



Glean Education's Research to Practice Podcast Episode #19 - Jade Wexler (University of Maryland)

Jade Wexler: Some of the best ways to get kids engaged is good instruction. If you are using data to drive your instruction so that your instruction is not way up here above kids' heads and it's not way below, and it's sort of right in that sweet spot of meeting their targeted needs, these kids are going to be motivated. They want to learn. They want to soak up content.

Jessica Hamman: Hi, and welcome to Glean Education's Research to Practice podcast, where we talk to education experts from around the world about their latest work and bring their fascinating findings out from the journal pages and into your classroom.

Jessica Hamman: First, a word from our sponsors.

Speaker 3: Go ahead and state your name and title and what you enjoy about working here.

Marc Lonergan: My name is Marc Lonergan. I am the director of operations at Heggerty, and what I love most about working at Heggerty is feeling that what I do is truly making a difference in our children and growing them to become stronger readers.

Speaker 5: Heggerty's daily phonemic awareness curriculum is used by over 450 school districts nationwide. Learn how you can get started at haggerty.org. That's H-E-G-G-E-R-T-Y dot O-R-G.

Jessica Hamman: I'm Jessica Hamman, and today we're thrilled to welcome Dr. Jade Wexler. Dr. Wexler is an associate professor of special education at the University of College Park, Maryland. Dr. Wexler has published more than 45 peer reviewed articles and is co-author of three books focused on adolescent literacy and serves on several editorial boards, such as Reading Research Quarterly, Learning Disabilities Quarterly, and Teaching Exceptional Children. Dr. Wexler is the co-director of the Language and Literacy Research Center at the University of Maryland, which aims to promote collaborative research in literacy and language among students and researchers. She currently serves as principal investigator of two federally funded grants supporting work on aim coaching, an adaptive literacy intervention coaching model for middle school instructional leaders.

Jessica Hamman: Today we'll be talking with her about a few of her articles and specifically on one that talks about improving instruction in



co-taught classrooms to support reading comprehension. Jade Wexler, thank you so much for being here.

Jade Wexler: Thank you for having me.

Jessica Hamman: I'm so thrilled to talk to you because we've been doing a number of podcasts on the topic of reading comprehension, and I'm really interested in the focus of reading comprehension and literacy skills in middle and high school students. Can you tell me a little bit about the background behind this body of research that you've been working on and we'll focus in more narrowly on some of the articles I mentioned afterwards.

Jade Wexler: So this body of work was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences. It was a development and innovation grant called Project CALI: Content-Area Literacy Instruction, and my co-PIs and I, Devin Kearns and Chris Lemons, we went into this proposal at the time when we were writing it as kind of looking at co-teaching as something that's prevalent, especially, at the middle school level. It's one of those things where everybody kind of knows it's happening, but we're not particularly co-teaching researchers, so we are not advocating for it or against it.

Jade Wexler: What we did is we saw it and we saw it as an opportunity to sort of capitalize on the co-teaching tier one content area classroom as a way that we could intensify the tier one classroom for struggling readers and students with disabilities who typically spend most of



their day in the gen-ed setting. And when there are co-taught classrooms in a school, a lot of times students with disabilities and struggling readers are in those classrooms. So we kind of saw it as a way to bring a tier two into a tier one by teaching co-teachers not only how to collaborate better together, but specifically to integrate a set of evidence based literacy practices into their co-taught content area instruction.

Jessica Hamman: So co-teaching is different in middle and high school than it may be in elementary school classrooms. Can you explain what co-teaching looks like in middle and high school grades?

Jade Wexler: Typically, it's a general education teacher and a special education teacher working together to provide instruction to students with and without disabilities in the co-taught classroom. At the middle school level, we found that most of the co-taught instruction is occurring in English language arts and often in math, actually. And this is actually something that we really struggled with is finding the co-taught classrooms. Again, it's that thing that we know is happening, but when you go to the school districts, a lot of times they don't have a very systematic way of knowing or stipulating who uses this service delivering model when and how much. And so a lot of times it's left up to individual schools and all of that.

