

**UTILIZING THE SIX REALMS OF MEANING IN IMPROVING
CAMPUS STANDARDIZED TEST SCORES THROUGH TEAM
TEACHING AND STRATEGIC PLANNING**

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ABSTRACT

This article will seek to utilize Dr. William Allan Kritsonis' book *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* (2007) as a framework to improve a campus's standardize test scores, more specifically, their TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) scores. Many campuses have an improvement plan, also known as a Campus Improvement Plan, which strives to improve many aspects on their campus, but mostly their standardized test scores. Utilizing the six realms of meaning, symbolics, empirics, esthetics, synnoetics, ethics, and synoptics, schools can better prepare their students on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

Introduction

School districts around the nation develop individual Campus Improvement Plans on each campus in the district yearly based on ways they can improve their campus and make it better for the school, the students, teachers, parents and the community. One major component in schools in the state of Texas is the TAKS test or the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills standardized test is a test that school children take in the state of Texas yearly. Students in Texas take this test in all grades, but have key grades where they must pass the test in order to either move on to the next grade level or graduate from high school. Students enrolled in Elementary Schools across the state of Texas must pass the standardize TAKS test in order to move on to the fourth and sixth grade.

Eleventh grade students take the exit level test and most pass all five parts of the test, Reading, Writing, Mathematics, Social Studies and Science in order to graduate. The students who are unsuccessful in obtaining a score of 2100, passing, on all five parts are given several more opportunities to pass before it is time for their senior class to walk across the stage and graduate; students who do not successfully complete the TAKS test are not permitted to graduate. This has grown to be a monumental task for schools across the state and a tremendous disappointment for the students who do not pass the test. Districts are faced with the challenge of how to reach out to the students in Texas to make them successful on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. School districts and schools throughout the state are always looking for innovative and new ways to improve the students test scores and the schools and districts accountability rating, which is based largely on these test scores.

The fundamental task of any educational institution is to determine the manner of defining and organizing its curriculum. At the outset the obvious fact is that there is more to learn, more to teach, and more to put in the curriculum than time available presents the educators with hard choices. (Kritsonis, 2007, p. v)

Through the strategic planning in team meetings throughout the various departments in a school and faculty meetings, the school can come up with ideas on how to incorporate the realms of meaning in their classrooms to assist each teacher with improving the education of their students, which will ultimately lead to an improvement on standardize test scores. Teaching teams on the school campus must involve a teacher from every discipline in order for the team to be complete. The teams must consist of someone from each of the following departments (if present) on the campus, Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Foreign Language, Career Technology, Fine Arts, Health/Physical Education and Technology Application. There should be at least one teacher from each discipline representing their respective subject area during these team meetings.

Each campus must find a way to meet their mission statement, which is the guiding line for each school and gives them insight of what is needed on their campus improvement plan to improve their school. “An educational institution or school system claiming to be purposive must make some attempt to classify, codify, and

integrate the knowledge base it has selected to become part of its curriculum” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. v). Schools can achieve this goal through *The Ways of Knowing*

Through the Realms of Meaning (2007) by Dr. William Allan Kritsonis.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss ways school districts can meet one of their goals on their campus improvement plan, increasing their standardized test scores, using the six realms of meaning in the classrooms. This article will focus on ways teachers can strategically plan in their team meetings and staff developments and ways to improve learning in the classroom based on the realms of meaning. Utilizing the realms of meaning will help schools; teachers and students reach the goals they have set in their Campus Improvement Plan and their Mission Statement. School districts around the country are faced with accountability ratings and state mandated assessments, which plays a large role in the funding that schools receive.

“Research have recognized the complexities and formidable tasks associated with mandated accountability efforts, particularly in light of the new demands for increased testing, public reporting of results, and opportunities for parents to exercise choice options out of failing schools in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001” (Houle, 2006, p. 144). With this increasing pressure from the state and on the national level, school districts are forced to come up with new and innovative ways to improve student standardized test scores, mainly student scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test. Schools can reach the goals outlined in their Campus Improvement Plan and receive their accountability ratings through constant planning in team meetings and staff/professional developments; coming up with ways to reach out to students to assist them in learning and improving their test scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test.

