Considerate Text Supports Student Learning in All Subjects – The Power Basics® Series

A White Paper from Walch Education
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Background

Walch Education develops and publishes texts and supplements in a variety of subject areas for middle and high school students. Walch has supported teachers and students for more than 80 years, adapting to new reforms and standards, and responding quickly to the demands on today's educators.

The No Child Left Behind Act makes schools accountable for achievement by all students; students with unique learning needs are not exempt. The *Power Basics*® series, including texts, workbooks, practice books, and assessment tools, provides a comprehensive program for students who need more support than can be found in traditional textbooks. The content-rich *Power Basics* books and ancillaries are designed to meet the diverse needs of students found in contemporary classrooms.

The senior author of this series, Robert Taggart, Ph.D., developed *Power Basics* specifically to address the needs of students not well served by traditional strategies and texts. Dr. Taggart is the founder and president of the nonprofit Remediation and Training Institute in Alexandria, Virginia, and a former research professor at Howard University, where he headed the Howard University Opportunity Institute.

With support from the Ford Foundation, Dr. Taggart developed the nationally recognized Comprehensive Competencies Program (CCP), a low-cost, public-use system for delivering individualized, self-paced, competency-based instruction covering K–12 academics and all functional skills. Nearly 1,000 CCP-based learning centers have been established in regular and alternative schools, job-training programs, corrections and welfare agencies, and community-based organizations.

Dr. Taggart headed the Carter Administration's youth employment and education initiatives, and designed the uniquely successful Quantum Opportunity Program for at-risk teens. He has authored twenty books and monographs on diverse topics, including job-training strategies, economic development, and the importance of basic skills.

The *Power Basics* Curriculum

The *Power Basics* curriculum provides content in language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and school-to-career. Each *Power Basics* book is organized into manageable instructional units that build mastery in the core curriculum areas, and can be used sequentially and class-wide, or on an "as needed" supplemental basis. Each *Power Basics* text can be purchased as a student text or as a reproducible; accompanying teacher's guides, workbooks, test packs, and practice packs are also available. Each student text is accompanied by a consumable student workbook for reinforcement, extension, and activities for the multiple intelligences. A consumable practice pack provides additional opportunities to practice each concept taught in the student text—a key to mastery. The teacher's guide offers unit overviews, additional activity and project suggestions, graphic organizers, multiple intelligence activities, and tips for reaching all students in a differentiated classroom. The accompanying test pack includes a pretest, a comprehensive test for each unit, and a posttest for final assessment. Each test pack also contains teacher support, and offers specific strategies for standardized test-taking.

The *Power Basics* Curriculum

Language Arts	*Basic English* *Everyday English* *Introduction to Composition* *Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension*
Mathematics	*Algebra* *Basic Mathematics* *Consumer Mathematics* *Geometry*
Science	*Biology* *Chemistry* *Earth and Space Science* *Physics*
Social Studies	*American Government* *United States History* *World Geography* *World History I* *World History II* *World History III*
School-to-Career	*School-to-Career*

Considerate Text

The goal of any textbook is to deliver content. *Power Basics* goes a step further, using "considerate text" to present content in a way that helps students understand, retain, and use the content in the classroom and beyond. "Considerate text," a concept introduced by Bonnie Armbruster and her colleagues, is text that is easy to read and comprehend. It allows the reader to easily access needed information (Armbruster & Anderson, 1988).

For text to be deemed "considerate," it must have an accessible reading level. New vocabulary must be highlighted and clearly explained, as learning new vocabulary is essential to processing new information. *Power Basics* uses a carefully controlled reading level. New vocabulary is introduced in the "Words to Know" section at the beginning of each lesson. Each vocabulary word is boldfaced in the text on the first occurrence, and then defined in context. A glossary contains the definition and phonetic pronunciation of each vocabulary word found in the text.

Considerate text must also be organized appropriately for the audience. *Power Basics* is structured to maximize comprehension. Units are divided into small, manageable lessons. Design elements were chosen carefully, including appropriate fonts and type size, boldfaced type for vocabulary words, and the inclusion of headings and subheads that provide structure and organize main ideas. A maximum line length under 5 inches and uncluttered pages serve to focus attention on the content. As research has shown, irrelevant text elements are often distracting to students with special needs (Seidenberg, 1989). Visual images and organizers are included when

appropriate to reinforce content. Explicit learning goals are stated at the beginning of each lesson, allowing for smooth progressions from one concept to the next. Clear examples set off from the rest of the text and frequent opportunities for practice also aid comprehension. Connections to real-life experiences activate prior knowledge and help facilitate learning.

