
STRAND 3: Beyond School

Ample evidence is available that clearly describes the impact of poverty, exclusion, and trauma on learning. Poverty, as discussed by Horatio Sanchez, creates physical changes to developing brains. Language and nurturing are significantly impacted and are impacted long before the children begin formal schooling. Likewise, trauma, even though schools are designed as safe places for students, negatively impacts learning. The trauma and exclusion students experience beyond school, plays a role in what and how they are learning. What you also find within the evidence are specific approaches, and instructional strategies, and resources that mitigate the impact of poverty, trauma, and exclusion. Opportunities to practice both literacy and numeracy development, and multiple opportunities to participate in the arts are among these strategies, but the evidence continues to shed more light on what we can do in school that has been negatively impacted beyond school.

Request for articles within this strand——Beyond School——should focus on specific instructional practices and resources that support at-promise students who may be learning via the lenses of poverty, exclusion, and trauma. See the Journal Submission Form to access submissions guidelines and submit your article for consideration.

STRAND 4: Endorse Biliteracy

Biliteracy is the goal. Building on what at-promise students already know is critical to supporting them in their goals. In the case of Emerging Bilinguals who access and demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a language other than English, one of the most powerful ways to support at-promise students is the development of biliteracy. Individuals who have the ability not only to understand and speak but read and write in more than one language enter the workforce with more opportunity in the U.S. and around the world. Such is the power of biliteracy.

Request for articles within this strand——Biliteracy——should bring the empirical research into the practical work of developing biliteracy and a goal and an asset for at-promise students. Focus on specific instructional practices and resources that support at-promise students who may be new to the United States or are adding English as a second language. See the Journal Submission Form to access submissions guidelines and submit your article for consideration.
REENGAGE STUDENTS AND INFORM LEARNING

By Dr. Gene Kerns, Chief Academic Officer, Renaissance

Meet the Reengage Students Strand

While multiple reports document the impact of the global pandemic, we have failed to examine decades of sustained, perhaps exponential, loss of learning opportunity in reading and mathematics. As schools across the nation shut down, so did, through no choice of their own, did learners. Bellwether education estimates 3 million students have yet to return to school, whether in person, on-line, or in a hybrid model. This nation must restore the promise of 3,000,000 students—not only in reenrolling them in school, but in fully reengaging them in their own learning.

Request for articles: The following article specifically address reengaging at-promise learners as the primary decision maker for their own learning. Further, this article lists specific evidence-based instructional techniques and resources to reengage learners. We invite you to share your expertise in reengaging at-promise learners. See the Journal Submission Form to access submissions guidelines and submit your article for consideration.

Inform Learning

For those looking to increase student achievement, formative assessment holds tremendous potential. Wiliam (2011) asserts that “the currently available evidence suggests that there is nothing else remotely affordable that is likely to have such a large effect” as focusing on formative assessment classroom strategies. Similarly, Stiggins (2014) proclaims “assessment . . . may offer more promise for prompting learner success than any other instructional practice or school improvement innovation we have at our disposal” (Stiggins, 2014, pg. 4). Clearly, this is an area that warrants deep exploration.

First, let me share an excellent resource for formative classroom strategies. My favorite book is Embedded Formative Assessment by Dylan Wiliam. I like the text because it’s a rather compact read and, more importantly, it contains 53 different formative classroom strategies. I’ve used it during keynotes, conference presentations, and onsite training and it’s always a hit with teachers as teachers love strategies that they can put into use easily.

While tools, strategies, and even tests of nearly any form can be used formatively, for our purposes here it is most appropriate to focus on strategies used by teachers while learning is occurring. The purpose is not to rank or rate students, the purpose is to inform learning. This is the area of primary focus for Dylan Wiliam, Paul Black, Rick Stiggins, and the other authors who focus in this area with Black and Wiliam (1998) defining formative assessment as “activities undertaken by the teachers and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (p. 142 – emphasis added).
For example, both William and Stiggins suggest that prior to working any major assignment students should be given some work samples and asked to rate them in terms of quality. This is critically important at points when we ask students to produce forms of work that may be utterly foreign to them. Most students had never seen a lab report when their science teacher called upon them to write one. Few students have read research papers before writing one or been to a science fair before crafting a science project. In short, “Low achievement is often the result of students failing to understand what is expected of them” (Black & William, 1998). We must ensure that prior to beginning work on major projects that students clearly understand what is expected of them.

