Six T's of Effective Reading Instruction

- Collective genius does not just happen; methods matter (Bennis, 1997)

Part of our professional work as teacher researchers has been to continually turn to the literature to polish and extend our understandings about reading, writing and learning. As we worked to design a model for improving reading achievement, we considered what Richard Allington (2002) and his team of researchers had learned about effective reading instruction from a decade of studying exemplary classroom teachers across six states and across the grades.

We also turned to the extensive work of Michael Pressley (2002) to polish and extend what we know about reading instruction.

At a conference I had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Pressley to talk directly with him about the findings emerging from the Learning for Success research project (1994-2002), and about the first draft of our new approach to improving reading achievement called SmartReading. He was delighted when I showed him all of the research-based components woven into the approach, especially the integrating of reading and writing. His coaching suggestions helped to further our understandings, and guide the next steps for our district research teams. We were saddened to learn of Michael's untimely death and will always be grateful for his bold and committed stance on the right things to do for literacy learning.

On the journey to creating a new model, I also met with Dylan Wiliams at King’s College to fine-tune our thinking around assessment for and as learning.

We polished our thinking through the work of many leaders. We thank them all for challenging us to examine our work through research lenses. Below are six touchstones we now use to guide our practice:

**Time**

- Planning for Reading and Writing... for as much as half of the day
  - at least 90 minutes of eyes-on and minds-on text
  - Exemplary teachers plan their instructional time so that students are reading and writing for as much as half of the school day
  - ...around a 50/50 ratio of reading and writing to other activities - activities other than reading and writing. Allington mentions that "...there is a lot of stuff going on in less effective classrooms that is not supported by reliable evidence for any amount of use (e.g. Test-preparation workbooks, copying vocabulary definitions from a dictionary, after-reading comprehension worksheets)."
  - (Pp.742)

- Extensive reading is critical to the development of reading proficiency
  - Extensive practice provides opportunities for students to consolidate, apply and extend the skills and strategies teachers often work so hard to develop.

  "Students need enormous quantities of successful reading to become proficient readers. By successful reading, I mean experiences in which students perform with a high level of accuracy, fluency and comprehension...When a nine year old misses as few as two or three words in each 100 running words of text, the text may be too hard for effective practice. That text may be appropriate for instructional purposes, but developing readers need much more high-success reading than difficult reading. It is high-accuracy, fluent, and easily comprehended reading that provides the opportunities to integrate complex skills and strategies into an automatic, independent reading process. Students who become proficient read more; they are engaged in more independent reading, more guided and supported reading conversations, and more social studies and science reading. Exemplary teachers recognize this critical aspect of instructional planning." (Allington, 2002, Pp.743)

Summary of Allington (2002, revised 2008) developed by Susan Close, and may be copied by educators for professional dialogue.
Texts

- "Smart" organizations...support teachers by providing a rich and expansive supply of texts to promote children’s learning across the school day, rich supply of books they can actually read

The texts are chosen to promote learning across the day and across the curriculum. The choices included multi-level texts for social studies and science as well as for reading in the language arts. Organizations that know that one-size-fits-all contradicts everything we have learned about effective teaching.

The exemplary teachers noticed that high-achieving students:

1. Received a steady diet of "easy" texts - texts they could read accurately, fluently, and with good comprehension.
2. Consistently out-gained both average-achieving and lower-achieving students year after year.

They also noticed that motivation for reading was dramatically influenced by reading success. They acted on those observations by creating multi-level, multi-sourced curricula that met the needs of the diverse range of students in their classrooms.

Teaching

- Explicit demonstrations of cognitive strategies good readers use

Students of all achievement levels benefited from exemplary teaching, but it is the lowest achievers who benefited most (Allington and Johnson, 2002; Pressley, 2002). In some classrooms, some low achieving students spend 80% of their instructional time in texts that are inappropriately difficult to make much progress academically. Some low achieving students receive appropriate reading materials only when they participate in special support instruction (resource support).

In exemplary classrooms low achieving students spend their day with books they can successfully read. Exemplary teachers...use active instruction – modelling and demonstrating strategies skilled readers use as they read. They model the thinking in ‘think-alouds’ that skilled readers engage in as they attempt to decode a word, self-monitor for understanding, construct pictures in their minds, summarize and question while reading or editing when composing. They adopt a watch me’ or ‘let me demonstrate’ stance. These teachers "...routinely give direct, explicit demonstrations of the cognitive strategies good readers engage in as they read...