Symbolics

The first realm, symbolics, “comprises ordinary language, mathematics, and various types of nondiscursive symbolic forms, such as gestures, rituals, rhythmic patterns, and the like” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 11). The realm of symbolics is something that should be discussed and planned out during team meetings and staff development because it encompasses variables that are important to obtain and understand in order for students to be successful on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. Symbolics is a realm that can be successfully utilized in all subject areas in public schools. Symbols are visual representations or visual aides that are common and known by almost everyone around, which can be as simple as your everyday traffic signs to the basic symbols used to govern the daily operations of schools that students are familiar with. These basic symbols, everyday language, etc... can be taught in all disciplines. Teachers getting together and collaborating with one another can ensure that these symbols are being taught in all classes and are universal amongst the disciplines through teachers getting together in team meetings. Professional Learning Communities, also known as PLC’s, have been successful in recent years in adding student success. “Scholarship on professional learning communities indicates that change is more likely to be effective and enduring when those responsible for its

implementation are included in a shared decision-making process” (Scriber, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007, p. 71).

It is imperative that each subject area is on one accord and is speaking a universal language when instructing students. Speaking this universal language to students within a school will ensure that the students are well prepared and equipped for recognizing the language, symbols, etc... when they view the information on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, ultimately improving their success rate.

Empirics

The second realm empirics,

includes the science of the physical world, of living things, and of man. These sciences provide factual descriptions, generalizations, and theoretical formulations and explanations that are based upon observation and experimentation in the world of matter, life, mind, and society. They express meanings as probable empirical truths framed in accordance with certain rules of evidence and verification and making use of specified systems of analytic abstraction. (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 12)

Empirics deal with the sciences in everyday life. The second realm focuses on the subject areas of physical science, biology, physics, psychology, and the social sciences. The second realm relies on factual information and educators must deal with and present all of the facts to the students that they teach. Teachers must gather information that is true and accurate in order to reach and teach their students to be successful on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test.

With this realm of meaning, educators can evaluate the data received from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills to evaluate where their students stand and where improvement is needed.

The reading of measuring instruments is in principle the most simple and certain of operations. It requires only the ability to perceive the position of a pointer on a scale. Being exactly defined and demanding only the most elemental sensory capacities, physical measurements yield data on which agreement by all observers is possible, subject only to errors of measurement that can be progressively reduced by refinement of instruments and repeated observations. (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 181)

Schools gather and evaluate important TAKS data on their students to access where they need to go from there or to examine the numbers that they have projected in their Campus Improvement Plan for the school on their TAKS test. District and the individual school accountability ratings play a major role in the validity of the school and the district. President George W. Bush introduced the No Child Left Behind Act to everyone, placing an extreme amount of pressure on schools and school districts, forcing them to look at the data and essentially come up with a new game plan.

The “No Child Left Behind Act” (NCLB) became a law in 2001. No Child Left Behind has added a new dimension to test based educational account-

ability systems. Features of state and No Child Left Behind accountability are discussed with an emphasis on questions of the validity of inferences that are made about school quality. It is concluded that none of the current approaches

to test-based accountability support causal inferences about school quality. It is also shown that tracking progress toward the important goal of closing gaps in achievement requires more than just monitoring changes in the percentages of students who are proficient. (Linn, 2007, p. 5)

Campuses and individual teaching teams get together on a regular basis to look at the data to formulate a plan to improve student test scores on school wide basis. Evaluating the data will give teaching teams the information needed for the areas where improvement is needed, providing them with pertinent information that they can use in all disciplines to assist students on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test. Empirics is an important realm that is valid for evaluating the data for student success.

