

How Can We Improve Deeper Learning for Students with Disabilities?

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RSE-TASC Special Education School Improvement Specialists across New York State have the opportunity to collaboratively collect data in multiple classrooms where students with disabilities are educated, using the RSE-TASC Explicit and Specially Designed Instruction Walk-Through tool. This tool includes multiple “Look Fors” for instructional practices that have been proven to be effective in supporting the learning of all students, and in particular students with disabilities and English Language Learners. While many of these practices are being seen with increasing frequency over the years, some are observed with stubbornly low frequency. One of these is: “Teachers explicitly teach strategies for responding to higher order questions.”

This is not unique to New York State. In the article “Deeper Learning for Students with Disabilities” (2015), Vaughn and colleagues explore some of the reasons students with disabilities may not be regularly challenged to engage in deeper learning. They suggest that:

- 1) some educators and policymakers may hold low expectations and not feel that deeper learning goals are feasible for all students;
- 2) many teachers do not receive the preparation, professional learning, and support on evidence-based instructional methods that help students with disabilities learn deeply;
- 3) school leaders are not trained to recognize when instruction has been tailored to meet the needs of students with disabilities so evaluation systems may not value it when teachers apply effective strategies; and
- 4) most schools are not organized to deliver tiered instruction that allows teachers to deliver targeted and intensive support when needed.

Let's look at practices that work

Vaughn and colleagues share some of the practices that have been proven to help students grasp deeper academic content. First, research has shown that instruction that is explicit and systematic, and that provides frequent opportunities for students to practice and receive feedback, leads to improved mastery in both foundational skills and higher level concepts, not only for students with disabilities, but for all students. Strategies that allow students to respond throughout a lesson, like choral responding and use of white boards, and use of frequent checks for understanding to make adjustments and connections, keep students actively engaged. These are clearly explained and illustrated throughout the book *Explicit Direct Instruction, the Power of the Well-Crafted, Well-Taught Lessons: 2nd Edition* (2018, Hollingsworth & Ybarro).

Vaughn and colleagues also stress that teaching meta-cognitive skills; i.e., teaching students with disabilities to think about how they think and learn, is critical for deeper learning. When students engage in meta-cognition, they become empowered and self-motivated, and learning improves.

So, what does this look like in practice? One example of an evidence-based practice for students with disabilities in fourth grade and above (effect size ranging from .38 to .52) is Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR). This is a modified form of Reciprocal Teaching (for more on this approach, see the [Summer, 2013 RSE-TASC Reporter](#)). This reading comprehension strategy combines four proven strategies – previewing text to build background knowledge, self-monitoring of comprehension while reading, determining the main idea, and reviewing and synthesizing information from text after reading – and explicitly teaches students steps for each. Through teacher modeling and guided practice students learn to:

1. Preview: Students are taught specific steps to stimulate background knowledge, make predictions, and set a purpose.
2. Click-and-Clunk: Students learn strategies to use during reading to identify words or concepts that make sense to them (that “click”) and to identify those that do not (that “clunk”), along with four specific fix-up strategies for clunks.
3. Get the Gist: Students learn how to identify and restate the essential idea of each section of a text.
4. Wrap Up: Students learn to ask and answer different types of questions to solidify their understanding of the text.

After students have learned the strategies through teacher modeling and guided practice, they work in cooperative groups to read texts, and each member takes the lead in facilitating the group's use of each strategy articulated above. For a more detailed step-by-step explanation of CSR, see the School Tool above.

School leaders will need to make careful decisions about supports and time given to help teachers implement these strategies. They must ensure that teacher's pre- and in-service programs provide information on evidence-based interventions that can help students with disabilities to access deeper learning. We should all believe that deeper learning is the goal for all students. When we adopt these practices, students with disabilities will attain that goal!

References

- Vaughn, S., Danielson, L., Zumeta, R. & Holdheide, L. (2015). “Deeper learning for students with disabilities.” Students at the Center: Deeper Learning Research Series. Boston, NA: Jobs for the Future.
- Hollingsworth, J. & Ybarra, S. (2018). *Explicit direct instruction (EDI): The power of the well-crafted, well-taught lesson : 2nd Ed.* Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Corwin Press.



School Tool: Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR)

The University of Minnesota National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET), funded by the College of Education and Human Development, publishes [Research-to-Practice Briefs](#) on evidence-based practices that improve secondary education and transition services. These free and downloadable briefs cover topics from community mapping to self-determination to teaching word identification skills.

One of the briefs is on [Collaborative Strategic Reading](#). This brief gives an overview of the research on CSR, a detailed outline of the steps for implementing CSR, examples of materials to use when implementing CSR, and perspectives from teachers who have implemented CSR in their classrooms. If you are interested in implementing CSR in your classroom, it is a terrific place to start!



Bright Spot!

This month's Bright Spot comes from Karen Butler, a Special Education teacher at Scarsdale High School, who recently participated in an RSE-TASC training on transition assessments.

What were students able to achieve? District-wide, students with disabilities are developing self-determination skills, primarily by helping each other. Juniors and seniors who have disabilities are volunteering their time to meet with elementary-aged students, also with disabilities. According to Ms. Butler, the younger students have become more knowledgeable and comfortable with who they are, and the older students are gaining confidence in talking about their disabilities and needs, as well as the strategies they use to manage or overcome them. Ms. Butler noted that learning to advocate at a young age has helped students better advocate for themselves in college.

What practices or systems made this possible?

Mrs. Butler described a district-wide system where students help each other to develop self-determination skills. Under the guidance of Resource Room teachers, juniors and seniors with disabilities volunteer and meet with a group of elementary-aged students at an event held at the elementary school. They discuss their own experiences with having disabilities, sharing their strengths and passions, as well as their challenges and solutions. The younger students are encouraged to ask questions.

What can we learn from this?

Students can develop self-determination skills by helping each other. Beginning the process early, in elementary school, benefits younger and older students alike.

Do you have questions for the RSE-TASC? You can contact us at 914-248-2289 or rse-tasc@pnwboces.org.