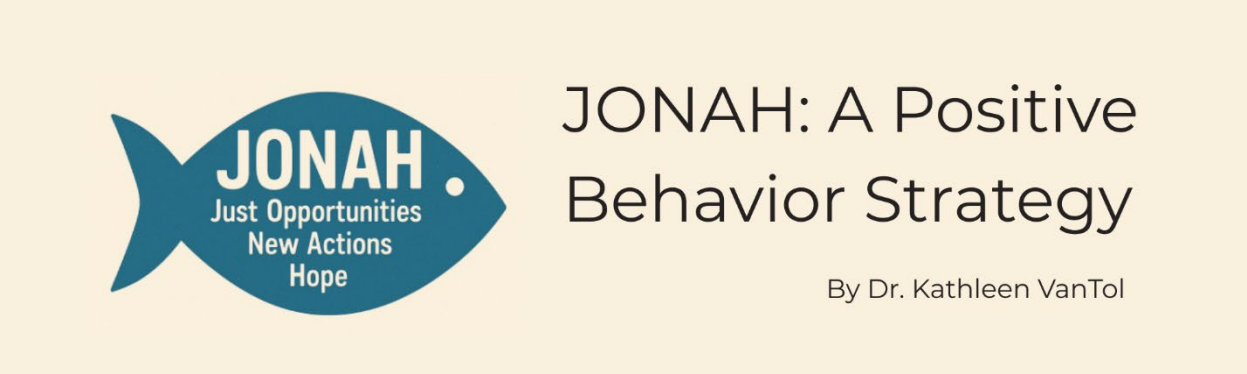

Module 2: Instructional Practices that Create Just Opportunities

"May we become master of ourselves that we may be the servants of others."
Alexander Paterson (1884-1947)

Rooted in the biblical account of Jonah, the JONAH strategy offers educators a meaningful framework for responding to student needs with compassion, structure, and hope. It encourages us to provide **Just Opportunities**, guide students toward New Actions, and remain anchored in Hope as we walk alongside them in their growth. These principles are grounded in grace, accountability, and the belief that every learner is capable of meaningful progress.

- **Just Opportunities** = Providing equitable teaching, accountability, second chances, and supportive environments.
- **New Actions** = Teaching and reinforcing better behaviors through structure, coaching, and care.
- **Hope** = Trusting in the potential of every student to succeed through grace, persistence, and encouragement.

Continuing our focus on the idea of **Just Opportunities**, this chapter examines this topic through the lens of instructional best practices. In the spirit of Paterson's call for self-mastery in service to others, the focus shifts to how educators can refine their craft to better support student growth. Creating a classroom where students thrive requires more than access, it demands intentional teaching that meets learners where they are and helps them move forward. This includes scaffolding instruction, keeping students actively engaged, and offering timely, constructive feedback. When educators use these strategies

consistently, they build a learning environment of **Just Opportunities** where all students are supported in meaningful ways and given the tools they need to succeed.

Explicit Instruction

Image source: Thirdman. (2021, July 26). *Girl in school uniform standing near the stairs*. Pexels. (CC free to use.)

Using effective, research-based instructional methods is one of the ways teachers can provide **Just Opportunities** in the classroom and serve their students well. A good example of this type of research-based instructional strategy is **explicit instruction**. Explicit instruction is a systematic method of teaching that helps students build understanding step by step. This approach begins by sharing the purpose behind the skill being taught followed by delivery of clear explanations and modeling of the skill before students move on to guided practice. Throughout the lesson, teachers check frequently for understanding, provide immediate feedback, and gradually release responsibility to students as they gain confidence and accuracy. By breaking learning into manageable parts and actively involving all students throughout the process, explicit instruction ensures that every learner has the support they need to succeed.

Explicit instruction integrates several research-based principles proven to enhance student learning outcomes. It maximizes time on task by engaging students in well-structured activities that match their current skill levels, which in turn builds both accuracy and confidence. This efficient and effective use of instructional time allows for more content to be covered, expanding students' opportunities to learn. Students also benefit from spending time in teacher-led, skill-based groups, where instruction can be tailored and responsive to individual needs. Scaffolded support is a central feature of explicit instruction. Initially, structured guidance is provided and later gradually reduced as

students develop independence. Finally, explicit instruction is designed to address multiple forms of knowledge including factual knowledge (what), procedural knowledge (how), and conditional knowledge (when and where), ensuring students not only acquire skills but also understand how and when to apply them. Across grade levels and subject areas, numerous studies have shown that students taught through explicit instruction consistently achieve higher academic outcomes (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024; Pittman, 2019).