By asking students to rate the work samples, using a rubric where appropriate, we can gather some tremendously useful information. If they are able to rate correctly – tell you which work samples are the best and which are lacking – this is an excellent sign that they are ready to produce work on their own. If they are unable to rate work samples correctly, it would be unwise and frustrating to ask students to being working on their own projects. If students cannot see or perceive the lack quality in someone else’s work,

When students are unable to rate samples correctly, teachers must focus in on their discussions of the work samples for the insights that those discussions can offer. What do the lower quality work samples lack, or the best samples contain, that students fail to see? Listening closely to these discussions will inform our practice and help us know what we need to teach our students to see.

Learning about useful strategies is a straightforward thing. As such, we need not dive deeply into more strategies here. I do, however, want to offer a higher-level insight, one that is particularly powerful for those of us who serve at-promise students. This insight has to do with the potential of formative assessment to tap into deep motivational forces that can foster prolonged engagement on the part of students.

In their work, Rick Stiggins and his colleagues at the Assessment Training Institute, most notably Judi Arter, Jan Chappuis, and Steve Chappuis, give “student motivation” particular emphasis, noting formative assessment’s potential to provide feedback that can powerfully engage students. They feel that this consideration is critical as “powerful roadblocks to learning can arise from the very process of assessing and evaluating . . . depending on how the learner interprets what is happening to him or her” (Stiggins, 2014, pg.17) "Traditional testing practices in the United States . . . cause many students to give up in hopelessness and accept failure rather than driving them enthusiastically toward academic success” (Stiggins, 2014, pg. 3).

In seeking to illustrate how formative assessment can meet essential motivational needs, Chappuis (2009) drew insight the work of Australian psychology professor Royce Sadler (2002) who asserts that if you want students to be deeply motivated and to be able to sustain that motivation, they must always be able to answer the following three questions:

WHERE AM I GOING? WHAT IS THE EXPECTATION OF ME?
WHERE AM I NOW IN RELATION TO THAT EXPECTATION?
HOW CAN I CLOSE THE GAP?

To illustrate the potential power of formative assessment strategies and processes to answer these questions, Chappuis (2009) then organized the common formative assessment strategies of “assessment for learning” under the headings of the three essential questions as outlined in Figure 1 (Chappuis, 2009). The result is a clear illustration of how motivation is driven through formative assessment practices, “focusing on the student as the most influential decision maker in your classroom” (Chappuis, 2009, pg. 11).
For Rick Stiggins, exploring the power of assessment strategies to motivate students isn’t just a professional interest, it is deeply personal. In a recent book, Stiggins described his own K-12 schooling as a period where he had little faith in his abilities. Things change drastically, however, when he entered the Air Force where he experienced an assessment process that was completely different and that provided him the answers to the essential questions of where he was going, where he was in reference to that, and how to close the gap between those two places. In the following narrative, Rick describes his transition from struggling student to empowered learner:

Poor early performance in reading aloud devolved into unfortunate personal generalizations about my overall academic ability and, ultimately, into a record of chronic low performance. In my mind I came to see failure as inevitable, and I gave up. To my mind, I had no way of controlling or even influencing my own well-being in school. Ultimately, because I failed to learn to read, I experienced low performance in most other academic contexts for a long time. As you can see, I generalized my inference that I was not a good student and never would be.

Once I had given up in the early grades, the underlying truth of my learning potential no longer mattered. Even though I found out later that my elementary records included a pretty high IQ score, my actual intellectual capabilities became irrelevant. It didn’t matter what my teachers believed about me. It didn’t matter that my mom had confidence that I could succeed if I just tried. One of my teachers noted on one report card, “Rick seems to have a mental block to reading.” Indeed.