The "watch me" or "let me demonstrate" stance seems quite different from the "assign and assess" stance that dominates many less effective classrooms...
Much of what teachers consider teaching is little more than assignment and assessment…the assign and assess model has little benefit to all but a few students who have already acquired a basic understanding of the strategy. (Pp.743)

In a traditional phonics program, when teachers assign a worksheet that requires children to fill in the missing vowel, only children who already know the corresponding response can successfully do the task. And they don’t need the practice. When assigned a story to read and questions to answer at the end, children who have developed the appropriate strategy to use while reading can respond appropriately, but those who have not developed it cannot. They cannot acquire the strategy from the end-of-the-story questions. They need someone to teach it to them – someone who can model and demonstrate its use.

Linguistic communication is the primary vehicle for human thinking and learning (Vygotsky).

What makes the human mind so powerful is the use of speech for learning and in particular an elaborated syntax linked to a powerful symbolic memory which enables humans to elaborate, refine, connect, create and remember great numbers of concepts…one of our key aims is to develop linguistic intelligence through enhancing in students their powers of communication and concept formation.

The more we can encourage children to think about thinking, the more we can help them gain metacognitive awareness and understanding of their own minds. Conscious reflective control and deliberated mastery are essential factors in school learning.

Learning depends on conversations, on the negotiation of personal meanings through dialogue with others, leading to improved understanding. These conversations can be internal, but are particularly effective carried out in pairs, or in groups, where different ways of interpreting experience can be explored to mutual benefit.

Exemplary teachers realized that instructional packages often provide little comprehensive or useful information on the direct and explicit teaching of comprehension skills or cognitive strategies…they craft explicit demonstrations of the skills and strategies:

E.g. The deletion strategy, when teaching summarization, was modelled as a ‘watch-me-do-this.’ Teachers would demonstrate through a ‘think-aloud’ process how to delete redundant, trivial, and subordinate information until they arrived at a summary statement.

They demonstrated strategies to the whole class, to targeted small groups, and to individual students in side-by-side instruction. …The plethora of instructional activities truly set these teachers apart, and explains much of their success with lower-achieving students. (Pp. 744)

Expert teaching requires knowing not only how to teach strategies explicitly, but also how to foster transfer of the strategies from the structured practice activities to students’ independent use of them while engaged in reading (Pp. 744).

A real concern is that when instruction becomes too explicit, children never learn when and how to use the strategies profitably and successfully in their independent reading.

How will we know if the students are transferring the skills to independent use while they are reading? Regular structured assessment conversations are one way to access the information. SmartReading offers teachers regular structured time to conduct both formal and informal assessment conversations.

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Effective learning is not just the manipulation of information so that it is integrated into an existing knowledge base, but also involves directing one’s attention to what has been assimilated, understanding the relationship between the new information and what is already known, understanding the processes which facilitated this, and being aware when something new has actually been learned.

It involves not only thinking but also a metacognitive process: thinking about thinking. Flavel argues that metacognitive ability changes with age, and older children simply become more successful learners because they have internalized over time a great quantity of metacognitive information.

Metacognitive development is not so much dependent on age but on experience, and we can intervene to help even young children to develop some of the metacognitive strategies of successful learning.

Like compound interest, metacognitive strategies can be said to increase learners’ intellectual capacity. Such strategies, valuable as they are, do not go far enough.

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Co-Teaching adds a new bold-T to effective learning.

As our research teams have engaged in the new learning round model – where they plan, co-teach, reflect, analyze, assess and plan-anew – together, a new T has been set into our way of working. One of the leaders reflects:

“As teachers participate in learning rounds and co-plan lessons, critical dialogue occurs around how to best support learning at each of the stages. Through these conversations, tools are selected to ‘best-fit’ the development of targeted skills. Powerful conversations about matching tools with desired outcomes push everyone’s thinking, learning and professional practice.”

Talk

- Exemplary teachers fostered much more student talk: teacher - student, and student - student talk

Exemplary teachers encouraged, modeled and supported purposeful talk across the school day.

The talk was problem posing, problem-solving talk related to curricular topics. Teachers and students discussed ideas, concepts, hypotheses, strategies, and responses with one another. Teachers posed more "open" questions, to which multiple responses were appropriate.' (Pp.745) Open questions offer the opportunity to examine thinking, the strategy as it is being used and to continue instruction. Open questions assess a broader understanding and help make children's thinking visible:

“So, what other story have we read that had an ending like this one?”

“Has anyone known of a problem with a pet like the one in the story?”
The interrogational nature of most classrooms talk...where teachers pose the questions and children respond, verify and correct, remains a dominant pattern, study after study, year after year (Cazden, 1988).

There is evidence that more “thoughtful” classroom talk leads to improved reading comprehension, especially in high-poverty schools. Thoughtful talk is highly personalized and provides targeted replies to extend student thinking and student understanding (Fall et al, 2000; Knapp, 1995).