Scaffolding

Image source: SevenStorm. (2018, August 2). *Four people painting wall on scaffolding*. Pexels. (CC free to use)

One reason explicit instruction is so effective is its strategic use of **scaffolding**, temporary supports that help bridge the gap between a student's current abilities and the intended learning goals. This evidence-based practice promotes accurate responding and helps students experience success while building confidence. Scaffolding allows teachers to adjust the level of difficulty and provide just enough support so that students are challenged without becoming overwhelmed. As students gain mastery, the supports are gradually removed, promoting independence. Research shows that the more time students spend participating with high levels of success in instructional activities, the more they learn.

Scaffolding can take many forms and is highly adaptable to the needs of individual learners. It often involves breaking down complex tasks into manageable steps, sequencing instruction carefully, and offering tools to guide thinking and behavior. Common scaffolds include teacher modeling, visual aids, cue cards, anchor charts,

checklists, partially or fully completed examples, and timely feedback. These strategies are especially helpful for students who struggle with attention, memory, or executive functioning. For instance, in a science lesson, a teacher might provide a structured lab activity guide that outlines each step of the experiment and includes key vocabulary to support comprehension and focus. In an English language arts setting, a teacher might use sentence starters and graphic organizers to help students construct a well-organized written response (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024).

Scaffolding Examples

🐟 Lesson Topic: The Water Cycle (Middle School)

Learning Goal: The student can develop and explain a model that shows how water cycles continuously through Earth's systems, driven by the sun's energy and gravity.

Standard: Next Generation Science Standard (NGSS) MS-ESS2-4: Develop a model to describe the cycling of water through Earth's systems driven by energy from the sun and the force of gravity.

Scaffolding Ideas:

- Support instruction by providing visuals such as a labeled diagram of the water cycle with pictures and arrows showing the stages and a graphic organizer with definitions and examples.
- Support student writing or small group discussion by providing discussion prompts and sentence starters such as "Evaporation happens when…" and "An example of condensation is…" Provide a word bank with key terms like condensation, precipitation, transpiration, infiltration, and percolation.

🐟 Lesson Topic: Identifying Themes in Literature

Learning Goal: The student can identify and explain the theme of a short story using textual evidence.

Standard: Common Core State Standards (CCSS) ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2 to RL.10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

Scaffolding Ideas:

- Support instruction by providing a graphic organizer that guides students to identify:
    - Main character
    - Problem
    - How the character changes
    - What the character learns (lesson/theme)

- Provide a word bank of common themes such as friendship, bravery, kindness, fairness, perseverance.
- Scaffold for gradual release of responsibility using modeling, graphic organizers, a word bank, and peer support:
    - Model filling in the graphic organizer using a short accessible story and referencing the word bank.
    - Direct students to work in pairs to complete a graphic organizer for a different story using the same supports (graphic organizer, word bank).
    - Have students read another short story independently and identify the theme using a simplified version of the organizer and without the word banks.

Active Student Responding

Image source: RDNE Stock Project. (2021, June 16). *Group of kids sitting on chair in front of table*. Pexels. (CC free to use.)

Another essential component of effective instruction is **active student responding**, which increases opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with the content. To implement this effectively, teachers should regularly prompt students to interact with the material in observable ways. Common strategies include choral reading, response cards, individual whiteboards, think-pair-share, cooperative learning, and peer tutoring. In addition to using these methods, teachers should keep the lesson moving at a brisk, purposeful pace to maintain student attention and momentum. A well-paced lesson reduces downtime, sustains engagement, and allows for more opportunities to respond, which contributes to greater learning.

Educators should carefully monitor student responses during these activities and provide immediate and specific corrective or affirmative feedback. It is also important to structure

these activities to ensure students experience high levels of success. Teachers should try to anticipate student errors and provide relevant precorrections to encourage accuracy in responding. During initial instruction, sufficient scaffolding should be provided so that students are able to respond accurately at least 80% of the time. During independent practice, the goal should be to structure the task such that students are able to achieve at least 90–95% accuracy so that practice assignments reinforce mastery. The well-known adage, "Practice doesn't make perfect, practice makes permanent" applies here. We do not want students to get repeated practice in making errors." Choral responding, partner responding, and individual student responding are types of active student responses. (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024; Pittman, 2019).