When small measures of learning success finally began to emerge much later in Air Force tech school, my emerging confidence fueled little bits of cautious optimism they gave me the inner reserves needed to risk trying again — and this time, with a bit more energy. The result was more success, and with that success came a growing sense of internal control over my own academic well-being. Like most winning streaks, mine took on a life of its own. I entered a personal upward spiral that left my unhappy history of failure far back in the dust.

I share this analysis of my failure and success, of pessimism turned to optimism, in order to point out the powerful roadblocks to learning can arise from the very process of assessing and evaluating the performance of the learner, depending upon how the learner interprets what is happening to him or her.

Stiggins (2014, pg. 27)

Merchants of Hope

Stiggins passionately and eloquently states that “teachers must be merchants of hope” (2014, pg. 45). Coming to better understand both individual formative assessment strategies and how they can collectively provide powerful motivational insight to students allow us to offer hope to students who are, indeed, the most important consumers of assessment information in all of education.

References
Meet the Knowledge, Vocabulary, and Equity Strand

Educational journalist, Emily Hanford, states that “equity in education begins with early decoding skills.” Indeed, for most learners, mastering the mechanics of a sound-based language, is the pathway to literacy; however, once these mechanics are developed, reading growth depends, more than anything else, on each reader’s vocabulary and background knowledge. We invite you to ponder equitable access to literacy acquisition and share your thinking via future articles in this strand.

Request for articles in the Knowledge, Vocabulary, and Equity Strand

Request for articles within the Knowledge, Vocabulary, and Equity strand—should reflect the critical importance of building a vast repertoire of knowledge, and an exceptionally deep vocabulary. Articles regarding best practices in digital reading would add depth to this strand. See the Journal Submission Form to access submissions guidelines and submit your article for consideration.

The Soul of Learning

In ensuring that the promise of all students is developed, our attention often focuses on literacy. This is quite appropriate. As Schmoker (2018) notes, “intensive amounts of reading and writing are the soul of learning” and while “all disciplines connect and contribute to success in other disciplines... language competency is the foundation of learning.” While we have long understood the primacy of literacy, it is painfully clear that for many intents and purposes, we do not clearly understand how promote the optimal development of literacy.

Consider the results from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). Flatlined scores go back decades and have remained flat despite the increased accountability of No Child Left Behind, the resulting changes to many school schedules that took time from all areas other than ELA and Math to increase time for these areas, and billions of dollars pumped into early grades reading instruction through Reading First. We have made massive investments, and those investment simply are not producing returns.
Of all the investments we have made in literacy that haven’t paid returns, the most telling may be the increased time allocated to English Language Arts (ELA) at the cost of other content areas. Most school schedules post-NCLB differ radically from those pre-NCLB. McMurrer (2007) notes there was a “47 percent reduction in class time devoted to subjects beyond math and reading” in response to NCLB (as cited in Hirsch, 2018, p. 61). Consider what the investments of additional time mean. By allocating more time to ELA, we were essentially saying “We know exactly what to do to increase literacy proficiency, we just need some more time to do it.” We unquestionably got more time, but we have little to nothing to show for it. We must not have known what to do after all.

This brings to mind the familiar definition of insanity often attributed to Albert Einstein but actually written by novelist Rita Mae Brown (1983)—doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. It is very clear that there are problems with our current approach to literacy and continue to do the same thing will not result in a different result for at-promise students. According to James “Lynn” Woodworth Commissioner National Center for Educational Statistics because, if one disaggregates the flatlined overall data, it’s shocking to see that “the bottom is dropping at an alarming rate.”

This problem is complex and there are multiple contributing factors. Given that time and space considerations here are limited, we will only address one contributing element, the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension. Pimentel (2018) refers to research in this area as “some of the most profoundly important, yet under-recognized, reading research” available and asserts that “the implications for literacy instruction are enormous.”

While we have always, on some level, acknowledged the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension, we rarely understood the scale of knowledge’s impact. A wave of modern research has clearly documented this. A lack of background knowledge can stymy the comprehension of even the most proficient readers, and when background knowledge is controlled for, gaps in reading performance which typically follow socio-economic levels, disappear.

