

Engaging Kids with Content: “The Kids Love It”

Can all this content really be taught to kids? Would it be a bore for them, drudgery for teachers? The only way to know is to try it out. The Core Knowledge Foundation produced a Pre-K-8 curriculum sequence based on one central question: What knowledge do writers take for granted when they write for a general, educated audience? The sequence offers teachers grade-by-grade guidelines for teaching a rich content-packed curriculum. It's now being used in hundreds of schools. What's the verdict? “The kids love it.” Core Knowledge teachers are quick to note: 1) the curriculum sequence specifies content, but not teaching methods; 2) following the sequence does not take the whole school year; and (3) students find the content fascinating. *American Educator* can't send you on a site visit, but we can bring the teachers' voices to you. Here, Rachel Pacheco, a first-grade teacher at Hawthorne Academy in San Antonio, Texas, and Gloria Farley, a third-grade teacher at Osmond A. Church School in New York City, explain how they use the Core Knowledge Sequence and what it has done for their students.

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Hawthorne Academy has been using the Core Knowledge Sequence since 1992. Over the past several years, it has converted from a regular elementary school to a comprehensive early childhood- through eighth-grade school that begins with full-day pre-kindergarten for 3-year-olds. Despite the fact that 90 percent of the students are economically disadvantaged, 93 percent of the students passed the state reading test in 2005—that's 10 percentage points higher than the statewide passing rate. But their success isn't limited to reading; Hawthorne students surpassed the statewide passing rate (by at least seven percentage points) in mathematics, writing, science, and social studies, as well.

“We use Core Knowledge as the main content in science and social studies, but we also incorporate it in math, language arts, and reading. Our curriculum is driven by

the state and district standards—and Core Knowledge provides the meat, or the specific content, that we use to meet those standards. Working together, our first-grade teachers mapped out the curriculum for the year. We organized the content into four units, one for each nine week period. This year-long plan now serves as our guide and helps to keep us on track while still giving us the freedom to decide on our own the ‘how-to’ of teaching that content.

A recent conversation with a friend who started teaching in another school district in February made me really appreciate Core Knowledge. She knew she had to teach the state standards, but she didn't have any idea what her class had covered so far this year. She feared repeating what had already been taught or perhaps missing something that had not yet been taught. The Core Knowledge Sequence spirals and is mapped out so that children build upon their knowledge rather than repeat the same content each year. So, for example, we just finished our unit on the solar system; it was just an introduction to the nine planets, the phases of the moon, the sun, stars, and constellations. When the children get to third grade, they will study the solar system again. They will review what they learned in first-grade and build upon that to go more in depth with their studies.

Core Knowledge allows for consistency within the grade level so that all first-graders are learning the same thing. Yet, each teacher is still able to teach the topics the way she thinks she should and to personalize the content for her class. We just finished our unit on the Mayas, the Aztecs, and the Incas. After our discussion on the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, I chose to show my students a video of a computer recreation of this city on a lake. The bilingual teacher across the hallway, Mrs. Alarcon, had her students go home and create their own Tenochtitlan based on what they had learned about this ancient city. The children's projects were amazing! They used many different materials to create a support system that would allow them to build on water. This led to a great discussion about the struggles the Aztecs faced in trying to build this incredible city. Mrs.



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(Top) Rachel Pacheco, Hawthorne Academy, San Antonio; (above) Gloria Farley, Osmond A. Church School, New York City

Alarcon's class went around to the other first-grade classes and presented their project. Needless to say, we will all be using her idea next year.

Our children are so excited about what they are learning. When a unit ends, they don't want to stop learning. I have to remind them that they will return to the topic at another grade level. But they say, ‘Tell us now, tell us now Miss Pacheco, we want to know now!’ And that's what makes it worth it: The children love being in school, they love what they are learning, and they can't wait until it's time to talk about the Mayas, the Aztecs, the solar system, or any other Core Knowledge topic. Parents get excited, too. One said to me, ‘Oh my gosh, my child came home today and taught me about the four phases of the moon and the constellations.’ Another said, ‘I had no idea what Mesopotamia was! My child is teaching me a lot!’

People cannot fully appreciate Core

Knowledge until they visit a Core Knowledge school and speak to the students and teachers. I remember being that first-year teacher thinking, 'Where am I going to find something on Mesopotamia or Ancient Egypt that is appropriate for first grade?' It was hard, but once I started looking and talking to other teachers, I was amazed at what I found. And the kids love it. Teaching and learning have never been so much fun and so exciting."

