

Standards for Effective Pedagogy

Five Generic Principles

Effective Education of At-Risk Students

Innovative programs of school reform and research for diverse students have tended to concentrate on specific cultural, linguistic, or ethnic populations and on specific local communities. For many years, the research community concerned with at-risk students has conducted studies on a variety of at-risk populations, including Native Americans; Korean, Chinese, and Southeast Asian Americans; Haitian Americans; Latinos of many national origins; Native Hawaiians; economically disadvantaged and geographically isolated European Americans; rural and inner-city African Americans; and many others. The field has also shown continued energy in the study and development of model school programs for a variety of mixed racial, linguistic, and cultural groups.

For many years, the author of this paper and his associates have attempted to integrate these studies into literature reviews encompassing thousands of studies conducted worldwide. These reviews (and reviews prepared by others) have uncovered a core list of “generic” findings that transcend specific groups, localities, or risk factors (Collier, 1995; Garcia, 1991; Tharp, 1989, 1991, 1992, 1994; Tharp et al., 1994).

General principles are, of course, less detailed than findings for any specific community. And no matter how valid, general recommendations must be modified to fit local circumstances (Cazden & Mehan, 1989; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1994). The principles below do not purport to be exhaustive; rather they reflect only those findings upon which there is a strong current consensus in the field. In addition, research at our previous Center consistently verified these principles. Thus the consensus is broad enough to make these principles an organizing structure, both for continuing research and for immediate implementation into programs for at-risk children.



Principle 1: Joint Product Activity

Facilitate learning through joint productive activity among teachers and students

Learning takes place best through joint productive activity; that is, when experts and novices work together for a common product or goal, and during the activity have opportunities to converse about it (Moll, 1990; Rogoff, 1991; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1985). In the natural (nonformal) settings of family, community, and workplace, shared ways of understanding the world are created through the development of language systems and word meanings during shared activity. Even the youngest children, as well as mature adults, develop their competencies in the context of such joint activity. Schools do not typically do it this way; there is little joint activity from which common experiences emerge, and therefore no common context that allows students to develop common systems of understanding with the teacher and with one another.

Joint activity and discourse allow the highest level of academic achievement: using formal, “schooled,” or “scientific” ideas to solve the practical problems presented by the real world. The constant connection of schooled concepts and everyday concepts is basic to the process by which mature schooled thinkers understand the world. These joint activities should be shared by both students and teachers. Only if the teacher also shares the experiences, can the kind of discourse take place that builds basic schooled competencies. Joint activity between teacher and students helps to create a common context of experience within the school itself. This is especially important when the teacher and the students are not of the same background.

Indicators of Joint Product Activity

The Teacher:

- designs instructional activities requiring student collaboration to accomplish a joint product.
- matches the demands of the joint productive activity to the time available for accomplishing them.
- arranges classroom seating to accommodate students' individual and group needs to communicate and work jointly.
- participates with students in joint productive activity.
- organizes students in a variety of groupings, such as by friendship, mixed academic ability, language, project, or interests, to promote interaction.
- plans with students how to work in groups and move from one activity to another, such as from large group introduction to small group activity, for clean-up, dismissal, and the like.
- manages student and teacher access to materials and technology to facilitate joint productive activity.
- monitors and supports student collaboration in positive ways.

Principle 2: Language and Literacy Development

Develop competence in the language and literacy of instruction throughout all instructional activities

Language proficiency—in speaking, reading, and writing—is the royal road to high academic achievement. Whether in bilingual or monolingual programs, whether the instruction is in English, Spanish, Navajo, or Chinese, language development in the language or languages being used for instruction is the first goal of teaching/learning.

The current literacy movement in cognitive and educational research is revealing the deep ties among language, thinking, values, and culture. Studies of English as a second language indicate the firm links among language development, academic achievement, and cognitive growth (Collier, 1995). Language development at all levels—informal, problem-solving, and academic—should be a meta goal for the entire school day. Language and literacy development should be fostered through use and through purposive conversation between teacher and students, rather than through drills and decontextualized rules (Berman et al., 1995; Speidel, 1987). Reading and writing must be taught both as specific curricula and within-subject matters. The teaching of language expression and comprehension should also be integrated into each content area.

Language and literacy development as a meta goal also applies to the specialized language genres required for the study of science, mathematics, history, art, and literature. Effective mathematics learning is based on the ability to “speak mathematics,” just as the overall ability to achieve across the curriculum is dependent on mastery of the language of instruction.

The ways of using language that prevail in school discourse (such as ways of asking and answering questions, challenging claims, and using representations) are frequently unfamiliar to English language learners and other at-risk students. However, their own culturally-based ways of talking can be effectively linked to the language used for academic disciplines by building learning contexts that will evoke children's language strengths.

Indicators of Language and Literacy Development

The Teacher:

- listens to student talk about familiar topics such as home and community.
- responds to students' talk and questions, making "in-flight" changes during conversation that directly relate to students' comments.
- assists written and oral language development through modeling, eliciting, probing, restating, clarifying, questioning, praising, etc., in purposeful conversation and writing.
- interacts with students in ways that respect students' preferences for speaking that may be different from the teacher's, such as wait-time, eye contact, turn-taking, or spotlighting.
- connects student language with literacy and content area knowledge through speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities.
- encourages students to use content vocabulary to express their understanding.
- provides frequent opportunity for students to interact with each other and the teacher during instructional activities.
- encourages students' use of first and second languages in instructional activities.

Principle 3: Contextualization

Contextualize teaching and curriculum in the experiences and skills of home and community

A consistent recommendation of our research field is an increase in contextualized instruction. Schools typically teach rules, abstractions, and verbal descriptions, and they teach by means of rules, abstractions, and verbal descriptions. Schools need to assist at-risk students by providing experiences that show how rules, abstractions, and verbal descriptions are drawn from and applied to the everyday world.