As Armbruster asserted, the presentation of the content affects how well it is comprehended, if at all. For students who need support, whether struggling readers or students with limited English proficiency, highly focused texts such as *Power Basics* become essential to learning success.

Text Structure

Research has shown that the organization of text, students' awareness of that organization, and students' use of the organization in their approach to learning affects comprehension. Moreover, aside from text structure in terms of content and coherence, the physical presentation of text can facilitate ease of reading and reading comprehension. Included in the physical presentation of the text are clarity and consistent location of main idea statements; visual clues such as headings, subheadings, and signal words; and callouts for important information such as learning goals and new vocabulary. An open layout, simple serif or sans serif text, and a short line length are also key factors in creating readability.

Explicit Learning Goals

Students are more likely to be better focused in their learning if the goal of instruction is stated up front. Students understand what is expected of them, which aids in motivation (Reiser and Dick, 1996).

Introductory Statements

One of the features defining a well-presented text is the clear presentation of main ideas (Dickson, et al., 1995). Moreover, students' ability to identify the main idea is vital to comprehension (Seidenberg, 1989). Features related to clear main ideas include placing the topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph, ordering topics in a systematic way, and arranging supporting information in recognizable patterns (Seidenberg, 1989).

Print and Layout

Use of simple serif or sans serif type has been shown to aid reading speed and comprehension. Other research-based considerations in design are an open-page layout, with short line lengths in unjustified, left-aligned text (McAlpine and Weston, 1994).

Titles, Headings, and Subheads

Titles, headings, and subheads form important cues to the relationships between ideas in a text. Students' recognition of textual cues, including headings, helped them identify ideas in the text and relate them to other ideas (Seidenberg, 1989). In one study, students who used heads, subheads, and paragraph topics to summarize the text recalled the content better than students

who studied longer without using this technique (Taylor and Beach, cited in Dickson, 1995). In another study, students who read passages that were set off by headings remembered main ideas better than students who read the same passage with the headings omitted (Doctorow, Wittrock, & Marks, cited in Chambliss, 1994).

Lists of Vocabulary Words

The importance of systematic vocabulary instruction is well established (Marzano, 2001). When new vocabulary is directly defined, students are more likely to learn the terms than when new words are simply pointed out. Moreover, students' comprehension of new words is enhanced by pre-teaching (Marzano, 1998). It's important that new words are highlighted consistently throughout a text, to cue students that a new word is being introduced.

Coherence

As a characteristic of considerate text, coherence refers to the simplicity used in connecting the parts of the text. *Power Basics* has been designed with coherence in mind. *Power Basics* exhibits several features that contribute to the coherence of the text, such as heads and subheads, short, manageable lessons, clear examples of concepts, frequent opportunities for practice, and ongoing assessment.

Text structure of *Power Basics*

- Simple font; only two font styles used
- Open, clean layout
- "Ragged-right" text
- Short line length
- Consistent use of headings and titles
- Vocabulary terms cued using bold and color and defined in context
- Clear presentation of main idea in opening paragraph
- Supporting information called out in sidebars
- Three different sidebar types represented with icons
- Clear use of information cues such as tables, bulleted and numbered lists, and graphic organizers

Each section of *Power Basics* features clear heads and subheads to help students navigate their way through the book. Heads and subheads allow students to see how sections of text relate to one another. They help students make a clear transition from one section of text to another.

One of the most important features of *Power Basics* is that each book has been divided into short, manageable sections with directly stated main ideas. Each section begins with an explicit learning goal and a list of words to know that students will encounter in the lesson. This is followed by a heading and a brief section of text. Having a short section of text helps students tackle the material more successfully. This brief text is less daunting, and students feel a greater sense of accomplishment.

A brief practice activity follows each section of text. These practice activities are frequent, and help reinforce what students have just read. Brief activities are less overwhelming than long practice activities often found in traditional textbooks. Repeated practice allows students to better retain what they have read. As Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock found, "Learning new content, then, does not happen quickly. It requires practice spread out over time" (2001).

Each lesson is presented in sequential order with a clear format. As stated previously, each lesson begins with an explicit learning goal and a list of vocabulary words that students will encounter in the lesson. This is followed by a head and a brief introduction. Because each lesson follows this format, the lessons become predictable for students. Once they become familiar with the format, they can truly focus on the content. Clearly, the consistent use of an implemented structure aids readers (Anderson and Armbruster, 1986). *Power Basics* also contains explicit transitions from one topic to another.

The content of the text contributes greatly to the program's coherence. No background knowledge is assumed. This levels the playing field for all students in the differentiated classroom. Students who may not have prior knowledge of a topic will not need to spend time catching up to other students. In addition, *Power Basics* excludes any irrelevant information. "Another way to allow important content to dominate is to limit details that are unrelated to central concepts. Details should be meaningful; they should support main ideas" (Tyree and Fiore, 1994). Consequently, students are not forced to evaluate what is and is not relevant in the text. They quickly learn that if it is stated in the text, it is important.