Choral Responding

Choral responding is when all the students say the answer together. This works best for short responses where all students can be expected to give the same answer. Choral responding is a great way to review factual information. It works well because it gets all students involved and provides scaffolding for students who need extra support since they can hear the answer, join in, and receive direct feedback. Choral responding also gives the alert teacher immediate feedback on student knowledge. To use choral responding well in the classroom, teachers need to develop a cue so students know when to answer. This cue could be a hand signal, a clap, or a vocal command such as "go" or "all together.

Variations on Choral Responding

- During choral reading, the teacher and the students read the material aloud together. This can be useful when going over directions, reading math story problems, or reviewing other types of written material; however, it can also be used as an alternative to round robin reading. There are many reasons why choral reading is more beneficial than round robin reading for students. During choral reading, the teacher is modeling fluency and prosody, all students are getting practice with reading, all students are more actively engaged, and the structure of choral reading provides scaffolding for those students with reading challenges.
- **Echo reading** is a variation on choral reading in which the teacher reads a short segment of the text first followed by the students echo reading the same segment of the text. This methodology is useful for the same reasons as choral reading and is particularly beneficial for lower ability readers.
- **Cloze reading** is when the teacher reads the text while the students follow along; however, with cloze reading, the teacher systematically pauses at specific words or phrases, and the students are expected to fill in the next words aloud before the teacher continues reading. It is important that these pauses be placed strategically so that the

students read words that help them create meaning (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024; DataWORKS Curriculum, 2014).

Partner Responding

Partner responding is a strategy in which students are directed to share their answers with a designated partner. It is especially effective for questions that invite longer or more varied responses, as it engages all students and encourages active participation. This approach not only promotes active involvement but also fosters peer learning by allowing students to hear and build on each other's ideas. Beyond content learning, partner responding supports the development of language proficiency, social interaction, and cooperation skills. While teachers may not hear every conversation, they can listen to selected pairs to provide targeted feedback. Partners can also offer feedback to one another, reinforcing their understanding. To ensure effectiveness, teachers should intentionally pair students and incorporate scaffolding as needed to support lower-performing learners (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024).

Variations on Partner Responding

- Providing a sentence starter is a simple yet effective scaffolding strategy that supports students in formulating and expressing their responses. Sentence starters help activate prior knowledge, guide cognitive processing, and promote complete, focused answers. Research indicates that students who are given a sentence starter get started more quickly, are more likely to use full sentences to express their answer, and tend to stay on topic. For example: "Analyze the results of the experiment and explain your thinking to your partner. Begin by saying either, 'The results support the hypothesis because…' or 'The results do not support the hypothesis because…'"
- A well-known partner responding strategy is the Think-Pair-Share. A useful variation on this is the Think – Write – Pair – Share. This variation requires students to write their own answers first before sharing their answers with their partner. This increases accountability and allows the teacher to monitor responses. After sharing, student pairs can be instructed to write a shared best response together or each student can simply add the best of their partner's ideas to their own answer
- Study–Tell–Help–Check is an effective strategy for reviewing previously taught content and can be used either at the beginning or the end of a lesson. Students begin by studying their own material independently for 1–2 minutes. Then, both partners cover their materials and take turns explaining everything they remember without looking back at their resources. During this phase of the strategy, partners support each other by asking questions, offering hints, and adding any missing information. Finally, both students review their materials together to check and correct their responses. This

strategy promotes active rehearsal, peer interaction, and retrieval practice and can strengthen memory and understanding.

Individual Student Responding

At times, teachers may want students to respond individually rather than with a partner or as part of a group. When doing so, teachers should avoid relying solely on volunteers, as this limits engagement to only a few students. On the other hand, it is also not advisable for teachers to use this as an opportunity to call on students who are inattentive. There are better ways to guide those students back to the lesson such as giving the whole group a directive to engage in an action. When calling on a student who cannot answer, the teacher should gently guide that student toward success. This can be done by allowing the student to consult a partner, offering a hint, providing the answer and having the student repeat it, or moving on to another student with the promise to return to the original student later. Regardless of the method used, the goal is for the student to ultimately respond with the correct answer (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024).