This is because, as Willingham (2017) notes, “Writers always omit a great deal of information needed to make sense of what they write” (p. 116). If writers could not assume readers have a general knowledge base that is “a million miles wide, but just a few inches deep,” then their writing would have to be unwieldy and boring (Willingham, 2017, p. 118). There are names, dates, places, and concepts that they automatically assume a reader will understand (e.g., “That’s a Trojan horse.” “They reacted like Pavlov’s dogs.” “You’re charging at windmills.”) These examples, and countless others, come from art, music, history, science – so much of the content that we cut to create more time for ELA and math.
Consider a recent study done by Adam Tyner and Sarah Kabourek with the Fordham Institute, viewed by some as one of the most significant pieces of educational research of 2020. In the study, groups of students received additional time in varying ways with the goal of increasing reading proficiency. One group, for example, received more time with reading strategy instruction. Another group received more time with social studies. Somewhat counterintuitively, the researchers found that “Literacy gains are more likely to materialize when students spend more time learning social studies.” Yet, in a misguided attempt to raise reading scores, we cut time from the social studies; the very content proven to raise reading scores.

Hirsch (2018) asserts that “knowledge is by far the most promising avenue to carry us out of the reading slump we are in” and “is by far the most promising way to advance reading skill for all” (p. 31). He adds that schools should come to the realization that “the secret to answering [the complex questions of today's high-stakes tests] will not be hours of practice of ‘inferencing skills’ and ‘close reading skills,’ but can only be answered through the student’s prior relevant knowledge of the words and the topics. (Hirsch, 2018, p. 30)

Willingham (2017) speaks directly to the needs of at-promise students when he advances that background knowledge is a primary cause of flattening reading scores specifically noting that “students from disadvantaged backgrounds show a characteristic pattern of reading achievement in school; they make good progress until around fourth grade, and then suddenly fall behind. The importance of background knowledge to comprehension gives us insight into this phenomenon” (p. 128).

In other words, while many students effectively learn the foundational reading skills in the early grades (as attested to by higher proficiency rates at early grade where foundational skills are the focus of those tests), gaps in performance widen quickly in the later grades. This is not because of any reading skills deficiency, but rather a lack of background knowledge. These gaps become apparent when success on later grades tests requires not only foundational reading skills, but also a broad base of general knowledge.

This insight has huge implications for how we address the literacy needs of all students, but at-promise students in particular. When student appear to struggle with reading, we commonly focus on reading comprehension strategies. While there is a definitive research base on the efficacy of such strategies, what most fail to realize is that such strategies “are quickly learned and don’t require a lot of practice” (Willingham and Lovette, 2014). Multiple studies have documented that, after a handful of lessons on any strategy, students have received all possible benefit. “Ten sessions yield the same benefit as fifty sessions” meaning that “instruction [on strategies] should be explicit and brief” (Willingham and Lovette, 2014).

“When it comes to improving reading comprehension, strategy instruction may have an upper limit, but building background knowledge does not; the more students know, the broader the range of texts they can comprehend” (Willingham and Lovette, 2014 – emphasis added). The following section from Literacy Reframed speaks to this dynamic through the lens of “The Matthew Effect”:

Addressing the need for knowledge will significantly help teachers address persistent achievement gaps. Many discussions about such gaps reference the Matthew effect. This concept is based on the following Bible verse: “For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath” (Matthew 13:12, King James Version). Loosely paraphrased, this verse is familiar to many as the aphorism, “The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.” When we understand the role of knowledge in comprehension, the Matthew effect applies perfectly: readers with a lot of knowledge become even better readers, and readers who lack knowledge fall further and further behind.

