

Building word consciousness

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Engaging children in wordplay activities has been cited by many researchers as a crucial strategy in boosting student vocabulary growth (Duke & Moses, 2003; Feldman & Kinsella, 2004; Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002; Nagy & Scott, 2000). The term *word consciousness* (Duke & Moses; Feldman & Kinsella; Graves & Watts-Taffe) is frequently used in research to describe a child's interest in gathering new words and using them in their oral and written language. So what can we do

in the classroom to foster a curiosity for learning new vocabulary? Here are three ideas that can be incorporated without much expense or effort.

Word jars

As a third-grade teacher, I read *Donavan's Word Jar* (DeGross, 1994) at the beginning of the school year. In the book, the main character is a



third grader who develops an interest in collecting words through exposure to environmental print. Seeing terms like *boutique* and *ballyhoo* sparked Donovan to start writing them down on slips of paper and placing them in a jar. The rest of the story chronicles his encounters with other people, young and old, and their reactions to his word jar.

When we finish reading the book, I give each student a plastic jar, donated by a local pizzeria, and a pack of notebook paper strips to use for collecting their own words. Instructions in the jar explain to parents that students are to look for words that are unfamiliar and interesting to them. In class, we discuss how Donovan found his words in many different locations. I want my students to see that print exists in places beyond books. Every night the students are asked to write one word and discuss the meaning with their families. On the last Friday of each month, students bring the jars back to class and share and trade words with classmates. In order to fill their slips of paper, children read soup labels, macaroni boxes, and other nontraditional sources of language. Words like *artificial* and *scrumptious* have become part of our vocabulary through visual reminders such as vocabulary-themed bulletin boards and word walls. This activity is a good way to remind students that text exists everywhere, not just in books.

Another way to use word jars is to categorize the words. The teacher can collaborate with the class to organize the slips of paper by part of speech. After this modeling exercise, students can independently or with a partner take their words and create categories for them. Younger children can group words alphabetically or cluster them by whether the words contain digraphs. Older children can create sets according to particular morphemic elements such as prefixes or suffixes.

An additional way to organize the words is to identify them as Tier Two or Tier Three words as described in the book *Bringing Words to Life* (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). In the book, Tier Two words are identified as those more advanced words that can be used in several settings. Examples of Tier Two words include *fortunate* and *absurd*. Tier Three words are those that are used in very limited settings and have difficulty being inserted into everyday conversation. *Isotope* and *peninsula* are examples of Tier Three words. One added bonus of using word jars is that it increases student exposure to dictionaries. In my classroom,

student interest has fostered discussions about the benefits and difficulties of trying to obtain meaning from a dictionary definition.

Word jars are one way to foster word consciousness. Another way would be to showcase words in a parade or a show.

Word shows

Debra Frasier's *Miss Alaineus: A Vocabulary Disaster* (2000) is a humorous recounting of one student's misadventures with a particular word. In the book, the heroine suffers embarrassment due to a miscommunication of a spelling word over the phone. In the end, through resourcefulness and fortitude, she turns her misunderstanding into a glorious triumph. The setting for the climax of the book is a vocabulary parade. Students in the school dress up to illustrate a particular word. Having a parade for words is a fun way to emphasize the importance of learning new vocabulary and also how visualization can contribute to understanding the meaning of a word. An offshoot of this idea is to have an exhibition like a dog show but instead of focusing on dogs, focus on words. Like dog shows, students can enter their words in different categories such as parts of speech. A group of children can judge each category with criteria such as usefulness in conversation and oral or visual presentation of the word. Finally, the champions of each category can be judged to determine a grand champion. Vocabulary parades and word shows are enjoyable activities that boost word knowledge.

Rich words

An additional way to highlight splendid vocabulary is to create a rich words bulletin board. I decorate the board with colorful play money and pictures that are associated with wealth (e.g., cars, diamonds). Each Monday, I staple a Tier Two word, which has been written on a sentence strip, to the board. Students are challenged to look for the word in their reading or use the word properly in their writing. When a student is cited for using the word, we write her and his name and the date on the sentence strip containing the word. After the word has been cited 10 times, we retire it to the Vocabulary Hall of Fame. When I begin the use of the bulletin

board, I like to read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Dahl, 1964). This book is brimming with lush, descriptive language. We start the board with the word *flabbergasted* and take time to discuss the meaning by saying the word, talking about the definition, and pantomiming scenarios that could be described by the selected word. Students enjoy hunting for the rich words in their reading and trying them out in their writing and oral language as well.

Creating opportunities for children to play with words is vital not only to enhancing their vocabulary but also to increasing their comprehension. Several studies have shown the correlation between reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge (Biemiller, 2003; McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Perfetti, 1983; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Building a curiosity for words will reap benefits in the effort to create strong readers for life.

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