Study Guide

LITERACY ESSENTIALS

Engagement, Excellence, and Equity for All Learners

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The purpose of this study guide is to deepen understanding and application of what you’ve read and thought about in *Literacy Essentials: Engagement, Excellence, and Equity for All Learners*. Use the annotated Contents with sections and subsections and this study guide to take a close look at literacy and its real-world connections for raising engagement and achievement for *all* learners—diverse students, teachers, and leaders at all levels. Celebrate what’s going well; ask the hard but vital questions; consider what you might change to ensure an excellent, equitable education for *all* learners.

Talking with colleagues about ideas and issues connected with teaching, leading, assessing, and learning has the potential to stretch your thinking, to raise new questions, and, perhaps, to help the group come to some consensus on important issues. High achievement for all is only possible and sustainable with schoolwide commitment, alignment of beliefs and practices, ongoing and high-level professional learning, and a conscious focus on excellent and equitable practices that engage all learners. I hope *Literacy Essentials* and the accompanying study guide may be a catalyst for successful and lasting empowerment and worthwhile change in your classroom, school, district, and/or province.

**Before the Study Group**

**Read and Reflect**

Decide as a group (district, whole school, grade level, small group) which section or subsection and/or how many pages to read for your first study group discussion and how much time to allow for completing the reading. Read the agreed-upon section or subsection in any way that suits your group. Perhaps, with a sticky note, mark one or two places that resonate with you the most. You may want to share what (page number) and why you selected the passage or quote. This is exactly how I read and prepare for any book club with colleagues and friends.

**Review**

If you can, take a few minutes to review the section(s) and subsection(s) with the accompanying Take Action ideas. Think about passages, ideas, and stories you may have highlighted or marked; questions you may want to bring up; or anything that seems important to you that may spark a rich conversation and bring about more effective and equitable practices and actions. You may want to jot ideas in a notebook. I write down all my thinking about teaching in one notebook and revisit it often.

With our busy teaching lives, we do not often have the time to think and reflect on our students, our practices, and our beliefs. Enjoy this time to reflect on your practice. What do you feel good about right now? What challenges you? What supports do you need?

In your notebook or on an index card, do a *quick-write* (write for two minutes) and be prepared to share your thoughts with your study group if you choose. This reflection could also take place at the beginning of the study group as a way to engage all participants.
**During the Study Group**

**Discuss (20–30 minutes)**

Focus almost all your time here.

Take a look at the questions for the sections and subsections you are discussing. Choose one or more of the questions provided, or raise your own important questions, as a catalyst for getting discussion and high-level thinking going. Use the accompanying Take Action sections to spark your thinking. You may choose to have your professional conversations in vertical teams, by grade levels, all together, or using any combination of these that best suits your group.

Keep in mind that, out of respect for our busy lives, a professional book study group need not meet for more than thirty minutes and need not be weekly. As long as participants meet regularly and are prepared—that is, they have done the reading and reflected on it—high-level conversations can easily occur.

It works well to have a facilitator (appointed by the group or a volunteer) who ensures that everyone gets a chance to speak and be heard, that the group stays on topic, and that the meeting begins and ends on time. The facilitator might also arrange for snacks (bottled water, fruit, and candy) to be on hand.

**Wrap-Up (10–15 minutes)**

Identify one or two ideas from the discussion that you may want to think about and apply prior to the next book study group. You may choose to write your thoughts in a notebook, at the end of the meeting, or after the meeting. Be prepared to reflect and share your thinking with your study group (either in the present meeting or at the beginning of the next book study meeting).

Decide and agree on, as a group, what section(s) or subsection(s) with Take Action ideas to read in *Literacy Essentials* prior to the next session as well as the next meeting place, time, and date.

**INTRODUCTION**

1. What are you hoping to learn and be able to apply from reading and discussing *Literacy Essentials*?
2. How and why are meaningful literacy teaching and assessing across the curriculum—as well as joy in teaching and learning—educational necessities for all students, or not? Discuss your thinking.
Discuss the role of trusting relationships in a healthy school culture, including your role in promoting trust with colleagues, students, and students’ families. What more can you do to promote trust between and among colleagues, students, and their families?

What role do you think the physical, social-emotional, and intellectual environments play in creating and sustaining a thriving school culture? Why does school culture (sometimes called school climate) matter? Can a whole school become high achieving without a healthy culture?

Take a look at the stories throughout the book (see the Stories Overview on page ix) and discuss how valuing life stories can impact and enrich our teaching, leading, and learning. How can you learn from and integrate your own personal stories—and your students’ stories—into your classroom and school to make the culture more inclusive, authentic, and joyful?