Some students come to school rich in knowledge. Before they could read, they were read to. Once they could read, they were encouraged and supported in doing so. They have visited museums and historical sites, and they have traveled to other cities, other states, or even other countries. Because of the knowledge they have, they take away more from every school lesson, lecture, video, field trip, or other educational experience than their classmates do. As Hirsch (2018) remarks, “The early knowledge base that has been gained by fortunate students is like Velcro; it is a base to which further knowledge sticks more readily” (p. 164). They are rich, and they get richer.
In contrast, other students come to school poor in knowledge. They were seldom, if ever, read to and might not even have a single book. Their home conditions or the responsibilities they bear (such as helping care for younger siblings) are not conducive to wide independent reading, and if they do have the time and inclination to read, they may have few books on hand. They have rarely left their immediate neighborhoods or towns, so their world concept is limited. As a result, they take away far less from the same educational experiences that their rich-in-knowledge classmates thrive on. They can be sitting in the same classroom, and while the knowledge-rich classmates beside them get richer, they fall further behind.

So, what does mean for us in serving at-promise students? It means that we must make knowledge acquisition a top priority. Steps might include the following:

**FORMALLY MAPPING OUT THE NAMES, DATES, PLACE, PEOPLE, AND IDEAS THAT ARE PART OF YOUR CURRICULA – THE CORE KNOWLEDGE FOUNDATION OFFERS A VARIETY OF FREE RESOURCES TO ASSIST WITH THIS.**

**RESTORING ANY INSTRUCTIONAL TIME CUT FROM SOCIAL STUDIES AND SCIENCE**

**ENSURING THAT STUDENTS ARE READ TO DAILY, IDEALLY FROM MATERIALS WRITTEN ABOUT TWO GRADE-LEVELS AHEAD OF THEIR TESTED READING LEVEL, WHICH IS AN IDEA WAY TO BUILD VOCABULARY AND, IF THE READING SELECTION IS NON-FICTION, KNOWLEDGE.**

To learn more about the role of knowledge in reading comprehension, consult the following resources available in the reference list that follows.

**References**


WHAT WE ARE LEARNING ABOUT POVERTY AND LEARNING

Dr. Jan Bryan, National Education Officer, Renaissance

Meet the Beyond School strand

This journal is organized around four key strands: Reengaging Learners, Knowledge, Vocabulary, and Equity, Beyond School, and Embrace Biliteracy. The following article aligns to the Beyond School strand. Articles in this strand address factors outside of school that impact learning. Poverty and trauma, for example, bring substantial and negative challenges to learning, and both originate beyond school. From another perspective, parent and community advocacy groups, such as Parents Requiring Our Public Education system to Lead (PROPEL) in TN, likewise originate outside of school; however, their advocacy brings positive challenges that highlight areas for needed reform. Decoding Dyslexia, a parent-led grassroots movement across the country, brings another example of a positive challenge originating beyond school. This group has shed substantial light on our nation’s need for evidence-based interventions to support students learning through the lens of dyslexia. As you read What we are Learning about Poverty and Learning, we hope that you find the information compelling, and that you respond to our call for submissions for additional articles in this the Beyond School strand.

Request for articles for the Beyond School strand

Request for articles within this theme, Beyond School, should focus on specific instructional practices and resources that support At-Promise learners who may be learning via the lens of poverty and trauma. See the Journal Submission Form to access submissions guidelines and submit your article for consideration.

8 Million More

At the end of 2020, the United States reported its largest increase in poverty in the past 50 years with a poverty rate increase of 2.4%. (see Tanzi & Saraiva, 2021). Certainly, COVID-19, and its ongoing economic impact, is at the root of this increase; even so, an additional 8 million more Americans are now considered as living below the poverty line. Horacio Sanchez, President and CEO of Resiliency Inc., and a key resource for this article, states in his most recent book, The Poverty Problem, that education is the institution most distressed by poverty. While this is well established, Sanchez takes the poverty discussion to the next level, clarifying what causes the distress, which is the brain’s response to poverty. Further, he outlines how educators enact practices that alleviate the distress to make room for learning academically, emotionally, and socially. Sanchez’s work is critical, as among these 8 million who are now identified as living in poverty, are thousands of At-Promise Students, and among them are those whose promise will lead this nation to address the impact of poverty in school and in our day-to-day lives. At-Promise Students will lead the way because we are beginning to understand the brain’s response to poverty and the exact correlation between poverty and learning. Further, we are learning instructional protocols and practices that redirect attention, provide for engagement, and the joy found in learning.
Poverty and Learning