Variations on Individual Student Responding

- Response cards have predetermined choices such as True/False, Yes/No, or A/B/C/D that can be used for active student responding. This option works best when the choice of answers is limited.
- Response boards are generally small erasable white boards on which students write their answers, although a sheet of paper encased in a plastic sheet protector can work as well and can be a more economical alternative. This type of student responding works best for longer or more varied answers.
- Action responding has students make use of gestures, facial expressions, or hand signals to respond. Some examples might be pointing at the correct response, giving a thumbs up/down, or acting out an answer.

Feedback

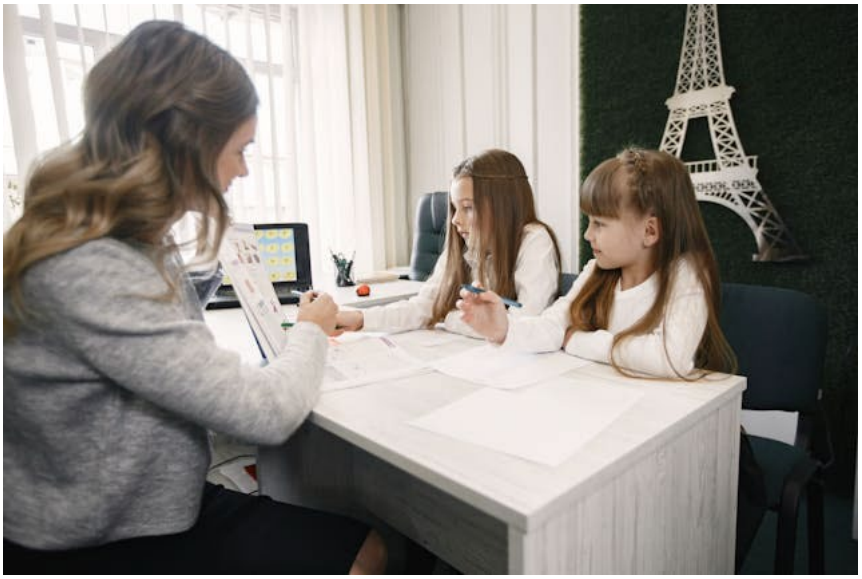

Image source: Fring, G. (2021, March 15). *Woman teaching girls sitting by the table*. Pexels. (CC free to use.)

Positive and corrective feedback are essential tools for guiding student learning and behavior in the classroom. Effective feedback increases motivation, engagement, and independence by helping learners understand what they are doing well and where they need to improve. It is most impactful when the feedback is specific and helps the student understand both where improvement is needed and how to achieve it. Feedback should be clear, specific, timely, and contingent on student performance. It should also be genuine, meaningful, age appropriate, and aligned with the complexity of the task and the student's current phase of learning. Feedback can take many forms. It may be verbal, nonverbal, or written. It may be provided in-person, using techniques such as questioning, scaffolding, cueing, and providing strategy suggestions, or it may be computer-mediated. However, when students show limited understanding, teachers should shift from giving feedback to providing instruction to ensure foundational concepts are understood before moving forward. Feedback is important, but not more important than quality instruction. Feedback can only build on the foundation that teachers have laid through their teaching.

As teachers monitor student performance during instruction, they consider a variety of reflective questions that guide instructional decisions both in the moment and when planning future lessons. For each student response, teachers first consider whether the answer is correct or incorrect. If the response is incorrect, they must decide what type of correction procedure is most appropriate. If correct, they need to determine what type of affirmation or praise would be meaningful and encouraging for the learner. Teachers must also assess whether the lesson can move forward as planned or whether certain facts, concepts, skills, or strategies need to be retaught immediately. Examples of additional

questions a teacher might ask include: Should more practice be built into the current lesson? Are adaptations needed to better support student understanding now or in future lessons? Thoughtful responses to these types of questions help educators ensure that their instruction is responsive, targeted, and effective.

For incorrect responses, it is essential that teachers provide timely and effective corrections. If students repeatedly make the same error without correction, the mistake can become a habit and harder to unlearn. Therefore, errors, as much as possible, should be corrected immediately and in a way that leads the student to the correct answer. Simply telling the student that their answer is "wrong" is insufficient. Corrections must include information that helps the student understand what to do differently in the future. The focus should be on helping the student achieve the correct answer rather than simply emphasizing the incorrect one. To preserve a safe and supportive learning environment, it is important that corrections be delivered in a positive, constructive, and respectful manner. Crucially, the correction process should conclude with the student giving the correct response, which reinforces accurate learning. Teachers may also consider revisiting similar items later in the lesson to ensure the correction has been retained

Providing positive reinforcement for correct responses during classroom activities is a simple yet powerful tool for reinforcing learning and promoting a positive classroom environment. Correct answers can be affirmed quickly with a smile, nod, or brief comment before moving on, keeping the pace of instruction brisk while still acknowledging success. When the class as a whole is demonstrating strong academic or behavioral performance, targeted positive reinforcement such as **behavior specific praise** can be offered to the whole group. Research shows that effective praise enhances academic learning, increases on-task behavior, shapes future actions, improves teacher-student relationships, and contributes to a more positive learning climate. Additionally, when used appropriately, praise can actually increase students' intrinsic motivation, making it a valuable part of effective instruction.

