Boardmaker® Instructional Solutions

Expedition Education

Executive Summary:

Expedition Education is a Boardmaker Instructional Solution that is specifically developed to support students with moderate to severe disabilities as they simultaneously develop their literacy skills and build world knowledge. This program helps students with a range of physical, cognitive, and language impairments to develop academic skills and knowledge they will need for successful participation in school and life. It is designed to make conventional literacy instruction accessible to all learners, to provide a methodology for implementing evidence-based instruction, and to provide strategic communication supports to students who might need it. The instructional premise of this program incorporates research in literacy instruction, reading comprehension, vocabulary learning, and instructional technologies. Expedition Education aligns to today's College and Career Readiness Standards and focuses on research-based principles of effective instruction in English Language Arts. These principles dictate the integration of reading with writing and vocabulary with communication, and help students to focus on the deeper meanings in text.

Problem Statement:

The purpose of education in the United States is to prepare students to be responsible participants in our diverse society, to teach students to participate productively in learning communities, and to prepare students for a life beyond school (Cole, 1990; Eisner, 2003; Johnston, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). Full participation in school and society requires that we read deeply, independently, and with understanding. This kind of deeper interaction with text is the vehicle by which students develop understandings about that which they are learning and connect new content with what they already know. Today's College and Career Readiness Standards mandate that all students engage in grade level learning and that they demonstrate knowledge in a variety of print-based and communicative ways (Common Core Standards, 2009). The ability to read with comprehension and then communicate understanding is essential if individuals are to successfully communicate across environments and partners (Erickson & Clendon, 2009; Erickson et al., 2010). Across the last two decades, literacy instruction for students with disabilities has focused primarily on skills, at the expense of helping students to develop the range of understandings that are required to read with comprehension. This narrow brand of instruction is ineffective for students with significant disabilities as it fails to help them develop meaningful access to other areas of the curriculum (Erickson et al., 2009; Keefe & Copeland, 2011). As high-stakes testing has begun to play a larger role in shaping the educational experiences of all students, science and social studies are not typically given the priority that reflects the larger goal of civic participation (Bogan, King-McKensie, and Bantwini 2012). Similarly, as students' progress through grade levels, they encounter more non-fiction texts and are increasingly expected to read to learn. This kind of interaction with the text, whether independently or in a shared context, can pose significant barriers due to the higher level of vocabulary and the density of content (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2008; Spencer, 2003). Lastly, the erroneous belief that reading comprehension instruction and activities are only meaningful when an individual can decode words independently is a consistent barrier to the literacy development of students with disabilities (Erickson & Hanser, 2009). These factors contribute to the momentum of failure as we continue to provide students with disabilities limited access to integrated, meaningful, and evidence-based instruction (Agran, 2011; Keefe & Copeland, 2011; Zascavage & Keefe, 2007). The lack of progress of these students combined with institutional beliefs about them, create an entrenched cycle of failure. Another important theme established by College and Career Readiness Standards is that all students engage in reading, writing, and communication that is grounded in evidence from texts. This further highlights the requirement that all students develop as literate and communicative

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individuals (Common Core Standards, 2009). Ability grouping (or leveled instruction) which has historically been the norm in special education, has the potential to be more harmful than it is beneficial (Wheelock, 1994). Since teachers and clinicians tend to establish grouping criteria on subjective perceptions of an individual's ability. Students in special education are challenged not only in demonstrating their thinking but also in managing the tools that allow them to do so. Recent evidence suggests that ability grouping informs how teachers and clinicians perceive student potential. This practice limits instructional choices and consequently diminishes academic outcomes. Achievement levels should not dictate potential for achievement.

Clinical Best Practice:

Today's research indicates that integrated English Language Arts instruction has significant potential to help students develop academically (Hinde, 2005). The most effective integrated instruction is that which is meaningful, value-based, challenging, and active. These qualities of powerful social studies learning are foundational to the development of children's knowledge, skills and dispositions as participating citizens. College and Career Readiness Standards have also altered how we deliver instruction. These include but are not limited to reading, writing, and communication that is grounded in texts, regular practice with grade-level texts, dedicated attention to vocabulary acquisition, and writing from sources or texts (Common Core Standards, 2009). Close reading, particularly for students who struggle, is a vastly effective practice that correlates with progress. Close reading is a key component of college and career readiness for all learners (Snow, 2013). Lastly, many researchers (both independently and concurrently) have established the high correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 1997). Given all of this, all students (and particularly students with disabilities) need consistent access to academic knowledge, vocabulary, and concepts if they are to develop as readers, thinkers, and writers. Additionally, both students and teachers benefit from a common instructional approach. The former benefit by establishing teaching routines that are grounded in best practices; the latter from consistent tools that allow them to focus on content rather than on technology or tools. Finally, regardless of ability, individual students often require unique supports or scaffolds that allow them to demonstrate both their knowledge and their thinking about the world.

