Key Components of Literacy Instruction

“We, in MPS, believe that effort creates ability. Therefore, it is our belief that we can create a culture of learning that provides rigorous instruction for all students. Instruction and learning must include commitment to a knowledge core, high thinking demand, and active use of knowledge. Knowledge and thinking are directly related or interdependent. Rigorous instruction will include the deep content knowledge and the habits of thinking students need to actively use that knowledge. This will ensure that all students are performing to high standards and producing examples of high quality student work.

Content Knowledge + Habits of Thinking = Learning on the Diagonal

Active Use of Knowledge

Habits of Thinking

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Balanced Literacy Approach

The MPS K-5 Literacy Framework has identified a balanced literacy approach using Reader’s and Writer’s Workshop. This approach will provide schools with an integrated and comprehensive standards-based literacy program for all elementary students. A Language Skills Block is also incorporated in the workshop model allowing teachers the opportunity to target specific language skills.

The workshop design embeds the Principles of Learning which are:

- The classroom is a community of learners that values and supports skilled productivity to meet standards. The classroom is organized for effort and students are able to self-manage their learning through rigorous instruction and socialization of intelligence.
- Reading and writing instruction is taught in the context of ongoing, purposeful student work. Students use Accountable Talk™ to learn and communicate ideas as they analyze their work based on models that meet standards.
- Students acquire knowledge and habits of thinking so they can competently contribute to the various projects in an active community of literacy learners.
- Rituals (prescribed way of doing things) and Routines (the daily structure of workshop time) are defined, practiced and are a part of a productive teaching and learning environment.
- Students engage in book-discussion groups, participate in author and genre studies, maintain reading logs and writer’s notebook collaborate with fellow writers in various stages of the writing process, and publish a wide variety of documents.

What is Balanced Literacy?

Balanced literacy provides a structure and support that will enable all students to acquire the knowledge, skills, habits and dispositions needed to meet or exceed standards in reading, writing, listening and speaking (Socializing Intelligence). Students are apprenticed as readers, writers and thinkers (Learning as Apprenticeship). Teaching and learning are seen as active and social processes. Social enculturation theory (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasizes that learning takes place through learner interactions with more knowledgeable people.

Learning environments in the apprenticeship model are organized for effort so that complex thinking is modeled and analyzed, and all students are provided mentoring and coaching. Students are supported in creating authentic products and performances through rigorous instruction that is organized around major concepts, requires reflecting and thinking, and which tests understanding through active use of knowledge. The social enculturation goal is for learners to internalize processes that are modeled. Once the processes are internalized learners become self-reliant.

Moving students to independence on increasingly difficult tasks is supported through the use of explicit instruction that increases their content knowledge and habits of thinking about the content. Teachers should take into account the initial abilities of the learner, the instructional goals, and the task complexity. Explicit instruction is best when it precedes cognitive development and arouses those functions that are in the process of maturing. Those cognitive skills that are emerging but not yet developed are considered to lie within the **Zone of Proximal**
Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). Instruction is most effective when the teacher identifies the zone or levels at which students can perform with some assistance (the student’s ZPD), guides them to higher levels of performance and then to the point of independent learning (Wilkinson & Silliman, 2000). Within this approach, instruction is scaffolded based on the student’s ZPD with the goal of moving all students toward independence on a particular performance objective or standard.

Initially, the learner needs a great deal of support. This support is often in the form of modeling that consists of demonstrating to the learner why and how to perform the tasks necessary to reach an objective. It is important to articulate the reasoning and decision-making involved in each step as part of the teaching and learning process. Think alouds are an example of this type of instruction. They allow students to see and hear the habits of thinking of the expert as they relate to active use of content knowledge. This support is gradually reduced while providing the student with feedback about progress and then removed to allow the learner independence. This instructional concept is called the Gradual Release of Responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). In addition to modeling, moving students toward independence is supported through scaffolding, explicit instruction within a student’s zone of proximal development and learning as apprenticeship approach to instruction. Scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, Ross 1976) is a process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal which would be beyond his/her unassisted efforts. A scaffold is a temporary and adjustable support that enables the accomplishment of a task that would be impossible without the scaffold’s support (Anderson, L. 1989). As the learner becomes more knowledge in the content and habits of thinking around a new skill, the scaffolding is gradually removed. Scaffolding is not a static, predetermined instructional condition. The degree of scaffolding changes with the abilities of the learner, the goals of instruction and the complexities of the task. Scaffolding may be substantial at first on new or difficult tasks and then can be gradually removed.