Jade Wexler: But typically, we find that there are co-teachers. It could be in science, it could be in social studies, could be in English, could be in math, and they're working together to intensify the instruction. And typically, the special ed teacher is in there because they have



this specialized instruction background, and they're able to intensify the content area instruction that is already happening in the classroom that the content area teacher is presumably an expert on.

Jessica Hamman: This article that we are going to chat about today, *Improving Instruction in Co-taught Classrooms to Support Reading Comprehension*, it gives a wonderful overview of methods for improving instruction and research based practices to implement. Can you tell us a little bit about the project and what those articles offer to teachers?

Jade Wexler: So what we did is we talked to the editors of *Intervention in School and Clinic*, and I was the guest editor for this special issue where they let our entire research team essentially write every article in the special issue, and that doesn't normally happen. Usually there's a topic and you get articles from a number of different researchers and put it together for teachers. But we talked to them about the fact that what we did with this project is we created professional development for content area co-teachers, gen ed and special ed teachers, and we taught them how to implement what we called this literacy instructional framework. The CALI Instructional Framework included practices, or sort of a routine, that we wanted them to implement in their classroom as much as possible. The routine was a set of evidence based practices that we essentially packaged for them and gave them guidelines and tried to make as simple as possible.



Jade Wexler: These practices are curriculum agnostic, so they can be integrated into any content area. So English, science, social studies. Even math, although we didn't work with any math teachers at the time. And could be used to enhance the literacy instruction that kids were getting on a particular text that the teachers had to teach anyways because it was in their curriculum, or text that we taught them how to pick that would align with a topic that they were teaching.

Jade Wexler: So there's a text that we would teach them how to select. A lot of them used ReadWorks or some other popular places to go get text. And we would teach the teachers how to systematically provide background knowledge on that text before having kids read it, how to give evidence based vocabulary instruction. So that's the world piece of the background knowledge. The word piece is the vocabulary instruction.

Jade Wexler: And then we taught them how to teach the students a routine for going through that text, reading through that text, and coming up with the main idea of each section through a peer mediated reading routine that they would go through.

Jade Wexler: And then the final thing that we did is we taught teachers to use data, and in this case it was mostly informal data that the kids would generate from getting the gist of each section, which is an evidence based practice from Collaborative Strategic Reading, so Sharon Vaughn and Janette Klingner, and we integrated that into the set of practices. So they read the text, came up with the gist or the main idea. The teachers would look at those main idea



statements or gist statements, and they would make decisions about students and decide which students were still struggling with this skill, because this is a pretty universal skill, right? Which students were doing okay, and just needed more practice, and which students were ready to move on, because presumably in these co-taught classrooms, you have typically developing achievers and then you have kids who are really struggling. And then we taught the co-teachers how to implement a station teaching lesson where they would individualize instruction for these different kids as they moved in different groups.

Jessica Hamman: Is that unique, to ask teachers who are content area teachers to implement explicit and direct comprehension and vocabulary instruction, which kind of are the literacy instruction domains and not necessarily content area domains?

Jade Wexler: It really depends. I think we've come a long way, and at the university level, a lot of pre-service programs are trying to integrate more instruction into their pre-service programs for content teachers to teach them that you're not just a science teacher, you are a literacy teacher too. There are also national standards out there now that basically say that same thing.

Jade Wexler: However, we still find through a lot of observation research that we've done, and in fact, at the beginning of Project CALI, we did a large systematic observation study to look at what is actually happening in these co-taught classrooms in terms of collaboration and co-teaching models. Are they all team teaching? Is one teacher



leading instruction all the time with one teacher being subordinate? And what kinds of literacy practices are happening in these co-taught content area classrooms? And what we found in study is that unfortunately, the teachers were missing a lot of opportunities to integrate literacy instruction into these content area classrooms.