President Johnson, in accordance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 commissioned James Coleman, and a team of researchers, to quantify differences in experiences in school based on poverty and race. Published in 1966, the Equality of Educational Opportunities report, often called the Coleman Report, garnered both intrigue and criticism. There is certainly room to continue the debate regarding Coleman's findings, as those findings remain relevant. The disparity in educational opportunity based on poverty and race noted in the report may still be at work. Coleman, however, also found that the quality of teachers “shows a stronger relationship to pupil achievement than race or poverty.” Further, Coleman explains, the impact is “progressively greater at higher grades indicating a cumulative impact of the qualities of teachers in a school on the pupil’s achievements” (Goldhaber, 2016).

These findings about teacher quality, which were observed in multiple schools regardless of poverty or race, have been confirmed in varied studies over the 50+ years since Coleman's work. Educational researcher and author Dylan Wiliam, in his studies of factors impacting student achievement, echoes Coleman's findings related to the power of a teacher. Wiliam (2011 p 16-17) noted that in American schools, the classroom effect (teacher quality) is far more predictive of achievement than the school effect (race and poverty). In other words, teachers play a pivotal role in establishing equitable opportunity among all learners. In the following section, we explore this most pivotal role.

The Classroom Effect

Sanchez focuses intently on what teachers can do in the classroom to fully engage students learning through the impact of poverty. He begins with three critical skills for learning: focus, social ability, and self-control. The scope of this article only offers few selected protocols and strategies from Sanchez and others. I invite you to explore the references listed at the end of this article, find the protocols and strategies that resonate with you and share with colleagues.

Within the context of this article, we explore the critical skill of focus, and for this we turn to noted resiliency expert, Dr. Amit Sood. Our brains operate in two general modes: default and focused. In the default mode, your brain attends to everything (e.g., hunger, sleepiness, anger, sounds outside the window, respiration, balance, and volume just to name a few). To focus, you must mute that dialogue. Sood suggests a one or two-minute guided meditation prior to engaging in highly focused task. In the classroom setting, teachers would explain the learning target and expectations for success while students visualize the learning target, make a sketch of the target and what success looks like. To retain focus, Sood suggests you think about student choice. We tend to think choice is always positive, giving students more autonomy over their learning. Sood writes, however that when presented with too many choices, the brain confuses a choice with its importance, and will likely lose focus on the learning at hand.

Rituals, mnemonics, and imagery are other effective focusing techniques. One particularly timely ritual helps students to begin the day with grace and appreciation for one another. Based upon pre-pandemic protocols, the nine justices of the Supreme Court of the United States begin the day with a decades-old ritual (see CASEL, 2019). All nine justices gather to shake the hands of, and say a personal greeting of appreciation to, one another. Following the ritual, the justices spend the rest of the day arguing. Their debates are rigorous but grounded in a cordial relationship and respect for one another. Even in virtual settings—especially with platforms that allow for breakout spaces—beginning the day with respect signals your default brain to mute the stress dialogue and focus on the learning at hand.
The School Effect

In addition to rituals, mnemonics, and imagery, Sanchez leads a fascinating discussion about musical training and the impact on the language center of the brain. Sanchez is clear that he is sharing the impact of formal musical training, ideally delivered by professional musicians. Schools must be fully equipped to engage learners in this training. Instruments, teachers, space learn, and time to practice must be addressed. The return is worth the investment. Musical training strengthens the brain’s language center, improves auditory processing and the ability to head discrete letter sounds. As Sanchez notes, “musical training, especially in schools with a concentration of students coming from poverty, might be one the most effective and well-researched strategies for improving not only the immediate performance of students but also the long-term capacity of their brains by improving underdeveloped structures” (see p 59-60).