Three levels of contextualization must be addressed:

1. At the pedagogical level, it is necessary to establish patterns of participation and speech that are drawn from family and community life and bridge to the sociolinguistic conventions of school participation (Au & Jordan, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).
2. At the second, or curriculum level, cultural materials and skills are the media by which the goals of literacy, numeracy, and science are contextualized. The use of personal, community-based experiences as the foundation for developing school skills (e.g., Wyatt, 1978–79) affords students opportunities to apply skills acquired in both home and school contexts.
3. At the third, or policy level, the school itself is contextualized. Effective school-based learning is a social process that affects and is affected by the entire community. Longer-lasting progress has been achieved with children whose learning has been explored, modified, and shaped in collaboration with their parents and communities (John-Steiner & Osterreich, 1975).

All three levels of contextualization have this common premise: The high literacy goals of schools are best achieved in everyday, culturally meaningful contexts. This contextualization utilizes students' funds of knowledge and skills as a sound foundation for new knowledge. This approach fosters pride and confidence as well as greater school achievement.

Indicators of Contextualization

The Teacher:

- begins activities with what students already know from home, community, and school.
- designs instructional activities that are meaningful to students in terms of local community norms and knowledge.
- acquires knowledge of local norms and knowledge by talking to students, parents or family members, community members, and by reading pertinent documents.
- assists students to connect and apply their learning to home and community.
- plans jointly with students to design community-based learning activities.
- provides opportunities for parents or families to participate in classroom instructional activities.
- varies activities to include students' preferences, from collective and cooperative to individual and competitive.
- varies styles of conversation and participation to include students' cultural preferences, such as co-narration, call-and-response, and choral, among others.

Principle 4: Challenging Activities

Challenge students toward cognitive complexity

At-risk students, particularly those of limited Standard English proficiency, are often forgiven any academic challenges, on the assumption that they are of limited ability; or they are forgiven any genuine assessment of progress because the assessment tools don't fit. Thus both standards and feedback are weakened, with the predictable result that achievement is handicapped. While such policies may often be the result of benign motives, the effect is to deny many diverse students the basic requirements of progress: high academic standards and meaningful assessment that allows feedback and responsive assistance.

There is a clear consensus among researchers in this field that at-risk students require instruction that is cognitively challenging, that is, instruction that requires thinking and analysis, not only rote, repetitive detail-level drills. This does not mean ignoring phonics rules or not memorizing the multiplication tables, but it does mean going beyond that level of curriculum into the exploration of the deepest possible reaches of interesting and meaningful materials. There are many ways in which cognitive complexity has been introduced into the teaching of at-risk students. There is a good reason to believe, for instance, that a bilingual curriculum itself provides cognitive challenges that make it superior to a monolingual approach (Collier, 1995).

Working with a cognitively challenging curriculum requires careful leveling of tasks so that students are stretched to reach within their zones of proximal development, where they can perform with available assistance. It does not mean drill-and-kill exercises, and it does not mean overwhelming challenges that discourage effort. Getting the correct balance and providing appropriate assistance is, for the teacher, a truly cognitively challenging task.

Indicators of Challenging Activities

The Teacher:

- assures that students—for each instructional topic—see the whole picture as a basis for understanding the parts.
- presents challenging standards for student performance.
- designs instructional tasks that advance student understanding to more complex levels.
- assists students to accomplish more complex understanding by building from their previous success.
- gives clear, direct feedback about how student performance compares with the challenging standards.

Principle 5: Instructional Conversation

Engage students through dialogue, especially the instructional conversation

Basic thinking skills—the ability to form, express, and exchange ideas in speech and writing—are most effectively developed through dialogue, through the process of questioning and sharing ideas and knowledge that happens in the instructional conversation.

The instructional conversation is the means by which teachers and students relate formal, schooled knowledge to the student's individual, community, and family knowledge. This concept may appear to be a paradox; instruction implies authority and planning, while conversation implies equality and responsiveness. But the instructional conversation is based on assumptions that are fundamentally different from those of traditional lessons. Teachers who use it, like parents in natural teaching, assume that the student has something to say beyond the known answers in the head of the adult. The adult listens carefully, makes guesses about the intended meaning, and adjusts responses to assist the student's efforts—in other words, engages in conversation (Ochs, 1982). Such conversation reveals the knowledge, skills, and values—the culture—of the learner, enabling the teacher to contextualize teaching to fit the learner's experience base. This individualizes instruction in much the same way that each learner is individualized within a culture (Dalton, 1993).

In U.S. schools the instructional conversation is rare. More often teaching is through the recitation script, in which the teacher repeatedly assigns and assesses. True dialogic teaching transforms classrooms and schools into “the community of learners” they can become “when teachers reduce the distance between themselves and their students by constructing lessons from common understandings of each others’ experience and ideas” and make teaching a “warm, interpersonal and collaborative activity” (Dalton, 1989).

Indicators of Instructional Conversation

The Teacher:

- arranges the classroom to accommodate conversation between the teacher and a small group of students on a regular and frequent basis.
- has a clear academic goal that guides conversation with students.
- ensures that student talk occurs at higher rates than teacher talk.
- guides conversation to include students' views, judgments, and rationales using text evidence and other substantive support.
- ensures that all students are included in the conversation according to their preferences.
- listens carefully to assess levels of students' understanding.
- assists students' learning throughout the conversation by questioning, restating, praising, encouraging, etc.
- guides the students to prepare a product that indicates the Instructional Conversation's goal was achieved.

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