Effective praise goes beyond general statements of approval. For praise to work as reinforcement, it should be positive, informative, credible, and genuine, and it must be contingent on behavior that meets clearly communicated expectations. Specific praise helps strengthen desired behaviors and supports long-term learning. For example, rather than saying "Good job," a teacher might say, "You really focused on using evidence to support your answer." While quick affirmations like "Yes," "That's right," or a smile are useful for keeping lessons moving, more intentional praise is powerful when recognizing noteworthy effort or success on challenging tasks. Praise that emphasizes effort, persistence, and strategy use also reinforces a growth mindset by showing students that their choices and actions lead to improvement. Focusing on attributes students can

control, such as their work habits, attention, or perseverance, builds confidence and motivation. Importantly, praise should be delivered in a way that is appropriate for each student. Some may thrive on public recognition, while others may prefer a quiet word or gesture, so it's essential to be mindful of student preferences for how praise is given (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024; Majeika, 2018, Pittman, 2019).

Lesson Design

While lesson design can vary depending on the content area, grade level, or instructional goal, lessons that use explicit instruction typically follow a similar sequence. They often begin with a brief review of previous learning. This might involve discussing a completed homework assignment or engaging students in a short opening "bellringer" activity that connects new material to what they already know. These connections may be drawn not only from recent lessons in the unit but also from prerequisite skills learned in earlier units or grades, helping to activate and strengthen prior knowledge.

The teacher then moves on to the main part of the lesson, first identifying the learning goals in a student-friendly style. Instructional material is then presented in small, manageable steps using clear and concise language. Modeling is key to the success of this strategy and may include both examples and non-examples to clarify understanding. Throughout the lesson, the teacher should maintain a brisk and purposeful pace in order to sustain student interest.

Another key component of explicit instruction is guided practice. During guided practice, students actively engage with the material through frequent opportunities to respond, supported by teacher prompts and cues that ensure a high rate of success and build fluency. Immediate corrections and feedback are provided, with reteaching as needed. Once students demonstrate sufficient understanding, they move into independent practice, continuing until skills become accurate and automatic. Finally, regular weekly or monthly reviews help reinforce retention and long-term mastery (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024).

General Lesson Outline:

Review

- homework
- previous learning
- prerequisites

Presentation

- State lesson goals, maintain a brisk pace
- Present material in small steps, use clear language

- Model procedures, provide examples and non-examples

Guided practice

- provide clues/prompts as needed
- ensure high rates of success
- high frequency of responses
- work on fluency

Provide **corrections and feedback and reteach** when necessary

- Independent practice. Continue until skills are automatic.
- Weekly / monthly review

Pacing

Maintaining a good instructional pace is essential for keeping students engaged and maximizing learning time. To do this effectively, teachers should come to class well-prepared and follow established routines that help students know what to expect and how to participate. These routines reduce downtime and keep the focus on content. During questioning, providing just enough "think time," typically 3 to 5 seconds, allows students to formulate responses without losing momentum. Observing students' cues can help teachers adjust this time as needed. In drill-and-practice situations, moving quickly from one response to the next increases both the number of opportunities for students to respond and their attentiveness, which often leads to improved accuracy. Avoiding unnecessary digressions and staying focused on the lesson objective also contributes to a brisk and effective instructional pace (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024; Pittman, 2019).

Lesson Example

This example highlights the main components of a lesson using explicit instruction and incorporates several of the scaffolding ideas mentioned earlier.

🐟 Lesson Plan: Identifying Themes in Literature

Grade Level: Upper Elementary or Middle School (adaptable for Grades 4–10)
Duration: 45–60 minutes
Lesson Topic: Identifying Themes in Literature
Learning Goal: The student can identify and explain the theme of a short story using textual evidence.
Standard: CCSS ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2 to RL.10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

Review (5–10 minutes)

- Activate prior knowledge. Ask: “What is the difference between the plot of a story and the message or lesson it teaches?”
- Review previously learned terms: Character, setting, conflict, resolution
- Quick check. Display a few familiar story titles, such as *The Tortoise and the Hare* or *Cinderella*. Ask: “What was the message or lesson in this story?”