Esthetics

Esthetics “contains the various arts, such as music, the visual arts, the arts of movement, and literature. “Meanings in this realm are concerned with the contemplative perception of particular significant things as unique objectifications of ideated subjectives” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 12). Through a school’s Campus Improvement Plan and Mission Statement, schools can look at innovative and creative ways to motivate and stimulate student success in more creative and artistic ways. “Humans teach their children the arts to help them achieve what we consider a well-rounded education, exposing them to new and interesting forms of sensory satisfaction” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 284). Expressiveness lies above and beyond the art, music and physical education classes. Although students are encouraged to express their artistic ways in the arts classes, they are also encouraged to express themselves artistically in other classes.

Writing is one of the major components on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills Test. Writing is an area that can be extended to all subject areas in a school, having students express themselves creatively through their writing skills. “Teachers allow students to spend large amounts of time developing their talents. Teachers encourage student’s expressiveness in order that they may gain confidence and appreciation” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 290). In team meetings, educators may get together to plan ways to assist students with their writing and their creativity. Students may write in all subject areas, expressing themselves and preparing themselves for the writing portion on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test, which is an area that many students struggle with on the test. Students are sometimes not fully able to express themselves creatively on the test, allowing them to become successful and pass the writing portion of the test. “A work of art’s meaning consists in what its organized materials uniquely express” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 302). By having students practice their writing over and in all subject matters; the students become use to the universal language, symbolics, which is needed in order for them to become better writers. When their writing and creativity is practiced in every subject, and taught in the same way that was established in the teacher’s team meeting, they become use to it and their writing creativity becomes second nature to

them. By practicing these symbols and the arts of literature and written expression in all discipline areas, student success rates will soar.

Literature is the art in which language is the medium of esthetic expression. The subject matter of literary study is the individual literary work. To understand literature it must be studied intrinsically to discover the unique patterns of sound, rhythm, meter, and semantic figuration as they are used in the creation of singular unitary compositions. Extrinsic factors may also add valuable insights, but only as they are employed to illuminate the inherent structure of each work itself. (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 362)

With literature and writing being one of the major components of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills that students often struggle with, getting together in these team meetings will put the great minds of educators together to come up with a viable plan with making improvements on this part of the test. "Literature is not intended to be translated literally. As an art, it is meant to have esthetic qualities that invoke thought and intellectually stimulate the reader or listener, even to entertain" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 368). Students struggle with comprehending what they have read and then have trouble translating it into a written expression.

To understand literature, a student must see beyond editing and factual representation. Literature generally exhibits use of images, symbols, metaphors, analogy, double vision, and myth. Can one then say that any works of writing that exhibits these traits is to be considered literature and therefore, a work of art? (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 374)

It all boils down to educators utilizing all six of the realms, as they intertwine together in some form or fashion. When educators work together, student success is the only possible and plausible outcome when used properly throughout all disciplines.

Synnoetics

The fourth realm, synnoetics, "embraces what Michael Polanyi calls 'personal knowledge' and Martin Buber the 'I-Thou' relation. This personal or relational knowledge is concrete, direct, and existential. It may apply to persons, to oneself, or even to things" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 12). It is important with this realm that educators enforce to their students the importance of being responsible for their own actions and taking some responsibility for the choices they make with their education.

Personal knowledge is gained by not only understanding the self, but understanding how others, whom one considers significant, sees one as well. If the people that one considers important shun him or her, then he/she is likely to accept himself/herself as important. Teachers often see this in children and are concerned about the student's self esteem. (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 400)

Once students are taught by their parents and teachers to take responsibility for the actions that they make, it will only strengthen the student all around, making them

more conscious of their actions and their education. Getting the students on board with their education only simplifies what educators have set out to accomplish and making them more aware of what it is that they need in order to achieve success in life.

Ethics

The fifth realm, “ethics, includes moral meanings that express obligation rather than fact, perceptual form or awareness of relation. In contrast with sciences, which are concerned with abstract cognitive understanding, to the arts, which express idealized esthetic perceptions, and to personal knowledge, which reflects inter-subjective understanding, morality has to do with personal conduct that is based on free, responsible, deliberate decision” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 13). This realm is another important realm to teach students in relation to their education as well. Teachers must teach students about academic dishonesty and how to be ethically moral in life. There have been numerous cases about students, as well as teachers, who have exhibited immoral ethics when it comes to the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test.

