Activating the Rigor in Your Pre-K Curriculum Through the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

Young students at partner school district U-46 in Illinois work in teams using the Summarizing Mat resource from the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning. This helps them illustrate their thoughts and engage in a conversation around the curriculum materials.

By: Shakira Fetherolf

Topics Covered

Yes, Pre-K Students *Can* Engage in Deeper Learning

It's a common question: *Can pre-K students really engage in deeper learning?*
The answer—backed by field experience—is yes.

When teachers use the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning™, they quickly see how even the youngest learners can collaborate, think critically, and grow their academic and social skills. In fact, starting this work in pre-K lays a powerful foundation for future success.

This article highlights what deeper learning looks like at the pre-K level—and how schools are using the model to help early childhood classrooms thrive.

A Joyful but Complex Stage of Learning

Pre-K students bring joy, curiosity, and endless potential to the classroom. They're eager to play, talk, and try new things—but they're also still learning how to participate in a school community. This means they need more than just exposure to rigorous content in the curriculum—they need thoughtful support to access that rigorous content.

Even the best pre-K curriculum will fall short if students don't have the self-regulation, communication, and collaboration skills to engage with it meaningfully. That's where intentionally selecting a model of instruction is critical.

Like the vast majority of K-12 classrooms, the typical pre-K classroom has a default, traditional model of instruction—the teacher does most of the talking as students compliantly follow steps and directions. But this approach doesn't reflect how young children naturally explore and learn. Just watch them play—you'll see discovery, collaboration, and curiosity driving everything they do.

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning is an instructional approach that gives student an active role in their learning. The model elevates any adopted curriculum resource, promoting critical thinking, higher engagement, and deeper learning—including with your youngest students.

The Gap Between Curriculum and Instruction

Many pre-K rooms are warm and inviting, filled with colorful materials and activities—but many still struggle to fully implement a rigorous, standards-aligned curriculum. That's because materials alone don't activate rigor.

What does? Standards-based planning and structured, consistent routines allow students to engage deeply—not just with the materials, but with each other.

I often see pre-K activities pulled from sites like Teachers Pay Teachers or Pinterest that are fun and visually engaging, but disconnected from learning goals, routines for student collaboration, or a clear model of instruction. Without a thoughtful approach that helps *all* students access grade-level content, the curriculum's full rigor remains out of reach.

The unintentional consequence is that learning gaps form, which is exactly what pre-K is meant to prevent. Some students even enter kindergarten labeled "below level" right from the start of their educational careers. When pre-K instruction doesn't invite young children to explore, collaborate, and think for themselves, it limits their learning and leads to boredom, behavior issues, and future challenges.

When Engagement Drops, Behaviors Spike

Ask any early childhood educator: keeping pre-K students engaged is both essential and challenging. Teachers are trying to meet students where they are developmentally while also making learning meaningful and structured. That's no easy task.

Too often, pre-K classrooms rely on teacher-centered instruction. That might include long calendar routines, extended morning meetings, slide shows, or video-based lessons. In many cases, students are expected to sit still for 20 to 40 minutes—well beyond what's developmentally appropriate for 4- and 5-year-olds.

The result? As attention fades, behavior issues emerge.

Even when the *content* is age-appropriate, the *delivery* often isn't. Sitting still, looking at a screen, and listening quietly while the teacher talks doesn't engage young learners—or build lasting skills.

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning offers a different path. It helps teachers shift from passive to active learning, using team-based structures and hands-on tools that keep students engaged and working together. When students are talking, thinking, and doing—they're learning. Behavior issues that were caused by disengagement naturally decline.

What Deeper Learning Looks Like in Pre-K

Pre-K students are more than capable of deeper learning. Our Applied Research Center defines deeper learning as ALL students developing into leaders of their own learning. They collaborate in teams, engage in rich discourse, and tackle rigorous tasks that prepare them for both academic and real-world success.

To reach the goal of deeper learning in pre-K, we must shift from a teacher-centered model of instruction to a student-led one.

In a student-led classroom, students:

- Talk with peers about content
- Practice self-management and teamwork
- Learn through collaboration, not just repetition

Through the student-led model, students develop the cognitive and social foundations that rigorous learning requires.

