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Standards and Instructional Equity for Student Success

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INSTRUCTIONAL THEORY RESEARCH

School is one of the most influential institutions in a child's ecological system. Award-winning Russian-born American developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner placed school in a child's "microsystem," or his or her immediate surroundings. The microsystem is also where immediate family falls. Bronfenbrenner understood that school, like family, shapes a child's development. Even prior to the development of Bronfenbrenner's "ecological systems theory," in the early 20th century psychologists John Dewey and Edward Thorndike formulated arguments pertaining to the connection between the science of psychology and the practical application of learning theory in educational settings (Tennyson 2010).

John Dewey envisioned a special linking science between learning theory and educational practice, and Edward Thorndike investigated principles of learning that could be directly applied to the teaching process (Tennyson 2010). Following the work of Dewey and Thorndike, another seminal researcher changed the way we think about how instruction informs how students learn. Lev Vygotsky's cognitive theory of learning involved the Zone of Proximal Development. This theory of learning incorporated the nuances of instruction beyond previous research and is still highly regarded and implemented today.

In the 1960s, educational psychologist Robert Gagné theorized that the acquisition of knowledge is facilitated by the hierarchical sequencing of content from elemental subordinate information to more complex skills (Gagné 1962). Additional researchers formulated cognitive-based theories, such as David Ausubel's theory of progressive differentiation, which proposed the use of advance organizers (broad, general ideas) followed by a sequence of more concrete and detailed ones (Ausubel 1969). Cognitive psychology pioneer Jerome Bruner proposed that ideas should be reintroduced in increasingly complex ways as the learner matures, and all teaching should be scaffolded (Bruner, Goodnow, and Austin 1964). These ideas are the foundation for the gradual release model of learning. The gradual release of responsibility model of instruction suggests that cognitive work should shift slowly and intentionally from teacher modeling, to joint responsibility between teachers and students, to independent practice and application by the learner (Fisher and Frey 2008; Pearson and Gallagher 1983).

Today, instructional theories are still evolving. The one attribute that remains constant, however, is the belief that all students deserve instruction of the highest quality. There are many barriers in the educational system that can render this commonly held belief hard to achieve. One of those barriers lies deep in the history of instruction. Thirty years ago, the delivery of instruction characterized by rote memory was widely accepted, but the world has shifted, and so must our instruction. However, I have found that the teaching of a basic understanding and memorization of content-related facts is still taking place all over the United States. We must change our expectations: memorization is not enough.

> *Students must develop conceptual understandings so they can apply the knowledge they have acquired, analyze information, synthesize what they have learned, evaluate the content, and most importantly, create new knowledge and new understandings.*

By changing our expectations for all students, we can remove the biases that create inequities in our instruction. The most significant predictor of underperformance is the absence of common instructional language and tools that inhibits the provision and facilitation of rigorous, standards-informed instruction in classrooms throughout schools and districts.

This paper will show you how addressing the standards in an innovative way and changing the way we think about student learning can precipitously improve the quality of instruction in your school/district.

An Innovative Approach to the Standards: Equitable Access to Academic Language

As you might imagine, the core content standards for English/language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science are dense in academic language. For this reason, it is inappropriate to expect the vast majority of our students—*let alone students who are "striving" to read and comprehend consistent with developmental expectations*—to demonstrate proficiency without instruction that's focused on a conceptual understanding of the standards' language.

For example, in Grade 3, students are expected to "determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea."

But what does that mean to our students? And how do we ensure that every single one of our students understands what this means?

There is an imperative that students and teachers, as well as those supporting and evaluating teachers, have a calibrated understanding of the terms that comprise each content standard. Why? The writers of high-stakes end-of-grade and end-of-course assessments use their calibrated understanding of the academic language to compose content-specific exams that yield valid and reliable scores. These scores are subsequently used to make assumptions about our students' aptitude and educator effectiveness, whether we like it or not.

Now, back to the academic language in the aforementioned standard. Rigorous instruction aligned to this standard should result in student acquisition of specific knowledge and ability:

- Students should be able to determine what the text is mostly about.

- Students should be able to distinguish between the main idea and the topic/subject of the text, which is too broad to be the main idea. "Too broad" as a concept must also be taught, and it must be associated with the topic of the text.

- Students should be aware that:
  - The main idea of the text is not always found in the first sentence of a text. In fact, it is seldom found there.
  - In some cases, the main idea is not stated at all.
  - Key details are too narrow to be the main idea. "Too narrow" as a concept must be taught, and it must be associated with key details in the text.

- In order to support their determination of the main idea, students will need a great deal of practice with distinguishing between ancillary and important words or phrases. This will assist them in explaining how the key details support the development of the main idea.

We have work to do to ensure that students have equitable access to the academic language of the content standards. It's the language of the assessment, therefore, that is the chief barrier to improvements in student achievement.

The language of the content standards is finite, and since it is finite, we can resolve the access gap by ensuring that:

- Your K–6 curricula includes operational definitions of Tier II (general) and Tier III (content-specific) academic language.

- Teachers and school leaders refrain from making assumptions about students' knowledge of academic language. You would be surprised by the number of students who are not conversant in the academic language of the standards. Just randomly select a few students to define a term or two in the objective posted on the board and see what they say.

- Teachers refrain from watering down the academic language. Instead, we should expose students to the language. The children can handle it.

