EDUCATION INSIGHT

Ensuring Literacy Instruction Meets the Needs of All Learners

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ALL FOR LITERACY

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Equitable Literacy Instruction Requires an Asset-Based Approach	4
The Science of Reading Ensures More Equitable Learning	6
Differentiated Instruction Is Equitable Instruction	7
Conclusion	8
References	9

Introduction

The right to read is fundamental, as literacy lays the groundwork not just for academic achievement, but also for better decision-making and self-esteem, personal empowerment, greater economic opportunities, and active civic participation (Sedita, 2020).

Ultimately, literacy is the key to lifelong learning, and all children deserve access to the opportunities, resources, and support they need to become confident readers. That's why equitable literacy instruction is so imperative. Without it, too many students may not have the skills they need for academic success and beyond.

Armed with new perspectives and an influx of federal funding brought about by the pandemic, education leaders are seeking ways to improve equity, and literacy instruction is a particular area of focus. What follows in this Education Insight are three factors that enable equitable literacy instruction—what administrators and educators should consider and how edtech can support both literacy learning and equity initiatives.

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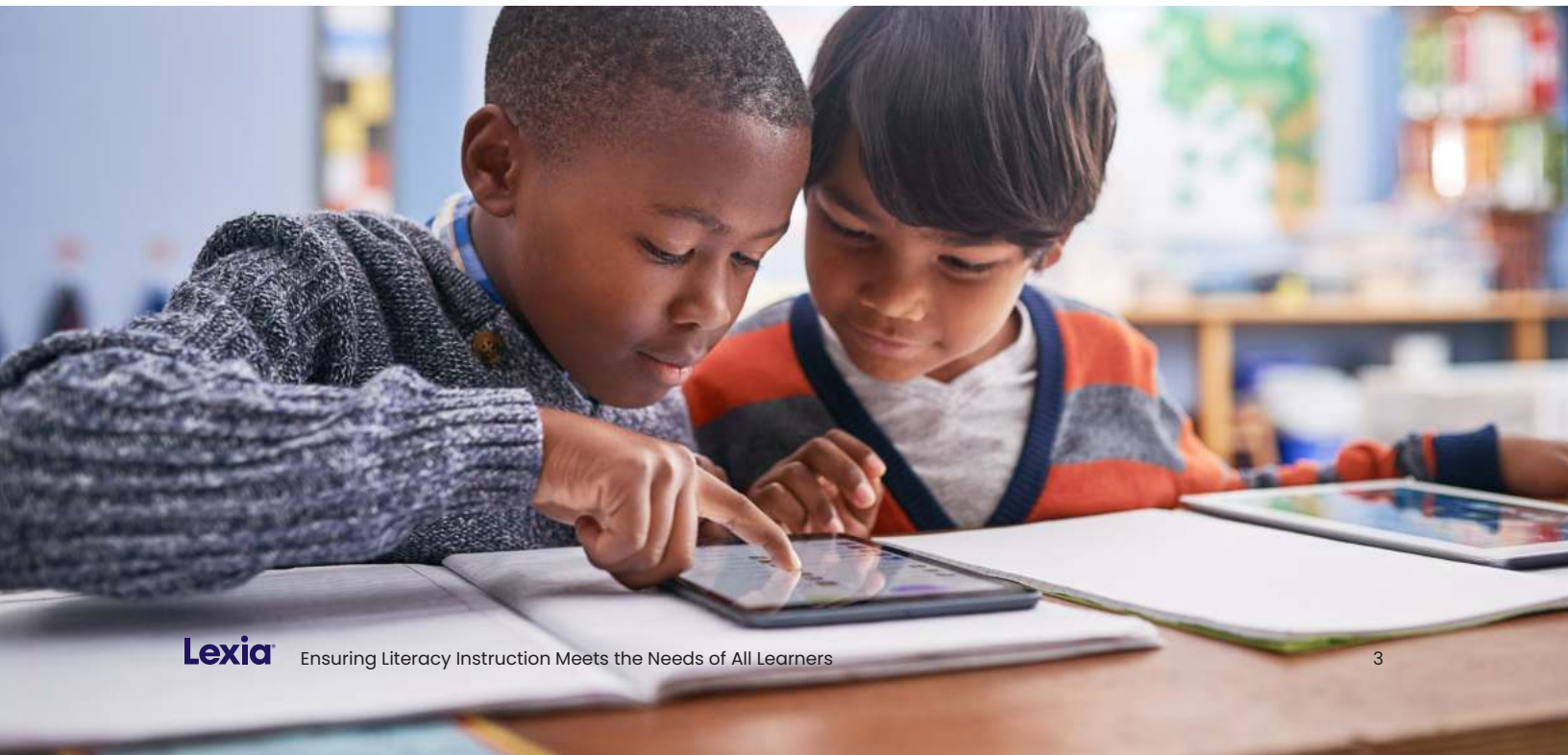

