

## Curriculum and Instruction

Core curriculum is the foundation of Tier 1 instruction and is the basis for building K-12 literacy in Arizona students. The curriculum at each level must be based upon the 2010 Arizona ELS Standards and built upon an evidence based teaching methodology that has been shown to be effective in teaching the students with whom it is being used. The basis of Response to Intervention is that we remove inappropriate instruction as one of the reasons a student is not making progress. This reflects the position of the 2001 President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education that many problems affecting students identified as having learning disabilities (LD) are not related to student disabilities, but instead are related to instruction that does not meet result in the students successful academic growth.

In addition the core curriculum needs to be taught using explicit, direct instruction, that is differentiated for the variety of student's skills in the class. Not all students are alike. Based on this knowledge, differentiated instruction applies an approach to teaching and learning so that students have multiple options for taking in information and making sense of ideas. The model of differentiated instruction requires teachers to be flexible in their approach to teaching and adjusting the curriculum and presentation of information to learners rather than expecting students to modify themselves for the curriculum. Classroom teaching is a blend of whole-class, group and individual instruction. Differentiated Instruction is a teaching theory based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual and diverse students in classrooms. Tomlinson (2001) identifies three elements of the curriculum that can be differentiated: Content, Process, and Products. Additionally, several guidelines are noted to help educators form an understanding and develop ideas around differentiating instruction.

### **Content**

- *Several elements and materials are used to support instructional content.* These include acts, concepts, generalizations or principles, attitudes, and skills. The variation seen in a differentiated classroom is most frequently the manner in which students gain access to important learning. Access to the content is seen as key.
- *Align tasks and objectives to learning goals.* Designers of differentiated instruction determine as essential the alignment of tasks with instructional goals and

objectives. Goals are most frequently assessed by many high-stakes tests at the state level and frequently administered standardized measures. Objectives are frequently written in incremental steps resulting in a continuum of skills-building tasks. An objectives-driven menu makes it easier to find the next instructional step for learners entering at varying levels.

- *Instruction is concept-focused and principle-driven.* The instructional concepts should be broad based and not focused on minute details or unlimited facts. Teachers must focus on the concepts, principles and skills that students should learn. The content of instruction should address the same concepts with all students but be adjusted by degree of complexity for the diversity of learners in the classroom.

## Process

- *Flexible grouping is consistently used.* Strategies for flexible grouping are essential. Learners are expected to interact and work together as they develop knowledge of new content. Teachers may conduct whole-class introductory discussions of content big ideas followed by small group or pair work. Student groups may be coached from within or by the teacher to complete assigned tasks. Grouping of students is not fixed. Based on the content, project, and on-going evaluations, grouping and regrouping must be a dynamic process as one of the foundations of differentiated instruction.
- *Classroom management benefits students and teachers.* Teachers must consider organization and instructional delivery strategies to effectively operate a classroom using differentiated instruction. Carol Tomlinson (2001) identifies 17 key strategies for teachers to successfully meet the challenge of designing and managing differentiated instruction in her text How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, Chapter 7.

## Products

- *Initial and on-going assessment of student readiness and growth are essential.* Meaningful pre-assessment naturally leads to functional and successful differentiation. Assessments may be formal or informal, including interviews, surveys, performance assessments, and more formal evaluation procedures. Incorporating pre and on-going assessment informs teachers to better provide a menu of approaches, choices, and scaffolds for the varying needs, interests and abilities that exist in classrooms of diverse students.
- *Students are active and responsible explorers.* Teacher's respect that each task put before the learner will be interesting, engaging, and accessible to essential understanding and skills. Each child should feel challenged most of the time.
- *Vary expectations and requirements for student responses.* Items to which students respond may be differentiated for students to demonstrate or express their knowledge and understanding. A well-designed student product allows varied means of expression, alternative procedures, and provides varying degrees of difficulty, types of evaluation, and scoring.

One of the basic elements of RTI is that all students are screened and those whose skills are not sufficient will receive help. The screening also performs another and even more important function. By looking at the over all data we can see if the instruction in the classroom is meeting the needs of at least 80% of the students. If it is not, then before we begin to plan for individual student interventions we need to think about how we can improve the performance of the entire class. Several factors may be causing the problem. As we have already discussed, the basic requirement is that all instruction is from an evidence based curriculum. Next is if the curriculum is being taught as it was intended. Many times teachers may modify the instruction and teach only parts of the material or teach it in a different way. Evidence based curriculums need to be taught as they were in the studies that showed them to be effective instructional tools. Also is there sufficient time being devoted to teaching? Research shows that at the primary level students should be receiving 80 to 90 minutes a day of literacy instruction. In addition are we providing?

- Dynamic and involved literacy leadership

- Coherent instructional design (sufficient amounts of teaching and research-based curriculum)
- Classroom Interventions for at-risk students
- Valid/reliable assessments to guide instruction
- On-going professional development which provides in-depth theory based knowledge of literacy
- A quality, organized, literacy environment
- Parents as critical partners in developing and sustaining lifelong literacy behaviors

A critical feature of all classes, at the elementary and secondary, is literacy within the specific content areas. Content literacy not only encompasses the ability to read, write, listen, and speak intelligently within the context of an academic discipline, it also encompasses the ability to think critically. Critical thinking is fundamental to the effective teaching of any subject, for every subject is grounded in a particular way of thinking, in a particular way of viewing the world. Moreover, the process of developing a knowledge and understanding of any subject necessarily depends on thought. One of the most important abilities that a thinker can have is the ability to monitor and assess his or her own thinking while processing the thinking of others (Elder & Paul). Since text is a primary means for communicating ideas and concepts, reading, writing, and thinking critically are integral to effective core instruction.