Presentation (15–20 minutes)

- State the Goal: "Today we’re learning how to find the *theme* of a story, the message or big idea the author wants us to understand. We’ll use a simple organizer and clues from the story to help us explain the theme in our own words.”
- Present in small steps using clear language.
- Define theme: “The theme is the big idea or lesson the character and the reader can learn from the story. It’s not the events, but the meaning behind them.”
- Display a word bank of common themes: *Friendship, honesty, perseverance, kindness, bravery, fairness, forgiveness*

Model procedures using a short story:

- Read aloud or summarize a short, accessible story. Examples might include *The Lion and the Mouse* or a short fiction excerpt.
- Fill out a graphic organizer together on the board:
    - Main character
    - Problem
    - How the character changes
    - What the character learns (theme)
- Use sentence starters:
    - “The character learns that…”
    - “This story teaches us…”
- Provide non-examples:
    - Clarify that “The mouse helps the lion escape” is a plot point, not a theme.
    - Instead, “Even small creatures can be helpful” is a theme.

Guided Practice (10–15 minutes)

- In pairs, students read a new short story or passage (either printed or from a class text).
- Provide each pair with:
    - A blank graphic organizer
    - The same theme word bank
    - Sentence starters: “The character learns…,” “A lesson from this story is…”
- Teacher circulates to prompt thinking, ask questions like:
    - “How did the character change?”

    - "What lesson do you think the author wanted us to learn?"

Provide **Corrections, Feedback, and Reteach** (5–10 minutes)

- Share additional examples.
- Involve students in giving feedback by asking for thumbs up/down for accuracy of each example.
    - Reinforce accurate theme identification and use of evidence.
- For non-examples, ask students to explain errors. For example, did they mistake plot for theme?
- Clarify and reteach as needed:
    - Revisit examples/non-examples.
    - Show how theme is broader than specific events.

Independent Practice (10–15 minutes)

- Students read a third short story independently.
- Provide a simplified graphic organizer (fewer prompts, no word bank).
- Students write a brief paragraph or sentence:
    - "The theme of this story is ___ because ___."
- Encourage evidence-based answers:
    - "The character learned ___ when ___ happened."
    - "The author helps us understand this theme by _____."
    - "This theme is important because _____."

Optional Extensions:

- Students find a theme in a self-selected book or story.
- Have students compare themes between stories:
    - "This theme is similar to the theme in _____ because _____."
    - "Both stories show that _____."
    - "Unlike in _____ where the theme is _____, this story focuses on _____."

Pulling It All Together

The success of explicit instruction as a teaching strategy can be attributed to several key components. Carefully sequencing skills and breaking them into smaller, manageable steps allows students to build understanding gradually. Scaffolding helps control task difficulty, ensuring students are supported as they progress. Frequent opportunities to respond, combined with multiple practice attempts and timely feedback, contributes to student engagement and mastery. Modeling provides a clear demonstration of expectations, while small-group instruction offers targeted support. Finally, assigning homework reinforces independent practice, promoting fluency and long-term retention of skills.

Choose and Use Challenge

This week, choose one instructional strategy from the module to put into practice. It could be providing scaffolding such as a graphic organizer, adding more opportunities for active student responding, or adjusting the way you give feedback. Focus on being intentional in your instructional choices and noticing how they impact student engagement and learning.

One idea I will implement next week is …

Glossary

active student responding – Opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with the content in observable ways.

behavior specific praise - Positive feedback that clearly describes the exact behavior the student demonstrated**.**

echo reading – The teachers reads a short segment of the text first followed by the students echo reading the same segment of the text.

choral responding – When all students say the answer together.

cloze reading – The teacher reads the text while the students follow along, systematically pausing at specific words and phrases so students can fill in the next words aloud before the teacher continues reading.

explicit instruction – A research-based, instructional strategy that includes sharing the purpose behind the skill being taught, clear modeling, guided practice, and feedback.

partner responding – When students share answers with their assigned partner.

scaffolding – Temporary supports that help bridge the gap between a student's current abilities and the intended learning goals.

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Want to Learn More?

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