Equitable Literacy Instruction Requires an Asset-Based Approach

While often well-intentioned, many efforts to make literacy instruction more equitable begin with a needs assessment, or deficit approach—focusing on the perceived weaknesses of students versus their strengths, or what they bring to the classroom or school community (University of Memphis).

An Asset-Based Approach Example

English language learning as deficit. For years, Emergent Bilinguals have been regarded as students with gaps in their knowledge. The assumption has been that these students are lacking the knowledge of the English language required to be successful in school.

English language learning as asset. On the contrary, students able to speak more than one language have demonstrated numerous academic advantages, including improved memory, decision-making abilities, and analytical skills. Heritage languages can also be leveraged when learning how to speak, read, and write in English, while learning English can help Emergent Bilinguals improve skills in their heritage language.

An asset-based approach can be extremely beneficial for Emergent Bilinguals, starting with the language we use to describe them. Referring to them as "Emergent Bilinguals"—rather than "English Language Learners"—reminds us of the value of their heritage languages and cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Viana, 2020).

When using an edtech solution to support Emergent Bilinguals in the classroom, it's important to choose a program that incorporates this asset-based approach. Lexia® English Language Development™ is one such program, drawing on learners' heritage languages and cultures to shape curriculum that's diverse in both image and perspective. This includes 17 culturally diverse and multilingual characters, all of whom are Emergent Bilinguals themselves, and many of whom speak with accents. As a result, Emergent Bilinguals see themselves as part of a diverse, growing community that encompasses and values a variety of cultures, worldviews, and ideas. It also helps them learn, as research suggests that familiarity with an accent improves listener comprehension (White, et al., 2016).

As studies support the concurrent teaching of language and literacy, an asset-based approach in oral language instruction will aid the development of strong reading skills as well.

Even the language we use to speak about educational equity initiatives can be deficit-based, such as referring to students as "at-risk" or discussing ways to close "learning gaps"—leading with what's perceived as wrong versus focusing on inherent skills and talents.

An asset-based approach, on the other hand, is grounded in what students can do rather than what they can't do. Instead of zeroing in on the literacy skills they're assumed to lack, an asset-based approach focuses on students' successes in other areas, such as knowledge of a second language, and how this knowledge can be used to accelerate, as opposed to detract from, literacy gains.

Seeing all instruction, including literacy instruction, through this positive lens enables students to thrive when they feel that what they bring to the table is represented and respected, and that their teacher believes in their abilities. An asset-based approach has been shown to have a positive impact on students of color, students with disabilities—including so-called invisible disabilities such as dyslexia and other learning disabilities—students experiencing poverty and/or hunger, Emergent Bilinguals, girls, and more (ANet, 2020)—which is why turning our attention to the assets that students bring to school is a must for more equitable literacy instruction (ANet, 2019).

