Of Primary Interest

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Beating the Odds in Teaching All Children to Read

What schoolwide practices characterize schools in which at-risk learners are beating the odds? What instructional practices are used by the most accomplished primary-grade teachers and by teachers in the most effective schools?

Everyone in America wants the best possible schools for our children, but many children are still not reading well enough to keep up with the demands of school. In a CIERA [Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement] Report entitled ***Beating the Odds in Teaching All Children to Read,*** Barbara M. Taylor of the University of Minnesota and her colleagues increase our understanding of how we can help all children learn to read, especially those at risk of academic failure, by approaching the experts—those teachers and principals who are helping young learners beat the odds. In this study, Taylor, P. David Pearson (Michigan State University), Kathleen F. Clark (University of Minnesota), and Sharon Walpole (University of Virginia) focus on both instructional (classroom-level) and organizational (school-level) factors that might explain how and why some schools are particularly successful in teaching at-risk children to read.

Taylor et al. used quantitative and descriptive methods to investigate school and classroom factors related to primary-grade reading achievement. Fourteen schools in Virginia, Minnesota, Colorado, and California with moderate to high numbers of students on subsidized lunch were identified as most, moderately, or least effective based on several measures of reading achievement in the primary grades.

A combination of school and teacher factors, many of which were intertwined, was found to be important in the most effective schools. They (a) have strong links to parents; (b) report collaboration of teaching staff across grade levels; (c) have a shared system for assessing oral reading fluency, accuracy, and text level; and (d) provide extensive professional development on instructional practices. Most had small-group or one-on-one interventions in place, and reading was clearly a priority at both the building and classroom level. In short, the most effective schools were organized to provide the two key ingredients that are documented in research: opportunity and assistance to struggling readers.

The most effective teachers (a) use small-group instruction and often work collaboratively with Title I, special education, or reading resource teachers; (b) allot time for independent reading; (c) communicate frequently with parents about their children's progress; and (d) coach children in applying word identification

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Effective Practices for Teaching All Children to Read

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have a shared system for assessing oral reading fluency, accuracy, and text level	communicate frequently with parents about their children's progress
provide extensive professional development on instructional practices	coach children in applying word identification skills while they read everyday texts

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skills while they read everyday texts. They were also observed asking high-level questions after reading more often than their less effective counterparts.

The research team will turn its attention next to highly challenging schools in which children are not beating the odds to see whether their improved understanding of effective early reading practice can be implemented in these settings.

To obtain a copy of the full report, ***Beating the Odds in Teaching All Children to Read***, send a check for $6.50 (which includes shipping and handling) for each copy to: CIERA/University of Michigan, 610 East University Avenue, 1600 SEB, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1259. Specify CIERA Report #2-006 when ordering. The full report is also available for download at <www.ciera.org>. The abstract above is reprinted with permission of the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement.

Fostering Thoughtful Literacy in Elementary Classrooms

Paula Preller

The most effective elementary classrooms CELA [Center on English Learning & Achievement] researchers are studying are thought-provoking environments. Located in five different states and representing a variety of demographic settings, these classrooms are led by highly effective teachers. Richard Allington and Peter Johnston are leading the CELA research team that is studying these effective classrooms as well as those that get more typical results. In examining teacher practice, they've identified a set of core teaching characteristics that tend to foster thoughtful literacy:

- *Managed choice*
- *Multi-source curriculum*
- *Multi-task learning*
- *Meaningful classroom discussion.*

Managed Choice

When students have more control over what and how they'll be learning, they exert deeper levels of extended effort in their work. Providing students with choices does not necessarily mean that teachers relegate all decisions to them. In the wide area between the two extremes—teachers choosing everything or students choosing everything—the effective teachers *manage* the amount of student choice appropriate for each class and student. They strategically offer choices to help involve students in their learning and ignite their interest in the subject and quality of their work. But the teachers assert their authority when they see that a student's choices would, for instance, lead to work that is inordinately difficult, easy, or unfocused.

For example, instead of choosing one book for the entire class to read, a teacher might gather 30 different books on a topic of study and allow each student to choose 3-4 to read. In some cases, the teacher might need to say something such as: "Suzanne, those four books are too similar. I'd like you to read this one instead of that one."

Multi-Source Curriculum

"One of the best ways to increase student thinking," says Allington, "is to make sure you have a curriculum that provides kids with things worth thinking about and that offers kids enough depth that they can actually think."[1] For example, the typical fourth grade social studies textbook "covers" the French and Indian war in approximately five pages. After reading those pages, students don't have enough information to really *understand* issues such as what caused the conflict or why the Iroquois allied with the French instead of the British. "The American school curriculum has been described as a mile wide and an inch deep,...a curriculum that's designed to make kids largely ignorant on a wide range of topics," notes Allington.

To remedy this lack of depth in the traditional curriculum and to foster thinking, many effective teachers have students use multiple sources—the textbook as well as other books and media, some of which may provide differing perspectives. When students are gathering information from more than one source, they must summarize, synthesize, compare, and evaluate. These kinds of thinking skills are harder to foster when teaching is organized around just one source.

Multi-Task Learning

Instead of giving every student the same "fill-in-the-blank" assignment, the truly effective teachers in CELA's study give students more open-ended assignments. Students are required to write their own summaries, syntheses, comparisons, or evaluations rather than simply remember how the textbook summarized a topic. These teachers employ an "every pupil writing, every pupil thinking" strategy. Tasks demand *all* students (not just those called on) be thinking.

For example, as a follow-up check after reading, instead of asking a few students to orally answer some questions, a teacher asks everyone to do a "quick write:" to take a couple of minutes to write what a specific character would do next and why. After circulating around the room noting what students are writing, the teacher calls on several key students to share and then asks who agrees or disagrees and why. In this way all the students engage in predicting, comparing, and evaluating, and in substantive classroom discussion.