Further, practice is especially beneficial to students from poverty. School leaders must dedicate time for students to practice, not only their instruments (which could be part of the formal musical training), but also practice math and reading. As our nation looks to mitigate COVID-19 unfinished learning, we are finding that continued practice is having a significant impact on math achievement. A 2021 study from Renaissance, focused on the efficacy of math practice showed that students in 2nd – 8th grades who engaged in practice via Freckle™ adaptive math did not suffer math learning loss. Further, students with a history of math struggle, who engaged in at least 100+ days of practice, entered school in the fall of 2020 ahead of expectations. The evidence related to reading practice is equally compelling, explaining that once students have mastered the mechanics of reading, they engage in self-teaching; particularly they gain vocabulary and acquire background knowledge without awareness that they are doing so. (See Willingham, 2017 p 68-69).

The Reaching At-Promise Students Association Effect

The ravages of poverty have plagued this nation for generations. President Johnson's efforts, however controversial, were born of a heart for children in poverty. Prior to his role in Congress and his presidency, Johnson was a 5th grade teacher in south Texas. He taught low-income Mexican immigrant children, who, he said, he never forgot. As part of the Civil Rights Act, Johnson crafted the nation's first federal education law with those children as his motivation. He referred to the bill as the bridge between hopelessness and hope for more than five million educationally deprived children. Today that number hovers around 11 million. The bridge is ready for reinforcements and expansion. At-Promise Students will lead the way.

References


Meet the Embrace Biliteracy strand

Building on what at-promise students already know is critical to supporting them in their goals. In the case of Emerging Bilinguals who access and demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a language other than English, one of the most powerful ways to support at-promise students is the development of biliteracy. Individuals who have the ability not only to understand and speak but read and write in more than one language enter the workforce with more opportunity in the U.S. and around the world. Such is the power of biliteracy.

Request for articles:

As you read More than a Name Change, we hope that you find important, so much so that you respond to our call for submissions for additional articles in this the Embrace Biliteracy strand. See the Journal Submission Form to access submissions guidelines and submit your article for consideration.

What the student brings

Nothing is more rewarding than supporting at-promise English Learners on the journey to the career of their dreams. And one of the most powerful ways to guide them to those dreams is the development of biliteracy. For generations, however, students whose home language is other than English have been typically referred to as English Language Learners (ELLs), English Learners (ELs), students with limited English proficiency (LEP), and even students with no English proficiency (NEP). Although unintentional, each of these terms identifies what the student needs rather than what the student brings, essentially deficit rather than asset based. To the positive, a new term is beginning to replace those previously used—Emergent Bilinguals (EBs). More than simply a change in words, the term EBs reflects a shift in perspective. Like all at-promise students, those who come to school speaking a language other than English do not arrive empty; they bring language, knowledge, skills, culture, and life experience on which to build. Supporting EBs on their journey requires building on their assets, taking them from at-promise to the college or career of their dreams.

Graduation rates for ELs in 2017-2018 in the U.S. provide context. According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of English Language Acquisition (2019), “the median state-level high school graduation rate for ELs was 68.4%,” ranging from 31% of the state of New York to 93% for West Virginia. This means that, on average, 1 in 3 ELs do not graduate from high school. As a means of comparison, the overall high school graduation rate for the same school year was 85%. An additional cause for alarm is the data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2019). These data reveal that 79% of 12th-grade ELs read at a below basic level, meaning that when they read informational texts such as exposition, argumentation, and documents, they are: 1) unable to identify the organization of a text, 2) make connections between ideas in two different texts, 3) locate relevant information in a document, and 4) provide some explanation for why the information is included. Reading at a basic level is critical for career opportunities. Students who graduate from high school unable to read at this level are highly unlikely to achieve in college or career. When nearly 4 out of 5 ELs in the 12th grade are unable to read at a basic level, it becomes clear that change is needed. Therein lies the shift from English Learner to Emergent Bilingual where the home language is the jumping off point for learning.
Building on the Home Language

Although some may find it counterintuitive to support the continual development of a language other than English rather than immerse students in English given that students are required to meet English Language Arts and Math standards to graduate from high school, the research on the effectiveness of dual language instruction is overwhelming. The explanation for this success is not complex. Because “literacy is an achievement that rests primarily on language processing at all levels, from elemental sounds to the most overarching structures of text,” (Castle et al, 2018; Seidenberg, 2017), teaching early literacy skills in the language students already know becomes the foundation on which the second language is built.

