What Students Learn without Being Taught

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Biography:

Catherine E. Snow is the Patricia Albjerg Graham Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE). After receiving her Ph.D. in developmental psychology from McGill University, Snow worked for several years in the Linguistics Department of the University of Amsterdam, before taking up a position at HGSE. She conducts research on language and literacy development, in early childhood and in adolescence, in monolingual and bilingual learners, topics on which she has published more than 250 articles and books. She chaired the National Academy of Sciences Committee that produced Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (1998) and the RAND Reading Study Group that produced Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D program for reading comprehension (2000). She was co-principal investigator of the Reading for Understanding project focused on middle grades (G4-8), Catalyzing Comprehension through Discussion and Debate (CCDD); outcomes of that project include curricular materials demonstrated to improve students’ academic language and reading comprehension skills (Word Generation) and a program shown to be effective in improving the reading outcomes of struggling 6th-9th grade readers (Strategic Adolescent Reading Initiative, STARI). Much of her recent work has been carried out together with collaborators brought together by SERP (the Strategic Education Research Partnership) in Research-Practice Partnerships.

Abstract:

Many educational efforts—curricular plans or interventions—are focused on explicitly teaching students skills such as writing or reading comprehension, I argue that we need to distinguish between the skills that can be directly taught and those that develop in the wake of other activities. I present evidence that two skills in particular—reading comprehension as reflected in the GISA and essay writing—develop without specific targeted instruction, in the context of a curriculum that does explicitly teach academic language, perspective-taking, argumentation, using engaging content and regular discussion/debate. I will discuss the characteristics of cognitive tasks that do/don't benefit from targeted instruction, and talk about implications for the design of elementary and secondary education.