Why it Works:

Expedition Education helps all students develop the kind of academic and world knowledge that helps them think critically, engage socially, and interact with print in purposeful ways. The premise of this program is that science and social studies provide context for academic development. It can be deployed to support the most significantly impaired students in the least restrictive setting, which includes general education classrooms, self-contained settings, and individual and group educational interventions. The following evidence-based practices were included in the instructional design of this program:

- **Understanding by Design**
  Expedition Education employs the Understanding by Design Framework (see: Unit-at-a-Glance in the program documents folder) that helps focus curriculum and teaching on the development and deepening of student understanding and on the students' ability to transfer that learning to other contexts (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). The Unit-at-a-Glance document highlights the key questions, foundational understandings, vocabulary, and general academic goals for each unit.
- **Repetition with Variety:** Expedition Education provides holistic, integrated ELA and social studies instruction with a high degree of repetition with variety. This consistent exposure to broader concepts (like history or geography) helps students understand these words conceptually and in more detailed form. Further, it takes students beyond demonstrating knowledge of isolated skills in isolated contexts and toward the ability to generalize knowledge across contexts. (Erickson, Clendon, Abraham, Roy & Van de Carr, 2005) While it is a critical exposure to all learners, it has particular value for students with the most complicated learning profiles.
- **Predictable Instruction:** Expedition Education employs predictable routine. This approach allows teachers to quickly understand and implement these lessons while providing real-time training in evidence-based practices. Predictable routines also support students by helping them to attend to academic content rather than the tools they use to access or demonstrate their learning (Troia & Graham, 2002).
- **Thematic Text Sets:** Expedition Education employs conceptually coherent text sets which help students to build knowledge and vocabulary. Reading comprehension requires that students infer information about texts. The acquisition of prior knowledge and the development of world knowledge aid in this process (Ebbers, 2002).

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- **Close Reading:** Throughout this program, students revisit the same texts for multiple purposes and through multiple lenses. Close reading allows students to uncover layers of meaning from texts and deepen comprehension about them (Fisher & Frey, 2012).
- **Communication Supports:** Expedition Education (as delivered through Boardmaker Online) provides communication supports as a component of lessons. This feature improves communication skills as well as increases opportunities for demonstrating literacy capability (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 1997).
- **Multi-Step/Multi-Modal Vocabulary Learning:** Expedition Education employs a multi-step vocabulary strategy that provides repeated and varied opportunities to construct personal knowledge of new words (Soto & Zangari, 2009). Additionally, the targeted words are those that frequently appear in texts that are not typically part of our everyday communicating (Beck, Perfetti & McKeown, 1982). These highly useful and prolific words give students greater opportunities to construct meaning from text and to build an academic vocabulary that will serve them in school and beyond.
- **Common Instructional Approach:** Expedition Education provides one curricular path for all students as a mechanism for inclusion, yet it also provides three levels of differentiated supports for activities (like writing) which research indicates are particularly burdensome for students with multiple disabilities (MacArthur, 2000). This approach allows teachers to deliver powerful curricula within our standards-minded culture, while also ensuring academic access and success for the fullest spectrum of students. Expedition Education also provides a path of progression in that the goal of these writing supports is to meet students as developing writers. The program can then provide options for increasing independence, from maximal to moderate to minimal support and ultimately, to more independent compositions.
- **Building Community:** Expedition Education focuses on building a classroom community to emphasize the social and cooperative nature of learning. The design of the program acknowledges that learning is a social process; students learn from others (Bandura &Walters, 1963; Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2009; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978)

Conclusion:

Expedition Education's integrated instructional approach sets the stage for all students to understand, participate in, and impact their world. Through this program, students access knowledge about the past as a conduit for understanding the conditions in which they live. Beyond this, the program integrates these skills and understandings into a framework that is easy to execute, engaging, and grounded in evidence.

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