According to Sparks et al (2008), whose study examined the ability of first language (L1) reading and spelling skills to predict later second-language (L2) reading and spelling skills, “the best predictor of L2 decoding skill was a measure of L1 decoding, and the best predictors of L2 spelling were L1 spelling and L1 phonological awareness. The best predictor of L2 reading comprehension was a measure of L1 reading comprehension. When L2 word decoding skill replaced L1 word decoding as a predictor variable for L2 reading comprehension, results showed that L2 word decoding was an important predictor of L2 reading comprehension. The findings suggest that even several years after students learn to read and spell their L1, word decoding, spelling, and reading comprehension skills transfer from L1 to L2” (p. 162). Research is clear that L1 reading positively affects L2 achievement in reading and spelling. Consider how one affects the other.

Beginning with decoding, think about students whose home language is Spanish. Tying this directly to Spanish and English, consider what is required when learning to decode an alphabetic language—knowledge of phonological awareness, letter–sound correspondences, and orthographic patterns (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In addition, accurate word decoding skills enable students to read most words in the text to comprehend its meaning (Ehri, 2005). Moving on to spelling, research on the processes by which students learn to spell their L1 also provides potential insights about the role of L1 spelling skills in learning to spell an L2 (Sparks et al 2008). Having learned and mastered the processes concerning how words are spelled in the first language is a skill that transfers to any other languages a student is learning, which is the same for the previously mentioned processes, like knowledge of phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondences, and orthographic patterns.

As for the relationship between L1 and L2 reading comprehension, the finding by Sparks et al that L1 reading comprehension was predictive of L2 comprehension is consistent with findings by VanGelder et al (2004), who observed that L1 reading comprehension in the 8th grade made large contributions to L2 reading comprehension skills in the 10th grade. The results by Sparks et al extend that research by showing that L1 reading comprehension in elementary school from the 1st through 5th grade was a significant predictor of L2 reading comprehension skill several years later in 10th grade, and point to the fact that as L2 learners of English in the U.S. read more difficult text in the L1, not only do their decoding skills improve, but they enhance their vocabulary as they are exposed to increasingly difficult texts, leading to higher levels of reading and comprehension.
The Cognate Advantage

There is an additional way in which Spanish L1 reading contributes to L2 English reading and that is due to
cognates—the words in both languages that mean the same thing and are spelled in a similar manner. For example,
adquirir/demostrar and acquire/demonstrate are Spanish-English cognates. Although these examples meet both
criteria, adquirir/demostrar are everyday words in Spanish, while acquire/demonstrate are academic words in
English, suggesting that Spanish-speaking students may have a ‘cognate advantage’ in comprehending English
academic texts (Lubliner & Hiebert, 2011).

The research supporting the important contribution L1 reading makes to reading English is strong. What is even
stronger is the generalizable longitudinal research by Collier & Thomas (2017) conducted in 36 school districts in
16 U.S. states, over 7.5 million student records analyzed, following English learners (of all language backgrounds)
in Grades K-12. Their analyses reveal that English-only and transitional bilingual programs close about half of the
achievement gap between English learners and native English speakers, meaning they do not provide EBs with the
true ability to achieve at the highest levels. On the other hand, however, “high quality long-term bilingual (dual)
programs close all of the gap after 5-6 years of schooling through two languages” (p. 203)—L1 and L2. In fact,
students in dual language programs with native speakers of both languages where biliteracy is fully developed,
outperform monolingual native English speakers by the 5th grade. Such is the power of biliteracy to change the
lives of at-promising students. And although not all EBs may be enrolled in dual language programs, continual
development of their L1, facilitating bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy will provide them with a clear
advantage in the global job market.

References

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