Jade Wexler:

And so what we saw was actually a lot of the time teachers were reading aloud to the students, maybe students were reading on their own silently, but there was no co-occurring literacy instruction happening. So these teachers were not providing background knowledge before kids read a text, they were not providing evidence-based vocabulary instruction or giving the kids strategies for getting the main idea. So all the things that we ended up putting in the CALI PD, we were not seeing. Typically what we saw was that sometimes there was not even a lot of interaction with kids with disabilities. So that specialized instruction, the whole reason that in theory you have a special ed teacher in this classroom, it was not occurring. And so we wanted to teach these teachers a systematic way to integrate these practices and to individualize and intensify for kids who were still struggling along the way.

Jade Wexler:

Unfortunately, a lot of times what we see in co-taught classrooms, and this goes way back historically, is that the special ed teacher becomes a kind of a subordinate role. They're the behavior management person, they're maybe not even in the classroom. They're out doing the paperwork, they're acting as an aid instead of capitalizing on these specialized skills that that teacher has. And so we really wanted to bring that role to the forefront for these teachers.



Jade Wexler: I should also mention that for the literacy instructional practices that we taught teachers, we are not saying that a science teacher or a social studies teacher has to learn how to teach phonics in that class. That would not be appropriate, especially at the secondary level. Maybe there's a couple things they could do with multisyllabic word study instruction to kind of sneak in. But for the most part, we're talking about vocabulary and comprehension practices, and simple things that they can do. Not a million strategies that they have to weave in, but a very simple set of evidence-based literacy practices that they can use to enhance the reading that kids are going to need to read and comprehend, and also maybe weaving in one or two things that they can help model for kids that they can do on their own. Like, how do I actually get the main idea of text?

Jade Wexler: I always use this example in some of the talks that I do that one time I was doing an intervention study in a juvenile incarcerated setting, and we were teaching the kids how to get the main idea using the gist strategy. And I was talking to this one gentleman and he said to me, "I mean, I don't know. They always tell us to get the main idea, but no one actually shows us. Like, how do you get the main idea?" And I thought, that is so true.

Jade Wexler: We often, in whatever content area, ask them to get the main idea, but we don't explicitly break it down and of them how to get the mean idea. And maybe we do in a reading intervention class, but I can guarantee you that Joe Smith who learns this great reading strategy in their reading intervention class and then goes to social



studies and the social studies teacher says, "Okay, now read this and tell me the main idea," doesn't automatically always say, "Oh, I learned this great strategy in my reading intervention class. Let me generalize that strategy and use it in here." No, the social studies teacher also needs to be able to model that same strategy.

Jessica Hamman: Yeah. So interesting. And it's a reminder to these content area teachers that increasing literacy skills leads to better comprehension, and the whole point is having them understand this content area. And so if we can support their literacy skills, that we support their understanding of the concepts you're trying to teach them. So it really goes hand in hand.

Jessica Hamman: You had mentioned in this initial overview article that there are three research backed recommendations for supporting instruction, and some of these you've already gone over. So the first was encouraging direct and explicit vocab and comprehension instruction. The second is opportunities for extended text instruction, which you talked about with asking teachers to download from ReadWorks and use text as an area for conversation. And the third was strategies to improve motivation. Can you talk a little bit about the strategies that are suggested to improve motivation and engagement in the classroom in these settings?

Jade Wexler: Yeah. Those recommendations come from the Institute of Education Sciences. They put out a number of practice briefs for practitioners. I highly recommend that anybody goes... You can just Google practice guides IES, and you'll come up with a number of



them from elementary school on up. That adolescent literacy guide was done back in 2008, and there were a number of recommendations that came amount of that. And I can, as a side note, tell you that there is a panel right now working, I'm actually on the panel, where we're updating that practice guide. So I would recommend to anybody listening to check back with IES and, I don't know when it will be out, but in the next year or so there, it will be updated.

Jade Wexler:

But as far as those recommendations, we took those and used them as a guide for that instructional framework that we sort of packaged for teachers. So in the CALI Practices that we translate in those articles in the special issue, you will notice that they are all aligned with those recommendations. So we teach the teachers, again, how to do the world knowledge and the word knowledge, so that's that explicit vocabulary instruction, right? And the background knowledge. And then the direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction. That's teaching them how to get the main idea. The text based discussion is really important. And then the motivation one was sort of one that's always kind of out to the side and we never know whether that's sort of part of the other ones or a separate one.