Success Story: Young Students Thrive in Teams

Howe Elementary School (Des Moines Public Schools) serves kindergarteners who often enter the classroom not speaking a word of English and having never been to pre-K. Through a partnership to implement student-led team learning, 100% of students in one of the school's kindergarten classrooms met or exceeded their expected growth on the state MAP® Growth™ assessment (Toth & Sousa, 2019). See Figure 1.

Their teacher credited student-led teaming for her students' success:

"I think that they're so much more capable because they're working in teams. My tracking is easier because I can see my students working through problems, and I can hear them talking.

I can teach them at higher taxonomy levels: instead of saying, "Okay, here's your sight word. Go to your desk and write it down," now it's more like, "Hey, your team is responsible for coming up with a sentence using this sight word"—and they do it!

They can do these more rigorous tasks now because they're working with their teams. For example, they're not afraid to pick up books and read. It used to be me reading a book and then discussing the characters and the setting with them. Now, they're in their teams and they're pulling the main idea and the key details and reading nonfiction. It's just really incredible."

See The Power of Student Teams (Toth & Sousa, 2019), p. 85-87.

See also: *How a Great City School District Is Improving Performance and Closing Achievement Gaps for All Students: A 10,000-Student Study of Des Moines Public Schools*

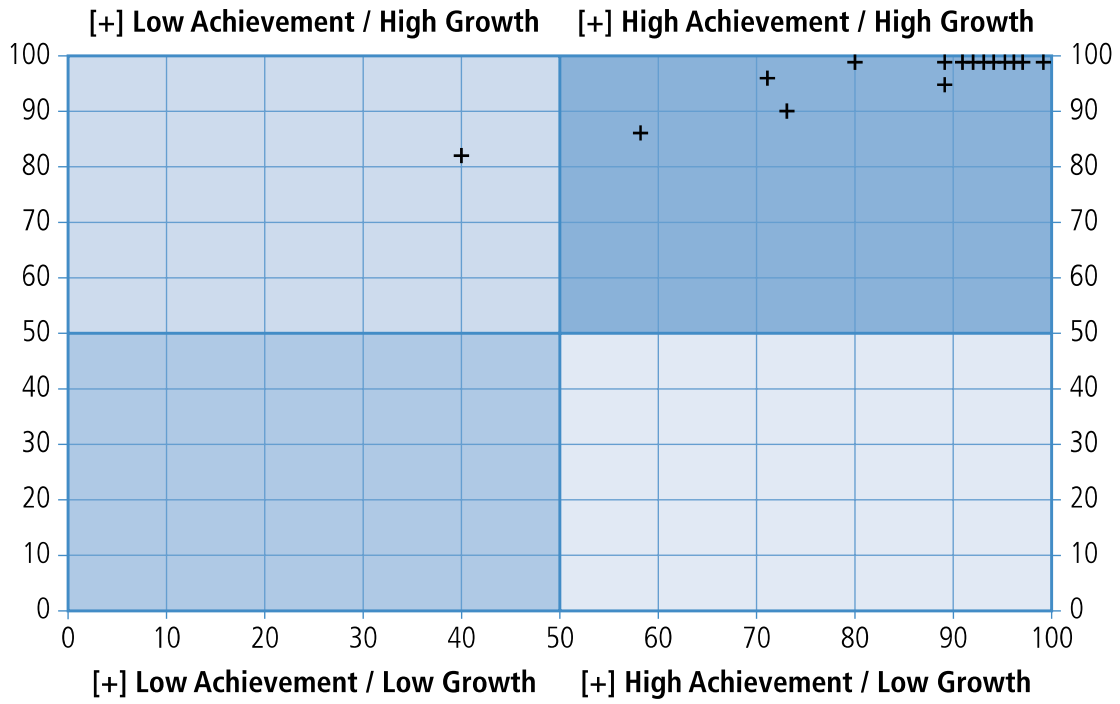

Figure 1. Kindergarten class at Howe Elementary—individual student growth, state MAP® Growth™ assessment math scores Fall 2017 to Spring 2018. Note that all students reached high growth, and nearly every student reached high achievement. See Toth & Sousa, 2019.