**Developing Trusting Relationships: Engagement 1**

1. Discuss the statement on page 9: *High achievement and good test scores are a byproduct of a healthy, thriving school culture.* Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. How would you describe your school’s culture? What is already working well? What actions might you and your school put into place to promote a kinder, more trusting culture with students, colleagues, and families? Use the chart on page 12, “10 Actions That Promote High Trust and Achievement,” and Take Action sections to jump-start your thinking.
3. What is your first priority for creating and sustaining a more trusting culture? What is your plan of action?

**Celebrating Learners: Engagement 2**

1. How do you view the role of celebration in teaching and learning? Do you view it as a necessity or an occasional add-on? What do you do daily, and what more might you do, to deliberately highlight learners’ strengths and accomplishments—both for students and teachers?
2. Discuss how the mind-sets and expectations we hold for students (and teachers) impact their achievement, confidence, and ability to learn. What actions can you take to recognize and celebrate each learner’s passions, interests, efforts, and gifts before focusing on weaknesses and needs? Why does that matter?

**Creating a Thriving Learning Environment: Engagement 3**

1. Evaluate the culture of your school. Use Appendix A, “Culture Matters,” and Appendix B, “A Healthy and Thriving School Culture,” to think about, discuss, and evaluate your own school culture and set goals to improve and/or sustain it. Discuss the role of joy. Is it a necessity? If so, how can you foster a more joyful culture of teaching and learning in your classroom and school?
2. Self-assess your physical learning environment—your classroom and school’s learning spaces, including all walls and libraries. Is an excellent, well-organized, accessible classroom library the centerpiece of your classroom? If not, how might you make it so, and why does that matter? What might you and your students do to make your classroom and school a more inviting, inclusive, and beautiful space?
Do your classroom and school have an intellectual culture? If not, why not, and what might you do to change that? Examine the kinds of questions you are asking, the relevance of the content of your teaching to students’ lives, and the kind of talk that predominates in your classroom. What might you do to develop students’ passions, interests, and intellectual curiosity? Review Take Action, pages 75–76.

**Teaching with Purpose and Authenticity: Engagement 4**

1. How can you and your colleagues adhere to required standards, curriculum, and mandates and ensure that planning, teaching, and learning are relevant and engaging for all students? Why is this goal an important one? Discuss how you might incorporate and apply real-world purposes with students’ interests and passions to ensure that students become joyful, self-directing literacy learners who use literacy to improve lives. Review the lesson plan in Appendix C, “Lesson Plan Framework/Overview,” and, perhaps, the complete lesson plan on sten.pub/literacyessentials for one way this can be done.

2. Why is student choice essential to optimal learning? Discuss how you might use more “choice within structure” in assignments to increase student engagement and effort.

3. Evaluate the role of technology use in your classroom and school. See pages 94–95 for specific questions to consider.
• Review and discuss the “Ten Key Factors for Excellence” on page 102. Do you agree that excellent teachers possess these qualities and/or similar ones? Which qualities describe you? Which might you set as a goal?
• Do you consider yourself an expert teacher of reading and writing, including in the content areas? If not, what do you think might contribute to further developing your expertise?
• How are you and your colleagues—or how might you become—engaged in high-level, ongoing professional conversations that lead to an improved and more joyful literacy and learning culture?
• If a crucial goal of education is to make people think more deeply, how can we as educators ensure that we are developing students who are deep thinkers, questioners, readers, writers, listeners, and speakers?

Embedding Professional Learning: Excellence 1

1. What is the role of ongoing professional learning in developing excellence in teaching? What can you do to establish, improve, and/or lead the professional learning culture of your school? Discuss the Take Action suggestions on pages 107–110 to spark your thinking and consider new actions.
2. How has your professional and personal learning journey affected your past and current teaching and learning experiences? What changes might you consider making? See the story “My Professional Learning Journey” on pages 110–113. Consider reflecting upon, writing, and/or sharing your own professional learning story with colleagues. How has your story shaped your beliefs and practices about teaching and learning? What are deliberate and thoughtful next steps you might commit to taking in your continuing journey?
3. As our beliefs are reflected in our daily practices, what can you do to ensure that you and your colleagues develop shared beliefs that align with research-based practices and that you select and use resources in support of those beliefs and practices—not as the driving instructional force? (Review pages 113–119.) Include the role of professional reading and becoming a teacher-leader in your discussion.

