

Giving kids a fair go

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Providing students with an even playing field may require explicit teaching across curriculum areas.

We are all different. Some are born into wealth and a network of contacts. Others are born into poverty. Some pick up particular skills and abilities quickly, whereas others struggle more. This leads to inequality.

However, the world's great liberal democracies are not ruthless Darwinian jungles. The consensus among mainstream politicians is that everyone deserves a fair go and much of politics is about working out what that looks like. What laws do we need to make? How much resource should we target to the disadvantaged?

Now imagine a teacher who sets students in a Year 6 class a project on [The Eureka Rebellion](#) – a key event in Australia's history.

Each student will bring a range of different resources to this project. Some will be better readers than others. Given that reading is [a combination of decoding skills and background knowledge](#), there are two sources of these reading differences.

So let's back up a little. In order to give these students a fair go, let's ensure they have all had a high quality systematic synthetic programme in the preceding years and a knowledge rich curriculum that includes effective vocabulary instruction.

What differences now remain?

Some students will pick up new concepts about the rebellion more quickly than others. Some will have supportive parents who know about the content and have time to help work with their child on the project. Perhaps they may proof-read, check spellings and make suggestions. Some may even decide to take a trip to Ballarat to check out Sovereign Hill and the Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka.

Other students may have fewer resources to draw upon. Perhaps their parents work long hours or know little about Australian history. Perhaps there is nowhere suitable to work at home. Perhaps they lack motivation and believe history is boring.

In class, the teacher monitors, intervenes and makes suggestions but nonetheless, some students become quite expert in The Eureka Rebellion whereas others don't learn a great deal about it at all. The former gain a sense of achievement, find the project interesting and start to identify as someone who is good at history. The latter do not – they have not grasped the history or its significance and so it is an unsuccessful and often boring printing and sticking exercise.

I think we have failed to give these students a fair go. Now imagine a sequence of explicit teaching about The Eureka Rebellion. The teacher assesses background knowledge – do students understand how the colonial system worked or the importance of gold to the economy at



that time? The teacher can then fill any gaps, perhaps through some whole class discussion.

The teacher enthusiastically tells the story of the rebellion, with all its intrinsic drama. Students complete a series of tasks of increasing complexity. Perhaps those who advance rapidly can accelerate to more open-ended tasks. At the end of the sequence, students could produce an essay or a poster or perhaps even give a presentation. Whatever the task, the students are given explicit guidance in how to complete it, ideally drawing on previous knowledge and previous tasks.

This gives all students a fair go. Nobody is harmed – the advantaged can still excel. However, those who lacked resources or were demotivated have an opportunity to understand the story and to achieve. They may discover that the topic is more interesting than they had imagined.

So what?

Most of you reading this post probably don't know about The Eureka Rebellion and yet you are still educated adults. What have we achieved by teaching students about it?

Any single item on the curriculum disappears if you stare too hard at it. You can make a case against anything

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– see the pundits who appear from time-to-time to denounce quadratic equations or some other arbitrary curriculum dot-point. They are making use of this effect.

But knowledge is what you think with. An educated adult has accumulated a lot of knowledge from many different domains over a long period of time. As this knowledge becomes embedded in schema in long-term memory, it becomes effortless to recall and this effortlessness fools us into thinking it is trivial and easy to acquire or that everyone else knows it. It is not and they do not.

As teachers, we can do little about natural endowments or wealth disparities, but we can work to close the knowledge gap.

And closing the knowledge gap gives everyone a fair go.

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