Activating Rigor in the Pre-K Curriculum

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning equips pre-K teachers with the tools and routines to create structured, student-centered classrooms. This includes:

- Self-management routines
- Collaborative team roles
- Structured academic conversations
- Visual supports for early readers

A Key Misconception About Early Learning

Students don't need to master self-regulation and collaboration *before* they engage in the rigor of your curriculum—they develop those skills *through* engagement with your curriculum, with support from the model.

Academic Conversations at a Pre-K Level

Even in pre-K, students can engage in respectful academic discourse. The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning introduces these skills through sentence stems, visual cues, and routines that build memory and meaning.

Self-Management Through Student Roles and Responsibilities

Student roles are a key component of the model. For pre-K students, teachers can simplify the roles.

For example, anchor charts or table mats can visually show which student is responsible for the facilitator role. Facilitators might help peers remember the task question, or prompt others to stay on track. Teachers can scaffold this by modeling: "Facilitators, raise your hand. Repeat after me…" Instead of calling the role "facilitator," this can also be changed to kid-friendly terms such as "captain" or "super guide."

Teachers who use the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning with emerging readers have implemented playful roles like "peanut butter and jelly" to guide students in taking turns during conversations. For example, while peanut butter speaks, it is jelly's job to listen (see Figure 2).

Once students get used to their roles and responsibilities, teachers can ask students to suggest their own favorite combinations: cookies and cream, guacamole and chips—which builds buy-in and community.

These structures help pre-K students take ownership of their behavior and learning from an early age, setting them up for success.

Respectful Debates with Routines and Visuals

A simplified version of the model's Agree/Disagree routine can help Pre-K students communicate effectively as they discuss academic topics in their teams.

Pre-K teachers can practice verbal language with their students using sentence stems like "I agree because…" or "I disagree because…" Teachers can also create anchor charts that reinforce sentence stems with visuals and sight words. Other visual reminders include cards such as a thumbs up/thumbs down and listening ear

to show students whose turn it is to respond using the sentence stems (see Figure 2).

The model's professional development prepares teachers with the skills to help their students learn the building blocks of respectful argument, evidence, and taking turns listening and sharing ideas.

Figure 2. Visual pairing cards to help emergent readers become more autonomous. In this example, peanut butter is talking while jelly listens and agrees/disagrees.

From Rote to Rigorous: A Task Comparison

Let's look at how instruction changes when you apply the model to a standards-based task.

M.PK.1: Pre-Kindergarten Math Standard: *Count in sequence to 10 and beyond.*

PH.PK.14: Pre-Kindergarten Health and Physical Development Standard: *Move body in relation to objects to effectively perform tasks.*

Traditional Task Examples:

- Counting aloud with the teacher
- Tracing numbers on worksheets
- Jumping jacks while reciting numbers

Notice that all these examples are teacher-directed and focused on memorization—not on building cognitive or social skills.

Task from the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning:

(1) The teacher draws numbered circles (1–10) in random order on the ground for each team.

(2) Students work in teams to jump from one number to the next in sequence, using number charts if needed.

(3) Afterward, students draw a summary of how they figured out the sequence using the model's **Summarizing Mat** tool.

(4) Students take turns explaining their thinking to their teammates, using Agree/Disagree sentence stems and visuals.

This task engages motor skills, cognition, peer interaction, and reflection—all aligned to the standards.

Source for student-led team learning task: **Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning**™ 4DL Teacher Suite, Library 4DL Teacher Resources

Building Skills That Carry Into K-12

When pre-K students enter kindergarten already familiar with collaboration, self-regulation, and respectful talk, they are prepared to fully benefit from your curriculum. Teachers don't have to spend weeks teaching basic behaviors—they can go deeper from day one.

This is the long-term benefit of investing in a student-centered model of instruction at the pre-K level: students learn to embrace rigor and are ready to take it on more quickly.

Instructional Coach Perspective: Developing Communication Skills in Pre-K

Sara Henry is an instructional coach at Willard Elementary School in School District U-46. The district is implementing the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning. Ms. Henry talked about how preschool students are already practicing the foundational routines of deeper learning.

