



Special Teachers and Exceptional Pupils = Urban Promise

Newsletter Features

- Reading and Understanding Expository Text
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Important Dates

- October 16th**
STEP=UP
Field Advisory 4 pm
- November 13th**
STEP=UP
Field Advisory 4 pm
- December 11th**
Advisory Board Meeting 4:30 pm

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Co-Directors
Michelle Parker-Katz
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Reading and Understanding Expository Text

With over 90% of students with disabilities having difficulties with reading, many often become exasperated when reading non-fiction informational text material. Text structures, themes, vocabulary, and overall reading purposes differ greatly from the fictional text students read frequently in schools. Given these challenges, how do experienced special educators, often working with general educators, help students comprehend such text before they even begin reading or listening? We report here ideas that STEP=UP Partners shared from their own teaching.

Expository texts bring forth multi-faceted challenges. It is not only the vocabulary of the text that makes them difficult to read and understand. The structure and organization of the text, the presentation of more than one complex concept concurrently, and the background knowledge required to make sense of the text all contribute to challenges. Tasha McShan reported her observation that students' eyes flow across a page, horizontally, just like fictional text. The student continued to do that even though the text was in two columns (just like this newsletter.) Of course the student made no meaning of the text! Here is an example where the organization and the visual presentation of the text posed challenges to reading comprehension. The formatting, font, size and the length of the text also determines the ease and accessibility for reading a text. Students may also find it difficult to differentiate quotes from

continuous text, or make sense of graphs and charts. The key is to teach students how to handle two-column text, or how to understand the headings whose boldface and font size are also indicators to readers about text organization. How might reading a graphic first, before tackling the other text, help students make predictions and read with purpose? Teaching students to examine text before reading could help them find reasons to read and make sense of even difficult text.

Kim Pilot drew attention to the relative sense of time required to understand expository text. To understand a history text, she said, requires students not only to understand cause-effect relationships, but also built a sense of chronology over long periods of time. Others added that students needed to make association with ideas that are often completely foreign to them. They have to imagine a world that is hardly anything like the one in which they live today.

Dave Rench and Alex Horn highlighted difficulties due to new vocabulary words and terms in science or mathematics. Understanding the word "percent" required mathematical conceptual knowledge. Most of the time non-fictional text includes words from different content-areas, with little explanation, description or visual aid. In one article, a reader could see vocabulary whose meanings are context-specific to science or math -- and all that is in a social studies text. While reading such texts, teachers discussed the need

to break down the text; what ideas, vocabulary words and terms, and hidden assumptions about the learners' backgrounds are nestled in the text? Introduce one concept at a time and choose to focus on some key ideas in the text and filter out the rest, teachers suggested. They also advised rewriting parts of the text to aid comprehension.

Given these multifarious challenges, what strategies do experienced teachers use to help students create meaning out of their reading? Dave highlighted that one key aspect of identifying strategies is to think about who these learners are and how to connect the text to them. Recognizing the strengths and challenges of individual students can help guide the choices of which strategies to use. Dave also tries to bring different students' prior knowledge into the discussion and thereby share the associations individual kids may have with others in the group or class.

Toni Gonzalez and Tasha McShan shared their uses of visual aids to help students who seem to be visual learners. Showing them videos and pictures helps. Tasha shared an interesting way to use contemporary pictures for helping students be creative and think about other worldviews and perspectives. She uses contemporary pictures from magazines and poses "What if" questions to students in an attempt to connect students to the text. For one lesson, she asked, "What if the I-Pod was not in the picture, what would you do?"

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Teachers also discussed how they use guided practice to help students learn to see the text and read the different parts. Some have re-typed text, used visual images, replaced difficult vocabulary words and terms with synonyms, and used reader's theater as a way for students to make concepts and complicated ideas come to life.

The challenge for novice special educators, we decided, is how to break down ideas and figure out how to make the individual student connections while novice educators are themselves still learn ways to observe students and understand their strengths and needs. How might we help novices know what to observe? Tasha observed her students' eye flow across a page. Others talked about knowing what terms would be especially difficult. Still others discussed how cultural and linguistic knowledge will help students make different associations, and how can we as teachers with possibly different biographies still build on students' knowledge? While helping students read and comprehend such text, it is also useful to draw upon our individual experiences of how we make sense of new and difficult text that we have never encountered before. When we have opportunities to discuss reading comprehension with other teachers, we can share those and the experiences of our students. In addition to discussing what strategies worked and did not work, discussing why a particular strategy worked and how practicing teachers identified such strategies is equally important for novice educators to hear. Such talk will help them develop their own ways of searching for strategies that is linked to individual students.

Digital Corner

Visual Thesaurus

<http://www.visualthesaurus.com>

The Visual Thesaurus is an interactive dictionary and thesaurus with an innovative display that encourages exploration and learning. It builds word knowledge by allowing the student to look up a word and build interconnections through their semantic relationship with other words and meanings. The tool provides a visual map of word meanings in web format. It helps students understand the relationships between English words and meanings, hear the correct pronunciation and compare several words at one glance. Say you have a meaning in mind, like "happy." It helps you find related words, from "cheerful" to "euphoric" and uses a color code to indicate the parts of speech for the words.

Research Corner

Helping Novice Teachers Understand Practices and Dilemmas of Teaching Content Area Text

We highlight two research articles that focus on strategies towards integrating content area text and reading instruction.

Spencer and Guillaume in their article suggest the Learning Cycle model as a strategy for developing content area vocabulary and comprehension. This model, developed as a part of the science curricula reform allows students to build concepts through varied experiences before labeling them with formal vocabulary terms. Student go through 4 phases - engaging, exploring, developing and applying, during this cycle. Beginning with the first phase students connect the question/phenomena with their life experience. They continue to explore the ideas/concepts expressed in the first phase through hands-on activities or discussions. In the third phase, they develop the formal language related to these ideas/concepts by integrating their experiences from the first two phases. The work from these phases finally culminates in them being able to use these words, ideas and concepts in a different context. The authors provide several examples of a number of strategies that teachers can use in each phase of the learning cycle. Many of these strategies have features that allow teachers to add new terms and modify understandings as new learning occurs.

Bryant and colleagues present an overview of the components of content area reading instruction and strategies that can be used to teach students with reading disabilities how to approach content area reading. They identify three components of content-area reading instruction: word identification, vocabulary, and comprehension. The authors provide an overview of research findings for each component, including a description of the skills involved, the difficulties exhibited by students with reading disabilities, and their implications for instruction. As an example, recognizing that word identification requires contextual, phonetic, and structural analysis skills, they suggest two strategies - Making Words and Word Identification Strategy as ways to help students with developing word identification skill. It also provides suggestions for selecting textbooks, questions to ask before, during and after reading.

Spencer, B. & Guillame, A. (2006),. Integrating curriculum through the learning cycle: Content-based reading and vocabulary instruction. *The Reading Teacher*. 60 (3) pp. 206-219

Bryant, D., Ugel, N., Thompson, S. & Hamff, A. (1999), Instructional strategies for content-area reading instruction. *Intervention in School & Clinic*, 34 (5) p. 293-302

**2007 NAEYC Annual Conference & Expo
November 7-10th
Chicago, Illinois**

<http://www.annualconference.naeyc.org/>