Learning A-Z

SUPPORTING EXCEPTIONAL LEARNERS:

Methods for Response to Intervention, Special Education, and Gifted Students

EXCERPT FROM THE RESEARCH BEHIND LEARNING A-Z

2019

Supporting Exceptional Learners: Methods for Response to Intervention, Special Education, and Gifted Students

Introduction

Students who experience difficulties in learning, who show superior performance, or who require a change in instruction or curriculum to help reach their full potential are considered exceptional learners. Exceptional learners are supported academically through methods such as special education services, response to intervention, and gifted and talented programs.

I. Response to Intervention

Response to Intervention (RtI) is a multi-tier framework designed to help and support struggling students. The goal of RtI is to help students maximize achievement so they can perform at the same level as their peers. According to Wisniewski (2013), when used effectively RtI can help students close learning gaps and achieve academic standards.

RtI is implemented using three components: screening, progress monitoring, and multileveled instruction. Multileveled instruction is generally modeled as a three-tier system:

- **Tier 1 (whole class):** High-quality instruction is provided to all students, with about 80 percent of students receiving instruction at this level showing mastery.
- **Tier 2 (small group):** Targeted interventions for students not making progress in Tier 1 that include increasingly intensive instruction depending on group size, frequency, and duration of intervention.
- **Tier 3 (individual student):** Intensive interventions that target the student's skill deficits. Students who do not show adequate progress at this tier are considered for eligibility for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004.

Within an RtI framework, screening and progress monitoring are used throughout the school year to monitor learning gaps and gains. Guskey and Jung (2011) express how important it is to use the RtI framework properly at each level so students can meet the goals for mastery, which require regular assessment and progress monitoring for students in targeted or intensive intervention. The data from progress monitoring helps direct teachers' decisions about moving students to different tiers.

II. Special Education

An important requirement of any special education program is matching resources to a student's developmental level and providing opportunities for practice with a purpose. To meet this requirement, educators need resources that allow them to easily customize instruction to suit the specific learning needs of every student. Special education is designed to support, instruct, and provide services to students with an individualized education plan (or program, known as IEP) to meet their specific needs. Services for each student may include in-class support with accommodations, with an instructional aide or co-teacher. Some students may need more support and spend part of the day or the whole day receiving modified instruction based on their IEP in a special education classroom. The frequency of assessments depends on student need and academic levels in comparison to grade level, and may be noted in their IEP (Winn & Blanton, 2005).

Student motivation and confidence are vital to making progress for students with learning and other disabilities, yet motivation tends to decrease in the upper elementary grades for these students (Wigfield et al., 2007, as cited in Wehmeyer, Shogren, Toste, & Mahal, 2017). However, teachers can increase student motivation toward reading and writing by allowing students to choose what and when to read, relating reading and writing instruction to students' interests, providing scaffolding and feedback, and creating social groups around reading and writing activities (De Naeghel et al., 2014, as cited in Wehmeyer et al., 2017).

In addition to nurturing motivation, teachers can further facilitate learning by adopting practices that research has found to benefit students with learning disabilities. For example, a meta-analysis by Wood et al. (2018) reported that read-aloud tools such as text-to-speech technology and recorded voiceover significantly enhance reading comprehension in students with reading disabilities. Difficulties decoding text, which are common in students with reading disabilities, also affect reading comprehension by hampering reading accuracy and speed and consuming student's resources (Smythe, 2005, in Wood et al., 2018). Read-aloud tools help students access materials that may be difficult to decode but that align with student interests and listening comprehension skills.

When it comes to learning content, although the focus of science instruction has shifted from reading text to more hands-on activities, students are still expected to read vast amounts of expository scientific text, which may be one of the most challenging reading tasks for students with learning disabilities (Mason & Hedin, 2011, as cited in Kaldenberg, Watt, & Therrien, 2015). A meta-analysis by Kaldenberg et al. found that students with learning disabilities benefit significantly from explicit instruction on vocabulary and from working with graphic organizers when reading science texts, possibly because those supports provide a scaffold to the expository prose found in scientific text.

Learning A–Z Resources to Support Exceptional Learners

Raz-Plus and Reading A–Z

- **Leveled Books** are printable, projectable, and electronic books at 29 levels of text complexity. These leveled books progressively increase in difficulty to help students improve comprehension and fluency. Students can read digital texts at their level, and in their areas of interest, at any time. Leveled Books include an optional Listen eBook version with read-aloud tools that read the text for the student, thus facilitating comprehension even if the student struggles to decode the words.

- **Assessments** provided by Learning A–Z offer teachers resources to measure and track learning gains. Raz-Plus includes a collection of easy-to-use assessment tools for key reading behaviors and foundational skills for progress monitoring, formative assessment, summative assessments, and more.
    - **Alphabet Letter Naming Assessments** help determine students' abilities to name uppercase and lowercase letters.
    - **High-Frequency Words Assessments** measure students' ability to recognize and read high-frequency words, including sight words. Each assessment targets high-frequency words that gradually increase in level of difficulty.
    - **Phonological Awareness** and **Phonics Assessments** help teachers determine whether to focus on onset and rime, rhyme, or syllables; and determine whether students know sound-symbol relations.