Power Basics provides clear examples for each idea presented. For instance, in the math books, each concept is followed by one or more clear examples. These examples are set off from the rest of the text with clearly labeled bold subheads. They are also broken into steps for students to follow.

Each unit is followed by one or more extension activities. These activities allow students to take what they have just learned and apply it. This exercise provides students with practical knowledge they can apply to real-life situations.

With assessment becoming increasingly important in today's classroom, *Power Basics* provides several opportunities for ongoing assessment. Each unit is followed by a unit review, which contains at least ten questions that help recap the unit. In addition to the unit reviews in the student book, *Power Basics* also offers a test pack to accompany each student book. Each test pack contains a pretest and a posttest that covers the entire student book, and a test for each unit within the student book.

Reading Level

Many reading formulas evaluate the reading level of text. However, most of these instruments are based on a combination of sentence length and the number of multisyllablic words in the text. They do not take into account other aspects of text, such as the way the text is organized (Armbruster, Osborn, & Davison, 1985). It is true that a text with many multisyllablic words and long sentences is likely to be more challenging than a text with short sentences and simple words. At the same time, a text made up primarily of short, choppy sentences with insufficient transitions also poses substantial comprehension challenges (Armbruster, et al., 1985).

To ensure access for diverse learners, *Power Basics* uses a combination of controlled reading level and text organization to facilitate understanding. Sentences use simple structures and the active voice. Ideas follow logically from one sentence to the next, and linking words are used to show relationships among ideas.

Each lesson introduces key terms needed to understand the lesson content. These key terms are listed at the start of the lesson, appear in boldface type the first time they are used, and are clearly defined in context, using familiar words and concepts to explain the new terms. A complete glossary, including a pronunciation guide, is provided at the back of the student text. Practice activities give learners the opportunity to use the vocabulary they have just encountered. The teacher's guide also includes activities for systematic vocabulary instruction, an approach that Marzano describes as "possibly one of the most important instructional interventions that teachers can use" (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

Conceptual Density

Another element that can make text more challenging is conceptual density—the number of new concepts introduced in each unit of text. The more new ideas introduced in each lesson, the more difficult the text is to read. Each lesson in *Power Basics* introduces a few essential new concepts, and elaborates on them to make them understandable to learners. In keeping with Marzano's finding that mastering a skill requires repeated, focused practice, each lesson includes frequent opportunities for practice (Marzano, 2001).

Learner Support Strategies

The *Power Basics* program also includes a number of strategies designed to support learners. The teacher's guide offers reproducible graphic organizers to help learners create visual representations of information.

"Think About It" sections prompt students to apply critical-thinking skills to the material they are learning. Boxed "In Real Life" sections help learners connect to the content by showing them how these concepts are relevant to their lives. "Tip" boxes offer suggestions to improve retention, such as mnemonics.

The teacher's guide provides a variety of suggestions for differentiating instruction, making the material accessible for all learners.

Standards Alignment

It is important to connect instruction to state and national standards. States are working hard to ensure that measures of educational performance and efficacy are conducted in the context of their content standards, and research shows that students perform better on assessments when the have had the opportunity to learn the relevant subject matter. John Smithson, of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, notes that this is well supported by research and is, of course, common sense. "Misaligned curriculum, instruction, and assessment is one factor that leads to poor student achievement." Correlations of *Power Basics* to national and state standards are available, and ensure that teaching can be aligned to and conducted in the context of the relevant standards.

Assessment and Test Preparation

Power Basics provides easy-to-use pre- and post-unit tests so that teachers can conduct ongoing formative assessment. Formative assessment is at the heart of effective teaching and can help

close the achievement gap between low and high performers. *Phi Delta Kappa International* published a study by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, "Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment," which reviews the evidence supporting these claims. The study illustrates that formative assessment yielded larger performance gains than most other types of interventions. Black and Wiliam also cite a study concluding that formative assessment helps both low-achieving students and students with learning disabilities progress.

Power Basics also helps students improve academic skills and learning in the content areas, and hence, become better prepared for academic tests by using the item types and formats which are most commonly encountered. A study conducted by Chicago Public Schools (Perlman, 2000) concluded that "standardized tests require students to apply critical thinking skills, and that if students become accustomed to answering those types of questions on a regular basis in class, they are likely to do better on the tests." Moreover, Ross and Driscoll (2006) demonstrated that test practice can help students reduce anxiety and improve their skills. In turn, this allows a student's knowledge to be more accurately reflected in test results.

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