Jade Wexler:

What I tell my students is that there are specific things that you can do to enhance motivation. You can have kids do goal setting. You can have them have some choices on things. And if you look at that guide, it lays a lot of other things out. But the one thing that I really like to focus on is that some of the best ways to get kids engaged is good instruction. If you are using data to drive your instruction so that your instruction is not way up here above kids' heads, and it's



not way below kids' heads, and it's right in that sweet spot of meeting their targeted needs, and you're using explicit instruction that includes modeling, guided practice, feedback, lots of opportunities to respond, these kids are going to be motivated. They want to learn. They want to soak up content, about anything and everything. And I have worked with students in the juvenile incarcerated setting, non-incarcerated settings, and all of them have told me and exhibit the fact that they want to learn content.

Jade Wexler:

So it's our job to really look at the data and think about what do I need to do to meet their needs? And I think a lot of times, when I teach the assessment class I've said before, sometimes we look at the data and we think, ugh, they're not getting it. This kid doesn't know this. But try to train ourselves to look at that and instead think, what is it about this data that's telling me about what I'm doing that's not meeting their needs? And how do I need to adapt my instruction to meet their needs? And it's a really slight shift, but I think it's really important.

Jessica Hamman:

And I love the fact that you mentioned data, because we don't really know if things are working unless we do database decision making along the way, so I love that incorporation. Tell me what your findings were and where you're headed next with this.

Jade Wexler:

We are working on publishing what we call our main effects paper, where we did a randomized control trial where we randomly assigned co-teaching pairs to getting the CALI intervention. So the CALI professional development, and then their students and their



classes got the instruction and that literacy instructional framework to business as usual, so pairs that did not get that. And this was an underpowered randomized control trial, so we had maybe to some people a smaller number of teachers in the study, but enough so that we were really excited about the outcomes. We got typically significant effects actually on teacher outcomes. The teachers enhanced their knowledge and skills. And we gave teachers actually one of the same measures that we created, it was called the MIM, the main idea measure, where we asked teachers to read some texts and come up with the main idea. And this very proximal to our intervention.

Jade Wexler:

It was proximal to what we taught the teachers to do, and what we taught the teachers to teach the kids. And interestingly enough, the teachers improved a lot on their own ability to come up with the main idea. And so you think about, that's really important because how can we expect teachers to teach all this if they're not equipped to do it? So we were excited about that. I mean, after all, this was a professional development study, so we had great teacher outcomes with that.

Jade Wexler:

Also, a couple other positive effects on things like sense of perceived effectiveness as a teacher and perceived effectiveness of one's co-teacher. So a lot more trust in each other as they each began to learn to take on specific roles in the classroom, and a lot of good evidence of social validity for them.



Jade Wexler:

And then in terms of the students, we were very excited because with PD studies, it's really hard to get effects on student outcomes, because we're teaching the teachers and that has to trickle down. Also, it's equally as hard to get positive effects for kids at the secondary level. We know that many of them have been struggling for so long that an intervention to catch them up and close that gap is really going to take a lot. And this didn't happen. The dosage of what they actually got wasn't that much over the entire year, if you really break it down. And the kids improved, they had statistically significant effects on one aspect of that main idea measure, which was that they were able to better identify. So when you teach them the main idea, you teach them to identify who or what is the most important information about a certain section of text, who or what about that text, and then what's the most important information about that who or what in the text. They were able to really improve on the most important information about the who or what. So if Bill Gates was our who or what about a section of text, our who obviously, and the fact that he was able to eradicate Polio was the most important information, they were able to better extract that information after getting the instruction from the teachers. And that was really exciting.

Jessica Hamman:

So what research are you focused on next?