While it should be very obvious to people that laws are laws and that people must conform to them for the good of society, many people rationalize an excuse to break the “little” laws. What obligation does the teacher have to set an example of total moral adherence to students? How should people react to a teacher who sits in the back of the room at a faculty meeting complaining about the students who talk in class while the principal is addressing the faculty? (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 450)

It is important that every teacher stresses to each and every one of the students that they teach the importance of honesty. We as teachers must lead by example. All teachers and the school must be on one accord when it comes to academic dishonesty. A school will not be unified if one teacher allows students to be dishonest without any consequences and another teacher punishes the student for it, where is the justice in that and what is it teaching our students?

Guilt is a normal human emotion. Most people inherently try to do what they believe is right and are consciously aware of it when they do not. When people do wrong and are punished for it, society generally believes they deserve it. If an existing rule is broken and the child is not punished, what does the child learn about society’s moral convictions or about the importance of the rule? (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 468)

One factor that schools are placed with the responsibility of is educating and ensuring that they are producing citizens that are respectable and honest citizens in society. Teaching teams, along with the entire campus, getting together and deciding on what they will and will not tolerate from students is an important thing to do. Students work more effectively when there is consistency throughout, when they can be reassured that all teachers are going to tolerate or not tolerate the same things in every single class. Students spend much of their day with their teachers, so teachers do in fact, have a great influence on the students they teach and can help them make the right decisions in being ethically moral students and citizens in society.

An idea of what human life can be and ought to be is consistent with the facts of human experience and with the persistent visions of universality, truth, beauty, love, duty, and integrity that have come down in moral traditions of humankind. It states a goal, based on the study of human potentialities, by which the consequences of actions may be assessed, and consequently

provides a solid ground for moral decisions. On this foundation a defensible and productive theory of morals can be established – a theory to which the entire educative endeavor is seen as a moral enterprise aimed at the consummation of human life through the increase in meaning in all its realms. (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 476)

Synoptics

Synoptics is the sixth realm of meaning. Synoptics “refers to meanings that are comprehensively integrative. This realm includes history, religion, and philosophy. These disciplines combine empirical, esthetic, and synnoetic meaning into coherent wholes (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 13). This realm is another realm that is used in a variety of subjects in the education field. There is a saying that says “you must know where you came from before you know where you are going”. Educators must teach kids about the past, so that they will not repeat past mistakes, but make greater strides in life. “Much of people’s understanding of history is based on interpretations of the written or spoken stories of the past, in some cases hundreds or thousands of years ago. Every story has two sides, or more, and the side of the story that is accepted and passed on is generally that of the victor” (Kritsonis, 2007, pg. 498). We not only teach our students what we have learned but we also work as a group to focus on what we have learned from the past.

Through our staff/professional developments and team meetings, we look at ways that we can improve the school for the betterment of the student’s success. Focusing on what was successful in the past and moving towards a post modern approach in the way we develop Campus Improvement Plans, is what is in the best interest of our students. Times have changed, the students have changed and as educators, we have to embrace change for the success of the students we teach.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, student success on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test is based largely on the way teacher teams can successfully relay the much needed information to the students.

The nature of teams in shared governance structures—the fact that teams can organize to either find or solve problems—has important implications for the creative leadership capacity of individual teams. Thus, structures and social dynamics of distributed leadership must be attended to and not taken for granted. Implications include (a) conceptualizing leadership in terms of interaction, (b) needing to help teachers become aware of conversational dynamics that lead to or subvert effective collaboration, and (c) needing to help principals become more aware of their role in helping to establish clarity of purpose and appropriate levels of autonomy, so that teams may engage in

work that leads to effective and innovative problem-finding and problem-solving activities. (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007, p. 67)

Through getting together as a team, in teaching teams and at staff developments, educators can instill in students the tools needed to make them successful in school and in life by utilizing the six realms of meaning in their instruction.

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