Tasks
- The student work is substantive, challenging, and requires self-regulation

In exemplary teachers' classrooms there was greater use of longer assignments and less emphasis on filling the day with multiple shorter tasks.
In these classrooms students often worked on a writing task for 10 days or more...There was less of the low-level worksheet-type tasks and greater reliance on more complex tasks across the day and across subjects. Because of the nature of the work students seemed more engaged and less often off-task...

Another factor related to student engagement was that the tasks required highly complex thinking.
They were open-ended, high inference tasks that invited students to 'think with text', and to use the information in the text to explain their thinking. The tasks often involve student choice. (Pp.745)

Open-ended tasks or driving questions tap into the reader's ability to link past experiences with the text, and they require the reader to predict based on information or character development in the text.
From such information the teacher gains information about the reader’s ability to use experiences to construct meaning in response to text. Open-ended tasks invite the reader to move beyond text-based responses that emphasize the reader’s ability to reproduce the ideas of the author. The focus is on the reader’s ability to integrate the author’s ideas with their own knowledge, to question their own or the author’s beliefs, or to use the ideas from the text (Tierney and Pearson, 1992).

Tasks invite students to remember, think about, and respond to what they are reading. These tasks call for the reader to link experience with the text and to draw a logical conclusion. Responses require more complex or sophisticated thinking.

Challenging tasks invite learners into a problem-solving, solution-finding context. Findings of problem solving, an area related to metacognition, indicate that an ordinary person rarely seeks to investigate and solve a problem systematically unless specifically educated to do so.
One of the dangers learners face is what Edward deBono calls the “intelligence trap, “ or the illusion of knowledge, which is that the greatest obstacle to discovery can lie in what people believe they know or can do. They become trapped in what they already know, and are not open to new ideas. Some knowledgeable students are remarkably unintelligent in their approach to learning. They do not generate new ideas, but are blocked by old familiar habits.
Research Underpinnings

Such learners need strategies for generating new ideas and for becoming open to the ideas of others. They need to become not only creative and critical thinkers, but also self-critical thinkers. Self-criticism for Binet was the most important indicator of intelligence. The capacity for self-criticism is not something that is inborn; it must be nurtured through practice and education. The need to avoid impulsivity…and to take time to consider options and alternatives has been identified by Feuerstein as a key strategy in overcoming learning failure. The more we can encourage children to think about thinking, the more we can help them gain metacognitive awareness and understanding of their own minds.

Literacy is about reading for understanding, reading for higher-order comprehension. What is surprising is that 20-30% of students experience difficulties in learning to read. Only a fraction of these students have biological differences that can account of the difficulties.

Aligning Testing and Teaching

- **Exemplary teachers often used rubric or performance standards-based assessment and evaluation**

  Assessment processes are transparent to the students. Performance standards or criteria sets provide information needed to guide planning and teaching, and improve learning.

  Black and Williams (1998) suggest a culture of success can be built on assessment practices. They argue that self-assessment is an essential component and that feedback has three elements: recognition of the desired goal, evidence about the present position, and some understanding of a way to close the gap between the two.

  According to their research review, improved classroom assessment produced such unprecedented positive effects on student achievement that they could not suggest another innovation that could claim effects of equal nature or size. Stiggins (2002) concludes that gains were maximized in classes where teachers:

  1. Understand and articulate in advance of teaching the achievement targets that their students are to hit
  2. Inform their students about those learning goals, in terms that students understand, from the very beginning of the teaching and learning process
  3. Become assessment literate and thus able to transform their expectations into assessment exercises and scoring procedures that accurately reflect student achievement
  4. Use classroom assessment to build students’ confidence in themselves as learners and help them take responsibility for their own learning
  5. Translate classroom assessment results into frequent descriptive feedback for students, providing them with specific insight as to how to improve
  6. Continuously adjust instruction based on the results of classroom assessments
  7. Engage students in regular self-assessment, with standards held constant so that students can watch themselves grow over time and thus feel in charge of their own success
  8. Actively involve students in communicating with their teachers and parents about their achievement status and improvement (Pp.758-765).
Research Underpinnings

We appreciate the interactive nature of the six T's, the six touchstones for effective reading instruction and effective learning.

We appreciate the highly complex nature of good teaching, and seek to learn from research-proven practices. Allington reminds us that, "...in the end enhanced reading proficiency rests largely on the capacity of classroom teachers to provide expert, exemplary reading instruction."

He leaves us with a challenging question: "Are we creating schools in which every year every teacher becomes more expert?" (Pp.747)

References


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