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The Science of Reading Ensures More Equitable Learning

Decades of multidisciplinary research have led to a broad consensus regarding how all children learn to read—a body of research known as the science of reading (Moats, 2020). The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) mandates that the best way to ensure all students are receiving the reading resources and support they need to learn and thrive is to align curricula, assessments, and professional learning to the science of reading. (CCSSO, 2021).

The science of reading outlines five critical skills required to learn how to read proficiently:

1. **Phonological awareness:** The awareness of the smallest units of sound (phonemes) and the ability to manipulate these sounds.
2. **Phonics:** A way of teaching that stresses the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use in reading and spelling.
3. **Fluency:** Reading with accuracy, at an appropriate rate, and with expression.
4. **Vocabulary:** The understanding of words and meanings.
5. **Comprehension**: Understanding the connected text.

By applying the science of reading to classroom instruction through Structured Literacy—or the practical application of the science of reading in the classroom—educators can identify where students have knowledge and where they need help based on these five critical skills (IMSE, 2021). This makes it easier for educators to differentiate instruction for each student, resulting in more equitable learning.

Edtech solutions that support literacy instruction should also be backed by science. One way to ensure this is to consult Evidence for ESSA, which rates programs based on certain standards (Hummell, 2021). For example, Lexia® Core5® Reading has received a "strong" rating from Evidence for ESSA, the highest level available. Core5 has been shown to accelerate the development of literacy skills for students of all abilities, supporting equitable literacy instruction through differentiated instruction.

Differentiated Instruction Is Equitable Instruction

One of the most equitable ways to teach reading is to differentiate, or personalize, instruction so that students receive exactly what they need to be successful. Each classroom contains a broad spectrum of readers: Emergent Bilingual, advanced, below-grade-level, and reluctant, among others (Haiken, 2021). As a result, a one-size-fits-all learning approach will not benefit every reader (Haiken, 2021).

Personalized learning can address these individual needs, by meeting students where they are and helping them progress based on their current skills. Personalized learning has been shown to help fill gaps in core content, including "building background knowledge, appealing to different modalities of learning, practicing particular skills, and using opportunities to go deeper on a topic of interest or relevance, individually or with similarly interested peers" (Achieve the Core, 2021).

Personalized learning can also help students build self-advocacy skills, empowering them to speak up about what interests them, see themselves in the content they're learning, and be equal partners in their learning experience (Morin, 2022).

One of the more efficient ways for educators to personalize literacy instruction is to incorporate an edtech solution into the curriculum. While blended learning refers to learning that takes place online in combination with classroom activities, adaptive blended learning takes this to the next level—meeting students where they are and personalizing their pathway based on how they learn, making individualized instruction easier to implement and more effective.

For educators, one of the key benefits of adaptive blended learning software is the ongoing data that it provides to inform and personalize instruction. For example, Lexia's programs include proprietary Assessment Without Testing®, an embedded assessment tool that allows educators to access powerful real-time data reports without having to stop to administer a test. This takes the guesswork out of differentiating instruction to help students reach end-of-year benchmarks, ideal for addressing the individual needs of each student and enabling all students to learn to read in a way that suits them best.

What is Adaptive Blended Learning?

Adaptive blended learning is an instructional methodology that leverages technology to provide a more personalized, data-driven approach to learning, giving students control over the time, place, path, and pace of their learning.

Conclusion

Literacy is essential to an individual's ability to communicate, express themselves, and engage with the world around them, and all students deserve the opportunities and resources they need to learn to read with confidence.

That's why, according to the Fordham Institute, "Any discussion about 'equity' in education that is not first and foremost a discussion about literacy is unserious…state education officials have no more urgent business to attend to than ensuring that every child can read in every school under their control or influence" (Pondiscio, 2021).

Understanding how to make literacy instruction more equitable is therefore essential. It can also help school and district leaders choose the right solutions to support their literacy teachers and students. By creating more equitable literacy learning curricula and environments, supported by edtech, educators can accelerate literacy gains to ensure all students become not just confident readers but also lifelong learners.

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