Effective teachers often give students graphic organizers. Students compare their webs, diagrams, or flow charts, and use them as a basis for discussion or other work. Graphic organizers in typical classrooms are often used as individual, close-ended assignments – not as a foundation for further thinking, discussing, and writing.

Meaningful Classroom Discussion

In the classroom of truly effective teachers, discussions are used as forums in which students develop and refine their understanding of the subject by finding out, comparing, and evaluating other students' knowledge and ideas.

When students read different materials or do different tasks, they need the input of others to complete their understanding of the subject. The resulting discussions encourage students to value their own and others' unique contributions and thoughts. Johnston notes that through these discussions, students develop "a deeper understanding of each other. This is the basis of the social commitment necessary for everything from persuasive writing to convincing character creation."[2]

Thinking Takes Time

The effective teachers CELA researchers studied understand that important things, big ideas, are hard to teach in 20-minute chunks. They integrate instruction and devote large blocks of time to a topic that will integrate various skills and tasks. As an example, in a first grade mealworm unit, children spent several hours each day for a week working with their mealworms. They were absorbed in observing, writing, reading, drawing, labeling, measuring, comparing, hypothesizing, and discussing—unmindful of whether it was "math time" or "reading time." The students were given the time to experiment with, think through, discuss, and refine their understandings.

Strategies that foster thoughtful literacy may seem to run counter to the traditional curriculum plans imposed on teachers. Yet the teachers providing and managing student choice, using multiple curricula sources, assigning multiple tasks, and nurturing class discussion find that this kind of teaching isn't necessarily harder to plan and implement than traditional approaches. Instead, they feel it makes sense, especially when they see the high quality of student involvement and work that results from it.

[1] Much of the material in this article can be found on the videotape ***Thoughtful Literacy: The Key to Student Achievement, A One-on-One Interview with Richard Allington***, Skylight Training and Publishing, Inc., 1999. Reproduced by permission of Skylight Professional Development, Arlington Heights, IL, (800) 348-4474.

[2] "Unpacking Literate Achievement," P. Johnston, CELA, 1999. <http://cela.albany.edu/Johnston_litach/index.html>. Also included as a chapter in ***Stirring the Waters: The Influence of Marie Clay***, J. Gaffney and B. Askew, editors, Heinemann, 1999.

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Early Literacy: What Should Young Children Know and Be Able to Do?

Elena Bodrova and Diane E. Paynter, with Shae Issacs

The standards movement of the past several years has focused educators on those instructional practices that best support student learning of the knowledge identified in state and district frameworks. With implementation of these standards, several critical issues have emerged.

Initially, standards were specified using a continuum of statements that represented various bands or grade levels (often referred to as benchmarks or indicators). Although this delineation provided some degree of clarity, the scope and sequence of knowledge children needed to master in the various content areas was either incomplete or, in some cases, developmentally inappropriate. The acquisition of literacy, for example, constitutes a continuum with more advanced skills and concepts being built on the foundation of more basic

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competencies; however, there are some qualitative differences between how young children build their early understandings and how older children learn more advanced content (for a discussion, see Snow et al., 1998).

In their early stages, literacy benchmarks often lacked the specificity that identified these qualitative differences. Gradually, the need to develop standards specifically for early childhood emerged.

Additionally, early versions of standards documents sometimes reflected the "activities" students should be involved in rather than the actual "knowledge" they should be learning, resulting in benchmarks that were vague and open to much interpretation (Wixson & Dutro, 1998). This lack of clarity and consistency eventually caused many states and districts to rethink literacy standards, particularly at the primary grade level. At the same time, conversations were taking place concerning standards and their relationship to the national goal to have all students reading by the end of third grade. In an effort to meet this goal, some educators began to place inappropriate and arbitrary expectations on young children, often forcing the creation of benchmarks at grade levels that were unrealistic and "hurried" children, without giving them sufficient time and instruction to master underlying pre-literacy cognitive concepts and skills.

Today, states and districts are still in the process of creating appropriate standards frameworks or documents to support and guide early literacy

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instruction. When evaluating such documents, state and local leaders should consider:

- ***The developmental appropriateness of preschool and kindergarten benchmarks.*** Early literacy benchmarks should not simply be "dumbed-down" versions of higher-grade benchmarks. Taking benchmarks from higher levels and then preceding them with statements such as "begins to" or "makes an effort to" does not adequately capture mastery of specific pre-literacy skills.
- ***That underlying cognitive skills necessary to early literacy must be addressed within benchmarks.*** Unlike the higher grades, many early skills that lie outside what is traditionally thought of as literacy are, in fact, critical to literacy development in young children. For example, a four-year-old's ability to do representational drawing—that is, drawings that look like something recognizable rather than just experiments with color—is an essential prerequisite to learning to write.
- ***The way benchmarks are written.*** Benchmarks written as statements of knowledge and skills, rather than activities or tasks, provide a clearer picture for selecting and constructing appropriate and valid assessments.
- ***The need for clear relationships among benchmarks from various standards (e.g., reading, writing, mathematics).*** A strong standards document should not have repetition or overlap of benchmarks from one standard to the next, which can lead to problems when creating recording and reporting systems.
- ***The language used in benchmarks.*** Early literacy standards and benchmarks may contain language that is different from that used for higher grades. Terms such as "read" or "write" may not be used very often, but references to "representational drawing" or "symbolic play" are likely.
- ***How benchmarks are prioritized.*** Benchmarks should be prioritized to reflect those competencies that are most critical for laying the foundation for literacy. Given the limited amount of time young children spend in the classroom, the most effective teaching strategies will be those that address the most basic literacy skills and understandings.

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