Expert Teaching Through Frontloading: Excellence 2

1. What is frontloading (defined on page 88 and discussed in this section), and what is its role in successful teaching, assessing, and learning? How can effective frontloading encourage students’ depth of thinking and independence as inquirers and learners?
2. Discuss the Optimal Learning Model (OLM) on pages 136–146. How can you apply the OLM to ensure that your frontloading leads students to greater competence, confidence, and independence? How can effectively applying the OLM or a similar learning model lead to more responsive and purposeful teaching and assessment? Discuss the role of shared experiences, such as shared reading and writing, in making it possible for all learners to equitably contribute and experience success.
EXCELLENCE (continued)

Listening, Speaking, and Questioning

That Elevate Teaching and Learning: Excellence 3

1. Discuss how you might become a more active listener and promote more meaningful and thoughtful speaking opportunities for students in all subject areas.

2. How could you use the OLM to guide you and your students to have richer discussions and become more accomplished public speakers? Why does this matter?

3. Review “Ask More Vital Questions” on pages 161–167, and discuss how the questions we ask play a critical role in students’ engagement, curiosity, levels of thinking, and achievement. What are some ways you might improve or enhance your questioning techniques—as well as your students’—to promote higher-level thinking and more diversity of thought?

Embracing the Reading-Writing Connection: Excellence 4

1. How might you embed the reading-writing connection in daily word study, book recommendations, and across the curriculum to increase students’ reading and writing competencies, engagement, and enjoyment? How can you prioritize sustained reading and writing of worthwhile texts? See Take Action, pages 175–177, to jump-start your discussion.

2. Inspiring stories—your own, your students’, and terrific literature—have the power to humanize us, build a more trusting and collaborative classroom and school culture, and enrich teaching and learning. How can you make stories and storytelling an integral part of your classroom?

3. Why is reading like a writer crucial for applying the craft of writing—voice, style, language use, writing with a reader in mind, and so on? Can we educators effectively teach writing craft without reading like writers ourselves? Review the Take Action section on pages 185–186 for some ideas.

4. Discuss how writing free-verse poetry can be an “equalizer” for students who struggle with language, academics, and confidence as learners. Review the Take Action section on pages 188–190 for suggestions for making poetry integral to teaching and learning for all students.

Teaching Readers: Excellence 5

1. Examine your own reading habits and behaviors. If you do not yet consider yourself “a reader,” what might you do to change that? Evaluate the reading culture of your classroom and school. What messages are being sent to students about reading? How can you ensure that you are teaching readers and not just teaching reading? Why does that matter?

2. Review the extensive section on reading aloud. Ensure that you are applying the research on the benefits of reading aloud in your classroom/school and sharing that research with students’ families and caregivers.

3. Discuss how and where you view independent reading as part of teaching readers. Why is students’ self-selection of books they can and want to read—and self-monitoring for understanding—crucial to their reading engagement, love of reading, and success as readers and thinkers? Review the section on independent reading, pages 204–209. What might you add, remove, or change in your teaching of...
readers? Are you relying on one-on-one reading conferences (see pages 222–225) and not levels to ensure that they are enjoying and comprehending texts? Is your guided reading program workable, and is its main goal a temporary scaffold—that is, does responsibly gradually shift the bulk of the reading work to readers?

4. Examine the texts you are using and have available in language arts, across the curriculum, and in your classroom library. Are the texts carefully selected for engagement, equity, relevance, diversity, accuracy, and quality literature (with a balance of nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and more), and do they also include digital texts, reputable online sites, and multimedia?

Teaching Writers: Excellence 6

1. Think about what your writing focus is with your students. Are you having students write for real-world audiences and purposes and teaching revision and editing in service to that end? Or do you prioritize teaching skills, grammar, and rigid writing forms to fulfill standards requirements and other mandates? Which approach is more likely to lead to writers who are engaged, clear communicators who write to clarify thinking, persuade, entertain, and so on? Do you believe you can teach writing well if you do not see yourself as a writer? Discuss.

2. Why is applying the OLM, or a similar learning model, particularly important for teaching writers?

3. How can you incorporate public writing conferences into your teaching, and how might you and your students benefit? Review pages 243–248 and discuss what strategies and actions you can implement in conferring with students.
• If, as research and experience indicate, educational inequality is one of the most crucial issues many underperforming students face today, what actions can you and your colleagues take to change that troubling dynamic?
• How are you ensuring that you are hearing and honoring the voices of all your students?
• Is principled, “best practices” teaching—supported by research and valid experience—your first intervention for all students? If not, why not? What changes might you and your school make, and what’s your most critical priority?