—Rachel Pacheco, first-grade teacher

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In 1999, before the Osmond A. Church School (PS 124 in geographic district 27) began using the Core Knowledge Sequence, just 33 percent of its fourth-graders scored either proficient or advanced on the state English Language Arts test. But last year, 80 percent of the students scored proficient or advanced. That's 20 percentage points higher than the citywide average—and it's all the

more impressive considering that 100 percent of PS 124's students are eligible for the free-lunch program. Last year, 92 percent of the fourth-graders in the school (compared to 77 percent city-wide) scored proficient or advanced on the state math test.

"When I first began teaching here, I didn't know about the Core Knowledge Sequence. It was just here. I think it's great, fabulous. It lends itself to going beyond the regular curriculum. Children are able to read, learn, and appreciate more. It helps me stretch kids to places I didn't know they could go.

My children love to write poems. We read lots of poetry—'Dream Variation' by Langston Hughes, 'The Crocodile' by Lewis Carroll, and 'Trees' by Sergeant Joyce Kilmer are just a few examples. The kids also write their own poetry, their own couplets.

Core Knowledge drives the entire cur-

riculum. It is a broad-based and diverse curriculum that allows the children to learn about other cultures. For example, I recently read Arabian Nights aloud to my students, and I combined it with an art lesson by having students design and draw their own rugs.

The students absolutely enjoy Core Knowledge. They are highly motivated and constantly asking questions. One project that the students loved was a research project we recently completed on orchestra instruments. The students worked in four groups—string, percussion, woodwind, and brass—and each student selected a particular instrument to study. This project culminated with a presentation by each group. I enjoy Core Knowledge too. But I don't have one favorite topic to teach—I really treasure them all because of the many opportunities I have to make connections among topics and relate all of the academic subjects to one another."

—Gloria Farley, third-grade teacher

Samples from the Core Knowledge Sequence for First Grade

American History and Geography

- I. Early People and Civilizations
 - B. Maya, Inca, and Aztec Civilizations

Teachers: Children will study the Maya, Inca, and Aztec civilizations in detail in grade 5. First-grade teachers should examine the fifth-grade guidelines to see how these topics build in the later grade. Here, introduce children to these civilizations...

- Maya in Mexico and Central America
 - Aztecs in Mexico
 - Moctezuma (also called Montezuma)
 - Tenochtitlan (Mexico City)
 - Inca in South America (Peru, Chile)
 - Cities in the Andes, Machu Picchu
- II. Early Exploration and Settlement
 - C. English Settlers
 - The story of the Lost Colony
 - Sir Walter Raleigh
 - Virginia Dare
 - Virginia
 - Jamestown ...

Visual Arts

- III. Kinds of Pictures: Portrait and Still Life

Teachers: Introduce children to the terms we use to describe different kinds of paintings, discuss examples, and provide opportunities for children to create their own works in different genres. When you look at the specified works, ask the children about their impressions—what they notice first, and what the picture makes them think of or feel. Go on to discuss lines, shapes, colors, and textures; details not obvious at first; why they think the artist chose to depict things in a certain way, etc.

- Recognize as a portrait or self-portrait:
 - Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*
 - Francisco Goya, *Don Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuñiga*
 - Vincent van Gogh, *Self-portrait* [1889]
- Recognize as a still life:
 - Vincent van Gogh, *Irises*
 - Paul Cézanne, studies with fruit, such as *Apples and Oranges*
- Recognize as a mural (a painting on a wall):
 - Diego Rivera, *The History of Medicine in Mexico*

Science

- V. Introduction to Electricity

Teachers: Through reading aloud, observation and experiment, explore with children basic principles of electricity and electrical safety rules.

- Static electricity
- Basic parts of simple electric circuits (for example, batteries, wire, bulb or buzzer, switch)
- Conductive and nonconductive materials
- Safety rules for electricity (for example, never put your finger, or anything metallic, in an electrical outlet; never touch a switch or electrical appliance when your hands are wet or when you're in the bathtub; never put your finger in a lamp socket; etc.)

Note: A variety of materials exist that teachers can use or adapt to teach the material outlined in the sequence. For more information, see the Core Knowledge Web site at www.coreknowledge.org.