Jade Wexler:

I have two new grants that I'm really excited about. One is funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, and we are refining and going to rigorously test this aim coaching model. And the other one is funded by OSEP, the Office of Special Education Programs, and it's called a model demonstration grant, and we're also studying



aspects of aim coaching, and I'll tell you about that in a minute. But the goal with that is to provide professional development to schools to get them to implement aim coaching, and study issues that have to do with what happens when you implement it under routine conditions.

Jade Wexler: So you're sort of scaling it up in the hands of practitioners. You give them intensive support and then back off and give them the responsibility and look at issues related to social validity and feasibility and things like that. So IES, my co-PIs are Elizabeth Swanson and Greg Roberts at University of Texas at Austin, and OSEP, my co-PI is Colleen Reutebuch at University of Texas at Austin. So we're working closely with them. And aim coaching is an adaptive intervention coaching model. Again, we're trying to develop guidance for coaches, and who a coach is I know differs in schools, so kind of instructional leaders for how they can take a MTSS model and apply it to teachers.

Jade Wexler: And so we have this model where a coach will provide professional development on a set of evidence-based literacy practices. Again, it's a very simple set. These are called PACT, Promoting Adolescents Comprehension of Text, which came out of Sharon Vaughn's group at the University of Texas at Austin. And so they provide PD and then they provide standardized protocol support to all teachers. So the same amount and type of planning and class support, reflecting, check-ins, things that you would expect. And then at a certain point, and excuse me, I should say during that time they're gathering skill data and will data. So skill being their fidelity of implementation of implementing those practices, and will, we're playing around with how we're measuring that, but we are looking



at them recording information about collaborative effort of teachers.

Jade Wexler: So have they bought in, are they engaged? Are they working closely with the coach? Are they willing to implement this? Do they think that it's important to implement this? And then based on this data during stage one, they come to a progress monitoring point where they look at the data and they decide which teachers have high skill. Those are teachers that we think we can back off a little. And we're also thinking about resources here as well. The coach only has so much time, so where do they spend their time to get the biggest bang for their buck, with the ultimate goal of everybody implementing these practices. And then you have teachers who maybe have lower skill, but they have high will. So they're not quite there yet, but they want to try.

Jade Wexler: And these are teachers that we have a couple of options of what they'll do during that stage two intervention, so the next intervention when they sort of individualize. And then you also probably have some teachers who have lower skill and lower will for a variety of reasons. And so what do you do with those teachers? Can we bring some of them back in? We're actually looking at some of the school connectedness literature for students, so how can we engage teachers the same way that we engage students? And some maybe just aren't engaged and don't want to do it, and don't see the value in it. Whereas others definitely have legitimate reasons about why they're not being supported or why they don't think something is of value or why they have too much else on their plate, and we're trying to figure out ways to individualize and intervene and then have that cycle repeat for teachers.



Jessica Hamman: I love that approach of supporting teachers. I think they get left behind a lot of times in all of this, but to grow and to nurture them as learners too is really important, and I think that would naturally build will. So I love what you guys are doing in looking at them and investing in teachers as part of this model. That's really exciting.

Jade Wexler: Yeah. Thanks. We're hopeful that it will work

Jessica Hamman: Well, that's awesome. Jade, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today about all you're doing. And like I said, I'm just thrilled to keep an eye on your research projects and your future research, which I'm sure there will be a lot of in the future, too. So thank you for talking to us today and for the work you do.

Jade Wexler: Yeah. Thank you so much for including me. I really appreciate it.

Jessica Hamman: To learn more, visit Dr. Jade Wexler at her faculty page at University of Maryland at College Park, or on Twitter at JadeSpecialED.

Jessica Hamman: To find links to the articles and resources mentioned in this podcast, go to gleaneducation.com/podcast, and access them in the show notes.



Jessica Hamman: Thanks for listening to Glean's Research to Practice podcast. If you're interested in learning more, head over to gleaneducation.com to listen to more episodes, access teacher resources, and join the movement to make in-service teacher education more dynamic and accessible. Bye for now.

Jessica Hamman: This episode was edited and produced by Needa Sharice.