A recent study by the National School Boards Association concluded that the more than 540,000 students who drop out of school each year leave the education system because they can't read well enough to succeed—even marginally—in high school (2004). As well, an increasing number of students who do stay in school and who continue on to the workplace and/or college cannot read well enough to meet the rigor of the texts they encounter (ACT, 2007). Still other studies indicate that even in the case of good readers, by 7th grade, reading development slows to such a great extent that by 8th grade, and through to the end of 12th grade, no measurable development takes place (Francis, et al., 1996). In light of such research findings, the ability to read and think critically about content-specific ideas has become more important than it ever has been before.

The Arizona Department of Education AZ/RTI Literacy Framework aligns with current research in the view that students' mastery of "The Big Five" reading concepts (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension) is an on-going process that builds over time upon increasingly more complex and demanding text. The process begins with

primary literacy instruction in the early grades; it continues through content literacy instruction in middle school and high school; and it extends into college and beyond through self-directed application and practice. In order to be successful, therefore, middle and high school students must continue to develop the fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension skills that they will ultimately need in college and the workplace.

The AZ/RTI Literacy Framework also supports the idea that content-area teachers possess the substantive knowledge of the concepts and principles that lie at the heart of their disciplines. As experts in their fields, teachers of English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies are specialists who know what it means to read, write, listen, speak, and think philosophically, mathematically, scientifically, and historically. Consequently, content-area teachers are the ones *best* suited to teach content literacy. The Core Instruction component of the AZ/RTI Literacy Framework addresses core literacy instruction at grades K-3 and core content literacy at grades 4-12 by providing:

- current research into reading instruction
- strategies for teachers
- an annotated bibliography of professional articles
- professional development opportunities

While we all think of K-12 curriculum, even of greater importance is that of Pre K children. In a review of the research the Westchester Institute for Human Services found that, "The weight of the evidence establishes that ECE can produce large effects on IQ during the early childhood years and sizable consistent effects on achievement, grade retention, special education placement, and high school graduation."

A joint position statement from the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) identifies curriculum as a complex plan containing multiple components that include goals, content, pedagogy and instructional practices. Curriculum is shaped by values, content standards, accountability systems, research, expectations, culture, language and the individual characteristics of a child. The Commission on the *NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation* established criteria for curriculum to be goal oriented, incorporate concepts and skills based on current research and foster children's learning and development.

In Arizona preschool curriculum is based on the Arizona Early Learning Standards (ELS). The Arizona Early Learning Standards provide the framework for designing and/or choosing an effective, high-quality preschool

curricula. The Arizona ELS represent the agreed upon goals and outcomes for teaching and learning. They reflect best practice and serve as the link between early learning expectations and school readiness. Curriculum should be intentionally planned, challenging, engaging, developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive in order to promote positive outcomes for children (NAEYC).

Indicators of effective curriculum according to NAECS/SDE & NAEYC include:

- Children are active and engaged
- Goals are clear and shared
- Evidence-based
- Content is learned through investigation and intentional teaching
- Build on prior learning and experiences
- Comprehensive to address needs of whole child
- Likely to benefit children

Recognizing how a young learner's brain develops, the AZ ELS should be presented in interconnected ways that promote social and emotional development, language, cognitive and the physical development that addresses the whole child and their individual needs. Children's development and learning in one domain influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains.

The Arizona Early Learning Standards are organized to align with the Arizona Academic Standards for Kindergarten. AZ Early Learning Standards contain:

- Social Emotional Standard
- Language and Literacy Standard
- Mathematics Standard
- Science Standard
- Social Studies Standard
- Physical Development, Health, and Safety Standard
- Fine Arts Standard

When adopting a curriculum, it is important to analyze whether its goals are consistent with the Arizona Early Learning Standards and local program standards. Curriculum goals should support and be consistent with expectations for young children's development and learning. It is also important to consider what research advocates as significant predictors of positive development and learning and how they are addressed in the curriculum. The sociocultural, linguistic and individual characteristics of children must be considered in determining the curriculum most likely to yield learning for the preschool population. Lastly, the values and wishes of

the family and local community must be considered in determining the curriculum with the best fit for the program. Children are learning “academics” from the time they are born. As children transition into Kindergarten it is appropriate for the curriculum to focus attention on more “academic” subject matter while still emphasizing all areas of development and ensuring curriculum is presented using developmentally appropriate instructional strategies. Once a curriculum is established all staff should receive extensive professional development including coaching and mentoring.

### **Effective Instructional Strategies**

Preschool curriculum must be presented through developmentally appropriate practices as identified by NAEYC. Developmentally appropriate practices is a common term for those teaching preschool. Professional colleagues teaching in K-3 often refer to effective instructional strategies. These terms are often interchangeable. Effective instructional strategies are based on knowledge and research about how children develop and learn at different stages and the approaches that work best for them. Effective instructional strategies for all early learners must be based on active, engaged learning opportunities. Instructional strategies will be most effective when the early childhood educator has developed a personal relationship with the child. According to NAEYC, excellent teachers use a wide range of teaching strategies that include:

- Acknowledge what children do or say
- Encourage persistence and effort
- Give specific feedback
- Model attitudes, ways to approach a problem and behavior
- Demonstrate the correct way to do something
- Create and add challenge
- Ask questions that provoke thinking
- Give assistance to extend current level of competence
- Provide information directly when needed and to build knowledge
- Give directions for appropriate actions or behavior
- Scaffold children’s learning
- Make use of various learning formats (whole group, small group, learning centers)
- Provide opportunities for deep, enriching *play*

- Use routines as learning opportunities
- Plan for transitions as learning opportunities

**Tomlinson, C. A. (2001).** *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms.* (2nd Ed.) Alexandria, VA: ASCD.