- Teachers reinforce and reassess students' conceptual understanding of the academic language of the posted objective each day. If you have taught for any extended period of time, you know that when you relate information to students on Monday and ask them to recall it on Tuesday, you typically find that they, in fact, did not retain the information. And by the way, reinforcing students' knowledge of academic language cannot be done by using the unfamiliar word in a sentence or copying terms and definitions from a glossary.

We also need to provide educators across grades and students across ages with common tools that have all of this common knowledge and common language built into them.

By supporting educators and staff with guides that define important academic language in a single, streamlined way, students will have a consistent definition of these terms without conflating concepts and ideas. We also need to continue to differentiate instruction, and by providing educators with guiding questions for students, we will help them to develop the knowledge and language they need to meet the expectations of the standards. And by providing students with graphic organizers and student workbooks that are also inclusive of these definitions and explanations, we are setting our students up for success.

Data: The Impact of Implementing These Instructional Practices

As wonderful as it is to understand this approach to instruction related to the standards, it is even more impactful to see the data.

The following chart and narrative interpretations demonstrate the impact of professional development on reading/English scores for all student groups in a low-performing public primary school over a four-year period.

Secondary School Study

Four-Year Analysis of Reading/English (ELA) Performance										
Student Group	Prior to PD	Year 1	Gain/ Loss	Year 2	Gain/ Loss	Year 3	Gain/ Loss	Year 4	Gain/ Loss	Total Gain
Asian (87)	82.3	95.5	+13.2	93.8	-1.7	97.6	+3.8	98.1	+0.5	+15.8
African American (297)	67.8	78.0	+10.2	87.5	+9.5	87.8	+0.3	89.0	+1.2	+21.2
White (176)	82.3	91.4	+10.2	93.4	+2.0	92.6	-0.8	94.7	+2.1	+12.4
Hispanic (94)	58.1	82.7	+24.6	86.9	+4.2	88.2	+1.3	+87.9	-0.3	+29.8
FARMS (218)	53.6	71.7	+18.1	82.6	+10.9	82.9	+0.3	85.9	+3.0	+32.3
Special Ed (60)	24.5	24.4	-0.1	69.4	+45.0	74.6	+5.2	68.4	-6.2	+43.9
ELL (33)	26.3	73.9	+47.6	72.7	-1.2	80.0	+7.3	66.7	-13.3	+40.4

Prior to the implementation of the Integrated Approach, the school depicted above was in School Improvement Status Year 3 and slated to be reconstituted by its state's department of education. As the chart displays, a mere 25% of students with special needs or limited English proficiency demonstrated competency in reading, while the aggregate passed at a rate of 75%. Similarly, just more than half of the Hispanic population and students from households living below the poverty line (FARMS) were demonstrating adequate yearly progress. Four years later, not only does the aggregate read at a rate of 91.6% proficient or advanced, but also African Americans, Hispanics, students living below the poverty line, students with special needs (SPED), and English Language Learners (ELL) have demonstrated 21.2% to 43.9% gains since implementing Donyall Dickey's instructional approaches.

When we change the way we think about student learning—and when we align our work as educators to the standards in this new way and develop a plan for implementing this work—we can see results, and we see students succeed.

CONCLUSION

It is important to reflect on how instruction has evolved. It is also critical to hold steadfast to our belief in children's abilities and that we must do better for them. There is a weighty imperative on teachers, school leaders, and central office personnel to improve student achievement right away, but we must remember that it's the people—our greatest resource for children—who will be tasked with implementation. This is where an effective literacy curriculum comes into play.

From coast to coast, schools and districts are being managed and operated like start-ups with disjointed and disparate expectations, systems, and structures. Yet we simultaneously hope for improvements in student achievement. We need more than hope as a strategy. We must come together under the same culture of instruction—a culture that insists upon a methodical alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, or what I refer to as a strategic integration of common instructional knowledge, common instructional language, and common instructional tools. Only then will the alchemy of student achievement become the resultant byproduct. Our students and families are counting on us, and zip codes cannot remain a determinant of student achievement. If we can change the instruction in these zip codes, we can change student outcomes in them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donyall D. Dickey, Ed.D., is a nationally recognized educator and expert in curriculum, instruction, organizational development, and school administration. Increased levels of student achievement and school improvement distinguish His 20-year career as an educational leader, having served as a teacher and principal in the Baltimore City and Howard County public school systems in Maryland, Regional Superintendent of Schools in Philadelphia, and Chief Schools Officer and Chief Academic Officer of Atlanta Public Schools in Georgia.

Utilizing his extensive experience, Dr. Dickey is the founder, Chief Executive Officer, and lead consultant at Educational Epiphany, a publishing and professional development firm working in urban, suburban, and rural school districts across 22 states. The organization aims to provide standards-based instructional materials for the core content areas, facilitate professional development for all levels of educators, and improve the school experience for children. Dr. Dickey has also published 35 professional books across content areas as well as on the Common Core State Standards for English and the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. He is a contributing author and an expert behind the innovative instructional framework of *Scholastic Literacy*, a K–6 comprehensive literacy program.

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1. Literacy is both a functional tool and a bridge to a life of intellectual curiosity and happiness. Giving young people access to the knowledge and skills that allow them to select the future of their choosing is, for us, the definition of freedom.

2. Setting high expectations for every child is nonnegotiable. Everything we craft is built on the conviction that equity and academic success is possible for every child.

3. Helping educators reflect on and refine their practice must always be our goal.

These beliefs are the heart of our work together. They have inspired us to serve educators and parents by integrating best practices in literacy instruction into a coherent, flexible, research-based system for teaching and learning.

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