"In preschool, we need that foundation, so that in kindergarten they actually know how to have those conversations…

Preschool students are working on the language components of the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning. For example, if somebody has done something to upset you: how do you use respectful language?"

– Sara Henry, *instructional coach, Willard Elementary School, Illinois (2025)*

Activating Early Literacy Rigor in Pre-K

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning strengthens literacy instruction, starting with:

- Previewing books and making predictions/inferences
- Comparing and contrasting stories
- Building reading comprehension

Collaborative Phonics

Early literacy instruction often centers on surface-level memorization, which makes it difficult for teachers to know which students are truly mastering phonics. For example, during group choral responses, a student might say the wrong sound but quickly mimic the correct one after hearing peers—masking their confusion. To the teacher, it sounds correct, but the misunderstanding only surfaces later during individual assessments.

In contrast, the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning encourages deeper learning through structured conversations and problem-solving—making student thinking visible in real time.

For example:

> *A teacher shows students a picture of a frog.*
> *The team debates: "What letter does frog start with?"*
> *One student says "B," another says "F."*
> *A teammate remembers "fan" also starts with "fuh"—they agree it's "F."*

This structured collaboration builds phonemic awareness and recall while also challenging students to think critically and make connections between sounds and letters—all critical for reading success.

Research supports this collaborative methodology. Talking about new learning significantly improves long-term memory retention (MacLeod et al., 2010). Explaining learning even lights up more brain activity than just listening (Toth & Sousa, 2019).

Reading Comprehension with Hands-On Tools

Hands-on tools from the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning are especially effective for building complex comprehension skills, such as identifying main ideas.

Here's one example using the model's Summarizing Mat tool:

> *Students read a story about an angelfish. The teacher asks them to draw the main idea of the book, then discuss their drawings with their teammates to agree on a shared answer.*
>
> *Most students in the team draw an angelfish, but one student draws an anemone. This sparks a lively conversation. Students use the routines they learned to take turns sharing evidence:*
>
> *"Look at page 5—it has the angelfish!"*
>
> *"Page 6 says the word 'fish' in big letters."*
>
> *The student who drew the anemone explains that she liked that picture best because it reminded her of Finding Nemo. But after hearing her teammates' evidence, she agrees: the angelfish was the main idea.*

This is deeper learning in action. Pre-K students are using evidence, refining their thinking, shifting perspectives, and learning from one another as they improve their reading comprehension skills.

Why Pre-K Is the Right Time for Deeper Learning

It's a common misconception that deeper learning is "too advanced" for pre-K—but in reality, our youngest students are ready for more than we often give them credit for.

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning supports strong academic development *and* the social skills that make for a successful transition from home or daycare to school.

The model doesn't replace your curriculum—it helps you deliver it with more clarity, collaboration, and impact.

Teachers receive targeted professional development designed to support student-centered learning. A clear progression defines the skills students should develop at each level—such as self-regulation or communication—along with examples of student evidence, and which resources from the model can help teachers guide the process. This chunks the learning for both teachers and their students.

When teachers implement the model, they quickly see the difference. Students' skills grow. Teachers' confidence grows. And the impact lasts, putting our youngest learners on the path to success.

About the Author

Shakira Fetherolf

Throughout Shakira Fetherolf's career for the past 20+ years, she has developed a love for taking a deep dive into educational leadership coaching and learning, education reform and transformation. Shakira has driven positive educational outcomes by teaching many different student populations, including students with emotional disturbances, students diagnosed with autism, and students with

learning disabilities in multiple environments including District 75 in the South Bronx, private schools, university-level, and public schools abroad. Shakira was also a Pre-K teacher in South Korea.

These experiences have widened Shakira's perspective, leading her to become who she is today, and driving the improved version of her that she strives towards daily. Holding herself and her team to the highest of standards with intellectual curiosity, grace, and vulnerability is how Shakira achieves success. Shakira believes that educators are vital to the type of society we create and encourages everyone to work together to make it a system of real change for student learning and success of ALL students. Shakira enjoys meeting new people and understanding how others view educational transformation, leadership coaching and development.

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