The figure below illustrates the concepts described above. It is useful in understanding the movement from modeled and shared instruction to coaching and guided instruction to independent practice. Within this model, teachers apprentice and socialize students as readers and writers as they engage in purposeful and rigorous work.

How is Balanced Literacy delivered in the classroom?

The balanced literacy approach seeks to find an appropriate balance of all components and elements of literacy instruction. For the purposes of the MPS Literacy Framework balanced literacy includes an articulation of grade level standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening that utilizes the instructional strategies below:

- modeled reading and writing (“to” students)
- shared reading and writing (“with” students)
- guided reading and writing (“with” students)
- independent reading and writing (“by” students)
Visitors to a balanced literacy classroom will see an orchestra that is being conducted by a skilled teacher. Using the Core Issues of Lesson Design and Reflection (Institute for Learning 2001) will ensure that teachers are designing and planning for rigorous literacy instruction.

Why is it important to design and plan instruction this way?
Grounded in the Principles of Learning, the Core Issues of Lesson Design and Reflection include the components of content, pedagogy, pedagogical content knowledge, and assessment that must be addressed in planning rigorous instruction (Institute for Learning 2001). It is critical to determine the instructional content (what) of the lesson for the particular students (who) in question when making decisions about instructional strategies (how) and theories of teaching, learning and assessing (why) that supports the intended learning goals.

Using the Core Issues of Lesson Design and Reflection questions (What? How? Why?) When designing literacy lessons prompts teachers to (see appendix):
• articulate intended student learning and its relation to content, standards, and student needs;
• align instructional strategies with lesson goals and theories of teaching and learning; and
• assess student work for evidence of learning and further instructional needs.
To plan rigorous instruction that supports all students’ learning takes time, thought, and coordination of all literacy instruction. Purposeful selection of learning activities is essential to implementing an organized balanced literacy block. Teachers use whole and small groups and are able to determine which is best, at what time and why. They use different types of questions to deepen understanding and scaffold student learning. They alternate between teacher directed instruction and student led activities using the gradual release of responsibility to foster independent student learning. Teachers’ help students not only learn comprehension skills and strategies, but provide opportunities for them to practice and figure out when to use a particular strategy or skill. Teachers recognize the importance of active engagement in learning and reduce passive student responses.

The MPS Literacy Framework has four key focus areas for rigorous literacy instruction: What, How, Why, and Who (see graphic below).

• Teachers should always know and understand WHAT should be taught at each grade level

• HOW the instruction will be delivered

• WHO will receive the instruction

• WHY this instruction for this group of students

References:


Framework for Rigorous Literacy Instruction

- Standards
- Curriculum
- Teaching Models
- Strategies
- Methods
- Theories of Teaching & Learning
- Knowledge of Learners
- Educational Philosophy
- Why?
- Who?
- How?
- What?

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Appendix

Core Issues of Lesson Design and Reflection

WHAT?
1. What is the intended student learning? What are the concepts and habits/skills being developed? How are they connected?
2. To what standard(s) are the lesson concepts and habits linked?
3. What difficulties, misunderstandings, or misconceptions might students have about these concepts and habits?
4. What theories of teaching and learning support this lesson design?

HOW?
5. How will the teacher model/explain clear expectations for the students’ learning?
6. How will each activity promote rigorous thinking?
7. How will each activity apprentice students in using the intended concepts and habits?
8. How will students be grouped for learning? How is the grouping related to the intended concepts and habits?
9. How will students be engaged in talk that holds them accountable to the intended concepts and habits in a collaborative community of mutual respect?
10. How will students make public their thinking and learning?
11. How will differentiated assistance be provided to individual students? (struggling students as well as those needing an extra challenge)
12. How will student learning be assessed by the teacher and by the students themselves?
13. How will student accomplishment be recognized?
14. How will the teacher do things differently the next time? How will instruction proceed from here?

WHY?
15. Why are these concepts and habits appropriate to the students’ learning needs and prior knowledge at this time?
16. Why are these instructional strategies/learning activities appropriate to the lesson goals for these students?