

Lesson One: Begin Where They Are

The Little Refrigerator

Super Bowl 1986. The Chicago Bears were revered as heroes, especially in the small, rural corners of the world, where athletic prowess seemed attainable to children whose aspirations were limited by the view. One of the Bears' linemen was a large, African-American man with an intimidating physique, but a warm, child-like smile. His name was William Perry. He was more commonly known as "the Refrigerator."

Johnny was a big, sweet child whose appearance reminded me so much of Refrigerator Perry, right down to the innocent brown eyes and easy smile. Johnny's family was better off than many. They ran a small farm, and they had electricity and indoor plumbing that worked. He often wore overalls and work boots to school. His clothes were always clean and pressed. He had two responsible parents and a positive attitude. But even though he had a more stable life than most of his peers, his world was limited. He had never been outside of Pace County.

During the spring, Johnny's grandmother was very ill and had to be hospitalized in a midsized city in a neighboring county. For days, Johnny told the class he was going "to town" to visit his grandmother. His daily accounts of anticipation began spinning and growing like a fish story. His excitement and sense of expectation were easily recognizable in his widening eyes and proud smile.

Finally, the day of the visit arrived. Johnny swaggered out of school with the assurance of one whose life was about to change in a very dramatic way. Although he expected great things in town, his findings far exceeded his expectations.

When Johnny came into the classroom the next day, his eyes and mouth were both wide open. The weight of his news seemed bigger than anything we had learned. With great drama and suspense, he reported to the class:

In the hospital in town, they have a magic room. You go in and the doors close. And when they open again, you're in different place.

As startled as he seemed, I was struck by an even greater sense of revelation. Earlier in the year, we had read a story in our reading basal about a child who like to travel on the elevator in his apartment building. Many children, including Johnny, had learned to decode and recognize the vocabulary words for the story – even the word “elevator.” They were able to answer the comprehension questions at the end of the story. Yet how well did they really understand it if they had no conceptual basis for one integral part of the story?

As someone who had grown up in a large city, it had not occurred to me that a child of seven years would not “just know” what an elevator was. But how could he know what he had not experienced? I quickly surveyed the class and found out that only about half of them knew about or had experience with elevators. I extended that to escalators with the same results. That year, another teacher and I began planning experience-based field trips to build concepts we may have otherwise never considered. One trip was to a shopping mall in that neighboring county. It was a new adventure for most of our students. While there, we built concepts for large parking lots, an indoor waterfall, two-story department stores, escalators, and of course, elevators.

I learned an important lesson from Johnny. As a teacher, I could not just assume that my students knew the things I considered basic or took for granted. My starting points for teaching needed to begin with my students, not with my expectations or even with my curriculum. I had to find out what they knew by experience, what they knew vicariously, and what they had yet to learn. Imparting skills and information to students would not be effective without the conceptual basis necessary for processing and storing the skills and information. Only then could meaningful, life-long learning begin. For that lesson, I thank the little Refrigerator, Johnny Miller.

The Take-away

Children are not standardized. Each child comes to school with an individualized bank of knowledge and experiences, strengths and weaknesses, hopes and fears. The problem is that standards are, well, standardized. While all students are expected to cross the same finish line, they are not all starting at the same place. Yet, in this world of educational standardization, the burden falls upon the teacher to “close the gap” and get each child across that finish line by the end of the 180-day race.

As teachers, we must create experiences that build the foundation for learning. I am not talking about fluency rates, phonemic awareness, word identification, or mathematical proficiency. I am talking about the concept development and network of synapses created by experience. Real understanding, real comprehension, real problem-solving and creativity are built upon the schematic network formed by experience and interaction. It all boils down to the fact that every student comes to school as a unique being. This means that as teachers we need to:

1. **Find the starting line.** Figure out as soon as possible the functional level of each student with respect to oral language, vocabulary knowledge, and background experience. *What do they know? What have they done? What's the next step for each individual child?*
2. **Plan with intention.** Design experiences to develop the oral language, vocabulary knowledge, and background experience of each child. *Where might a field trip be planned to provide first-hand knowledge? What virtual experiences can you simulate via the Internet or through classroom role-playing?*
3. **Honor their experience.** Capitalize on the experiences these children have had. They were doing *something* for all these years before they started school. Let them know that we are all continually learning. *What can each child offer? What can each child share? What can you learn from these unique individuals?*

Buzzwords like *differentiation* and *response to intervention* may change. However, the lesson has been around and will always be around: *Begin where they are.*