

Chapter 2

The Cardinal Questions

“Sometimes you gotta go back to the beginning to learn.”
—KRS-One, *Know Thy Self*

Accountability is the key word in this chapter. We are reminded of a Charlie Brown cartoon where Charlie tells his friends, “I taught my dog to whistle.” Snoopy sits there as the friends gather around spellbound and nothing happens. Annoyed, his friends state, “We thought you said your dog could whistle.” Charlie quickly retorts, “I said I taught my dog to whistle, I didn’t say he learned!” While this may be Charlie Brown’s answer, it is not an acceptable response for educators faced with the challenge of NCLB’s requirement of closing the achievement gap, which calls for schools to have all students reach proficient levels in reading, math and science by the year 2014.

When a student is not learning we must explore all the instructional possibilities instead of assuming it is a problem within the student.

Let’s first think about how this vignette ties into teacher accountability. Whether related to one’s work, gaining knowledge or simply for pleasure, reading is a skill that is learned and improves with practice. There is much talk about using high-quality, scientifically-based instruction to close the gap that exists between high and low achieving students. This talk refers to what and how teachers are instructing the students in their classrooms.

Typically, educators implement the reading protocol that is provided to them by their administrator, and use ideas from their personal “bag of tricks.” Sometimes this practice or program for teaching reading works and sometimes it doesn’t. Most times we don’t know that the approach is not working until it is too late! Once that happens, inevitably a referral is made to obtain out-of- classroom support.

Hence, it is time for a paradigm shift. Instead of waiting to find out if a student is learning we must assess progress early and often. Once we discover a student is not learning we must explore and implement alternative methods of instruction in the classroom instead of referring out under the assumption that the problem lies with the student.

The research that is readily available has provided much clarity in regard to what works, so there is no reason to apply practices arbitrarily or make referrals unnecessarily. The real tricks are:

- determining if all students are receiving the most effective core reading instruction,
- deciding which students may need additional instructional intervention,
- choosing and successfully implementing the most appropriate techniques.

Keeping all this in mind, the ultimate educational accountability question becomes, “Can *all* of our students read and comprehend for whatever purpose they deem necessary?” If the answer to this question is not a resounding “yes,” then the next logical question is, “Why not?” One really cannot even begin to answer this question without first addressing one’s own personal pedagogical content knowledge of reading. Our experience tells us that knowing one’s pedagogical strengths is as important a component of successful instruction as the research we consult.

To focus on this topic we have constructed what we call **Cardinal Questions** to use as a thinking framework. We think of these questions as having two functions: one, for teacher self-assessment, to discover and reflect on personal strengths; two, to utilize the same questions to assess the strengths of students.

Before proceeding to the Cardinal Questions, let’s quickly address the misconception that teachers know everything. We are fully aware that deep understanding and wide application of a new practice does not come naturally. Society and the profession itself must acknowledge that teaching requires life-long learning which is only achieved by making

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a commitment to stay abreast of new information through reading, questioning, staff development, collaboration, and coaching. One cannot teach what one does not know and has not practiced. And you cannot know what you don't know until you engage in self-reflection.

"Teacher, know thyself." We encourage you to evaluate yourself and your pedagogical content knowledge; we suggest you begin this investigation by applying these Cardinal Questions:

- 1. What do you know** about your content area — in this case, about culturally responsive, research-based reading instruction? In other words, **what do you know** about teaching reading and its five component skills : phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension plus motivation?
- 2. What do you do** about meeting the learning needs of all of your students? In this case, while teaching reading, **what do you do** about meeting the learning needs of your students?
- 3. How do you learn?** To meet your optimal learning needs:
 - What environmental preferences do you have (i.e., noise, lighting, chairs, workspace, temperature)?
 - What is your preferred sensory input modality (i.e., visual, auditory, motor)?
 - How are you smart (i.e., logic smart, music smart, body smart, picture smart, word smart, people smart, self smart, nature smart)?
- 4. How do you approach or react to an unfamiliar task?** When you learn something new, how are you affected by:
 - your cognitive style (i.e., impulsive/reflective, global/particular, leveler/sharpener, synthetic/analytic, inductive/deductive, concrete/abstract, random/sequential)?
 - your personality type (i.e., introvert/extrovert, sensory/intuitive, thinking/feeling, judging/perceiving)?
 - your motivation to learn (i.e., intrinsic, extrinsic)?
- 5. What will you do with the information you gain from answering the first four questions?**

Once you have judiciously answered these questions, share the information with your colleagues in faculty meetings or study groups. Synthesize the knowledge of the entire staff so as a professional learning community you can support and learn from each other, and even more importantly, ensure a strong core reading program in every classroom.

“Teachers, know thy students.” Ultimately you will want to apply the Cardinal Question thinking framework while getting to know your students. The Cardinal Questions that lead to a better understanding of a student’s ability are:

- 1. What does the student know?**
- 2. What does the student do?**

(Questions #1 and # 2 are revisited with more specificity in the chapters on the five precepts of reading as well as the motivation chapter.)

- 3. How does the student learn?** To meet the student’s optimal learning needs:
 - What are the student’s environmental preferences (i.e., noise, lighting, chairs, workspace, temperature)?
 - What is the student’s preferred sensory input modality (i.e., visual, auditory, motor)?
 - How is the student smart (i.e., logic smart, music smart, body smart, picture smart, word smart, people smart, self smart, nature smart)?
- 4. How does the student approach or react to an unfamiliar task?** When the student is learning something new, how are his/her behaviors affected by:
 - cognitive style (i.e., impulsive/reflective, global/particular, leveler/sharpener, synthetic/analytic, inductive/deductive, concrete/abstract, random/sequential)?
 - personality type (i.e., introvert/extrovert, sensory/intuitive, thinking/feeling, judging/perceiving)?
 - motivation to learn (i.e., intrinsic, extrinsic)?
- 5. What will you do with the knowledge gained from answering the previous four questions?**