Making High Expectations an Instructional Reality: Equity 1

1. What actions are you taking to recognize, celebrate, and encourage diversity as a positive factor in your classroom, school, and neighborhood?
2. How do you define and “implement” curriculum? In one sense, everything we do in the classroom is curriculum, as our decisions on how and what to teach emanate not just from curriculum documents, district requirements, and standards but also from our thinking about these requisites and how we interpret and carry them out—including the choices we give students, opportunities for talk and small-group work, grading, and so on. How are you adjusting your curriculum to advantage all students?
3. Why is whole-part-whole instruction (not part-to-whole) more meaningful and easier for learners to grasp? How do we disadvantage students when we teach part-to-whole, such as skills-in-isolation, without first ensuring that students see the “big picture” of how, when, and where skills fit into a whole, meaningful context.

Reaching All Learners: Equity 2

1. How well do you know your students? How might getting to know them better help instill in them a determination to learn? What are some actions you are already taking and new actions you might consider taking?
2. Self-evaluate the effectiveness of the feedback you and others give your students. Is the feedback timely, kind, necessary, useful, and actionable? Review the Take Action related to giving feedback on pages 296–298. Do you first comment on learners’ strengths when giving feedback? Are students and teachers learning to give self-feedback and set their own meaningful goals?
3. Are English Language Learners in your classroom and school getting the equitable education they deserve? Review “Twelve Essential Actions to Help English Language Learners Succeed” on pages 303–304. Adopt and apply what you can to suit your context and to promote optimal learning for ELLs and all students.

Applying Responsible Assessment: Equity 3

1. What are your beliefs and your school’s beliefs about assessment and use of data? How are you bringing sanity, equity, and transparency to your assessment practices despite the pressure of
standardized tests and other non-negotiable mandates? If needed, what changes might you consider making to put students before standards and testing?

2. Discuss how formative assessments—used effectively—can inform your daily teaching and positively affect student engagement, learning, and achievement. Review pages 314–317.

3. Look closely at how data are being used in your school. Are you triangulating the data to ensure accurate evidence about the learner? Are rubrics being used appropriately and responsibly? Are grading practices fair? Review and discuss pages 322–329.

4. Why is self-assessment, a type of formative assessment, crucial for optimal learning? How and when might you include more self-assessments?

**Developing Self-determining Learners: Equity 4**

1. Evaluate yourself as a self-determining learner. (See pages 335–337). If we educators are not self-determining learners, how can we foster that quality in our students? Why is becoming a self-determining learner more important than ever in the twenty-first century?

2. Review how you can set goals for, with, and by students that make it more likely they will become self-determining learners? See “Purposeful Learning Goals” on page 346 and discuss how to ensure that—as much as possible—goal setting leads to transfer and/or transformation of learning, not just completion of a teacher-directed assignment.

3. What are you doing to help students acquire a strong will to learn, develop stamina, and recognize failure as part of learning?

**Advocating for Students: Equity 5**

1. How are the resources and practices you employ and advocate for respecting and benefiting all students? Discuss the important roles of an expert teacher and librarian, well-stocked classroom and school libraries, school funding, and more in creating equity in teaching and learning opportunities for students. How do the tests and assessments you use help or hinder students’ progress? How might you advocate for and implement fairer practices?

2. Discuss how technology use is expanding or narrowing a meaningful curriculum in your classroom and school. What does research and experience tell us about effective technology use in schools? Review “Use Technology Judiciously,” pages 364–369, as part of your discussion. In your classroom and school, who’s controlling the learning? Is it the technology, or is it the learner and/or teacher? What new cautions or actions might be advisable?

3. How can music and the arts be an equalizing force for encouraging all students’ abilities and preparation for life? How do you, or how might you, utilize popular culture platforms—social media, hip-hop, raps, short videos, podcasts, and multimedia—as teaching, learning, and presentation tools?

4. How are you including families in ensuring potentially high results for all children? Discuss inclusive and welcoming practices you use or might use for an optimal partnership. (Also, review “Make Parents Partners” on pages 19–22.)
The Need for Civic Engagement

1. Why is civic knowledge and engagement a necessity for any democracy to thrive and survive? What steps must we take to ensure that we are graduating responsible citizens who take their civic responsibilities seriously?

2. Discuss the significance of the quote by former Supreme Court justice David Souter, “An ignorant people can never remain a free people,” and view/listen to Souter’s thinking in the short video. (See page 390.) What do his comments mean for our teaching, students’ learning, and democracy?