- **Incentives** such as **WOWzer printable certificates and electronic and printable badges** can be used anytime to encourage and reward students. Students receive digital stars for successfully completing various assignments and texts they have selected themselves. These stars can be redeemed in the Kids A–Z platform, where students can customize their own online environment or create a personal avatar.

- **Shared Reading Books** support a balanced literacy instructional approach. Teachers use projectable big books while modeling close reading, text-dependent questioning, and strategies for asking and answering questions.
- **Comprehension Skill Packs** give teachers the resources they need for direct and explicit instruction. These standards-based lesson plans provide a three-step approach to instruction—teach, practice, and apply—to help students construct meaning from text.
- **Literature Circles** and **Reader's Theater Scripts** help create a social community around reading while students collaborate during book discussions or perform a piece of writing.
- **Graphic Books** present informational text in a visually engaging format.

Science A–Z

- **FOCUS Books** cover high-interest science topics at three different reading levels and are available in printable, projectable, and electronic formats.
- **Vocabulary Cards, Game Packs,** and **Word Work** resources provide multiple ways for students to learn the scientific vocabulary featured in the texts they read.
- **Graphic Organizers** are printable and projectable tools that help students establish connections implicit in scientific texts, distill important information, and process the science texts they read.
- **Quick Reads** are single-page passages in printable and electronic formats that address specific science topics.

Headsprout

- **Headsprout** is an adaptive online program that ensures that beginning readers master foundational skills necessary to be at or above their reading level. The scaffolded program adapts to meet the needs of every student to develop and enhance reading comprehension.
- **Headsprout Fluency Building Packs** provide additional practice for students who need further support in the areas of decoding and oral reading fluency. Additional practice is delivered based on periodic benchmark assessments that identify specific phonetic skills gaps.

Writing A–Z

- **Emergent Writing** and **Process Writing Lessons** help emergent to fluent writers develop their writing skills using printable, projectable, and electronic tools. Students complete activities that develop their skills from writing single words to sentences to compositions.
- With the **Build-A-Book** tool, students draft and publish their own full-length books on any topic of interest—complete with color illustrations.

III. Gifted Learners

Students who show high ability in creative, artistic, or leadership areas, or in specific academic fields, need services to develop their potential which are not ordinarily provided by the school (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.). Despite this necessity, many schools are unable to successfully address the fact that between 40 and 50 percent of the typical content taught in class is redundant for gifted students (Reis & Purcell, 1993, and Yang & Siegle, 2006, as cited in Callahan, Moon, Oh, Azano, & Hailey, 2015).

Callahan et al. (2015) suggest the following recommendations for adapting the curriculum to gifted learners:

- Increasing the abstractness and complexity of the concepts presented
- Increasing the number of points of view presented about a topic
- Encouraging open-ended problem solving
- Adding critical thinking skills from higher grade levels
- Assigning activities that require student independence
- Accelerating the pace of instruction
- Allowing more student choice about the end product of an activity and the process of reaching that end product.

Learning A–Z Resources to Support Gifted Learners

Raz-Plus and Reading A–Z

- **Leveled Books** are printable, projectable, and electronic books at 29 levels of increasing text complexity. Students can read texts at their level and in their areas of interest at any time.
- **Close Read Passages and Packs** present challenging nonfiction and fiction texts for students to analyze deeply through careful reading and answering open-ended questions.
- **Project-Based Learning Packs** challenge students to work in teams reading multiple texts in order to answer a Driving Question. These packs require students to collaborate, communicate, and use critical thinking throughout the project.
- **Classics** expose students to timeless novels, poetry, and stories more easily by breaking longer texts into manageable parts.
- **Themed Nonfiction Series** provide literacy instruction while focusing on specific nonfiction topics that students can choose based on their interests.

Science A–Z

- **Investigation Packs** are group science activities that help students explore science content in detail as they read high-interest texts and answer a question surrounding a Mystery File.
- **Project-Based Learning Packs** are inquiry-based science projects in which students work in teams to read different passages about a related topic and answer a Driving Question.
- **Interactive Science Lessons** teach difficult scientific concepts through highly visual scenarios that require students to apply scientific concepts and principles. The lessons include audio support and immediate feedback, allowing students to progress independently at their own pace.

Headsprout

- **Headsprout** lets students move at their own pace through the program, ensuring that students meet the criteria for each skill before moving on. Students can use the program independently and progress through the lessons as quickly as their skill level allows.

Writing A–Z

- With the **Build-A-Book** tool, students can draft, edit, illustrate, and publish their own books to the rest of the class, on nearly any topic and genre. With this tool, students write with a sense of purpose and can determine the length of their books, from a single page to multiple chapters.

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