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Testing in Today's Education: Meeting Standards or Falling Short?

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In today's world, students are being tested in almost all subjects. As early as 3rd grade, students are taking standardized tests in math, English language arts/literacy and science. This testing occurs on a yearly basis and takes up about 2 weeks of instructional time. These tests not only measure student knowledge, they measure students' ability to take a test, students' ability to read and take apart a question and the tests have also been used to measure teacher effectiveness. In the state of Rhode Island, the PARCC test (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) is the standardized test that students take. I spent my year student teaching in a 5th grade classroom full of students who would have to take the PARCC test. I had the opportunity to find different ways to teach students the skills they need to do well on these standardized tests. In 2016, only 41.4% of 5th graders in Rhode Island were considered proficient or exceeding proficiency on the English Language Arts section of the PARCC test. That number dropped to 34% of students meeting or exceeding proficiency on the mathematics section of the PARCC test. This led to my research into, if the test measures what it's supposed to and we have highly qualified teachers teaching these students, maybe we need to find different ways to provide the instruction to students to help them meet the standards.

The first resource I looked at for teachers is a program called Zearn. Zearn is a math instruction program based off of Engage NY and Eureka Math. Zearn offers a personalized curriculum for each student through the use of Independent Digital Lessons and Small Group/Large Group Instruction. Students have the opportunity to explore mathematical concepts through engaging videos, guided practice and independent practice. With Zearn, students move through lessons at their own pace taking as much time or as little time as they need to complete the online lesson and the paperwork that accompanies it. Each video lesson is paired with "student notes" that the students do along with the video, a problem set with questions geared towards the concept the student just learned, homework that goes along with the concept and an exit ticket to assess student knowledge before moving on. Zearn can also be used for full class or small group instruction. Zearn provides teachers with the resources to teach full lessons without using a computer. Having the resources

to either teach a lesson, or reinforce a video lesson for those students who need extra help allows all students to get the individualized attention they need. Through research done by Zearn, it is clear that students benefit from this kind of instruction. Students score higher on all aspects of mathematics when they are engaged in this higher-level thinking. Students using Zearn have been found to score above state averages as opposed to students not using Zearn who typically score below the state averages.

Another resource for teachers to use in their classroom is IXL. IXL is another computer-based program that gives students knowledge they need to know to be proficient on a test or in their state's standards. IXL offers questions on different standards for every grade level in every core content area. Students can go on IXL and click a standard that they want to practice. IXL will generate questions for that student to answer. If the student answers correctly, he/she moves on to the next question. If a student answers incorrectly, IXL provides the student with a review of the question, a remember section that explains the vocabulary word that the student needs to understand in order to answer the question correctly and a solve section that solves the question correctly for the student. IXL also monitors student learning through data that is recorded and sent to the student's teacher. Teachers get reports on all of their students as the students go through the IXL program. Teachers will be sent reports to help them discover student strengths and weaknesses as well as data that can help guide instruction and focus on the students' needs. Research has shown that IXL, much like Zearn, is another resource that will help students score higher on standardized tests. It was shown that in ELA, if students use IXL on a regular basis, learning one new skill a week, the percentage of students meeting proficiency would increase by 9.94%. This research has shown that students who have access to IXL in their classroom typically score higher on standardized tests than students who do not have access to IXL.

Through my research and my student teaching experience I found that there are many different ways to teach students the information they need to be prepared for the tests they will take. Though the tests vary across state lines, the information that students need to know is, for the most part, standardized. With 42 states

adopting the Common Core State Standards, most students across the United States are held to the same standards. It is our job as educators to find the best way to provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to meet or exceed expectations. There are many different ways to do this and I hoped to find just a few that I could trust to use with my current students and in my future classrooms.

I found that using Zearn in my classroom is one of the best ways to teach students the mathematical skills and knowledge they need to know. In about 45 minutes students can learn a concept, learn the skills and knowledge associated with that concept, go through guided practice answering questions regarding the concept and get independent practice with the concept. One of the best parts about Zearn is that it explains “why” to the students. The students are learning the skills and knowledge on a concept and they’re learning the “why” or the reasoning behind that concept. Through just one 45-minute lesson the students are learning multiple different pieces of information that will allow them to be proficient in the standards and therefore proficient on any exam they take.

IXL is another resource that I incorporated into my classroom. While Zearn was a resource I used almost every day, I used IXL on a more sporadic basis. IXL was a resource that I used for the “what do I do when I’m done” question. Students can go right onto IXL, click a standard and immediately have a list of questions available for them. The questions not only ask students to work at a higher-level of thinking, they also mirror what students would see on any standardized test. I also like the instruction that IXL provides when a student answers a question incorrectly. I think that instruction is the most beneficial piece about IXL. I believe that the explanation of why an answer is correct or incorrect is the best way to really get students to understand the concept. Since IXL does not do that with every question, I would use IXL more as an extra resource for students to practice their skills as opposed to a program like Zearn that I would use to give instruction to students.

When I first started working with this project and the Common Core State Standards I didn’t know how many different resources were out there for teachers to teach students knowledge and skills. I was used to coming up with a lesson plan with the help of a cooperating teacher or a “teachers pay teachers” account. I hadn’t

expanded my horizons to the different programs that teachers could use involving technology or lessons that were pre-made for students. Researching these different resources and implementing them into my own classroom gave me a whole new view upon teaching. I learned the place that technology has in a classroom, and I learned that sometimes all it takes is a new approach to information for a student to understand what he/she needs to. Through this research I have found that if you look around there are multiple resources that you can use to help your students learn information. I've learned that there are ways to personalize instruction for every student without creating 20 different lesson plans. I've learned that sometimes the best way to help students learn the skills they need is to let them move at their own pace and support them in the areas that they need that support.

After doing this project I believe that both IXL and Zearn are resources that benefit students. Both resources provide students with the skills and knowledge they need in order to meet or exceed expectations in reference to standards as well as tests. I had the opportunity to observe my students taking their PARCC tests in the past few weeks. It was clear that my students were more relaxed and more prepared than previous years and other 5th grade classrooms. While other classrooms had 13 students who weren't able to finish the test, my classroom was able to finish the test and answer the questions to the best of their ability. Some of the questions left students with comments like "This is too easy, my answer can't be right," or "Is this really all it is?" That showed me that the instruction they were given in preparation for the test really went above and beyond in getting them ready to take it. Rhode Island has recently decided that they will not be administering the PARCC test anymore but instead moving to a new standardized test. While the tests may have different names, the purpose of both tests will be to assess students' knowledge of standards. That is why I believe instead of looking at a test, or a teacher, we should look at different ways to provide instruction to students. The students will have to meet the same standards no matter what test they are taking so the need for engaging instruction will never go away.