Research-Supported Characteristics of Teachers & Schools that Promote Reading Achievement

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Beginning Reading Instruction
The Rest of the Story from Research
by Michael Pressley
Based on a paper prepared for the National Reading Conference

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This research was conducted as part of CIERA, the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, and supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers program, PR/Award Number R305R70004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents of the described report do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum and Assessment or the National Institute on Early Childhood Development, or the U.S. Department of Education, and readers should not assume endorsement by the Federal government.
effective reading instruction
All educators want the best schools possible for children, schools that help them acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to pursue whatever dreams and paths they wish. Yet in reality many children are not reading well enough to keep up with the demands of school (Campbell, Donahue, Reese, and Phillips 1996; Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, and Mazzeo 1999), let alone the demands of society or their personal dreams. In the recent national report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, a National Academy of Science Committee concluded that “quality classroom instruction in kindergarten and the primary grades is the single best weapon against reading failure” (Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998). The committee recommended that the number one priority for educational research be to improve classroom reading instruction in kindergarten and the primary grades.

In addition to advocating improved classroom reading instruction, the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children discussed the importance of systematic, schoolwide restructuring efforts in reading. The committee (Snow et al.1998) recommended that low-performing schools consider reading reform efforts with a dual focus on improved classroom reading instruction and schoolwide organizational issues.

In an effort to share the good news about what can be done to increase learning and achievement for students in high-poverty schools, the research has been combed for this report to pinpoint those instructional and organizational factors that lead to student success. Specifically, the report represents an effort to explain how and why some schools across the country are attaining greater than expected reading achievement with populations of students who are at risk for failure by virtue of poverty. The terms instructional and organizational are emphasized because the authors conclude, based upon a thorough reading of the research, that aspirations to improve literacy for all students only can be met when both classroom level (instructional) and school level (organizational) facets of reform are addressed.
A great deal is known about elementary-level classroom teaching that is effective in promoting literacy development. This knowledge about effective teaching is the cumulative result of a number of research efforts in the latter part of the twentieth century.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, researchers began documenting the teaching processes that occurred in classrooms. The goal was to identify processes associated with an important educational product—high achievement, often reading achievement. Hence, this body of research came to be identified as process-product approach. Some of the now well-known researchers contributing to this tradition were Brophy (1973), Dunkin and Biddle (1974), Flanders (1970), Soar and Soar (1979), and Stallings and Kaskowitz (1974).

The process-product approach reflected educational researchers’ commitment in the middle part of the century to neo-behaviorism and the concomitant belief that educational outcomes (i.e., products) could be understood as functions of educational inputs (i.e., processes). The unambiguous focus was on teaching behaviors and dimensions of teaching that could be measured by direct observation (e.g., Rosenshine 1979). Several important practices were documented as part of this effort:

- More time spent engaged in academic activity produces better performance on objective tests of academic content. A high amount of time on task occurs in classrooms emphasizing an academic focus, with direct instruction by teachers especially effective in promoting elementary reading.

- Effective, direct instruction includes making learning goals clear, asking students questions as part of monitoring their understanding of what is being covered, and providing feedback to them about their academic progress.

- Effective classrooms are convivial and warm, democratic and cooperative.

- Effective classrooms are places that respect individual differences between students. For example, more teacher instruction is provided to weaker students, who are also given more time to complete tasks.
Direct instruction, mentioned above, evolved into an approach that emphasized the development of the component skills of reading. Its advocates (e.g., Carnine, Silbert, and Kameenui 1997) were confident that mastery of such skills would add up to a whole larger than its parts, with that whole being skilled reading. Direct instruction approaches to reading emphasize sound-, letter-, and word-level skills in beginning reading. Comprehension within the direct instruction model is less about constructing meaning in response to texts and more about learning vocabulary and specific comprehension skills, such as sequencing, sentence processing, summarizing, and making inferences (e.g., deciding whether the ideas in a text make sense).

Gerald Duffy, Laura Roehler, and their associates (e.g., Roehler and Duffy 1984) conducted work in the 1980s that went beyond direct instruction, emphasizing the cognitive processes involved in excellent teaching. In fact, they emphasized teacher thinking much more than did the neobehaviorists. They also emphasized teaching as explanation, referring to

In short, the effective teacher articulates and models the strategic activity that is skilled reading, demonstrating for students how good readers construct meaning and respond to text.
1. There is more than one effective teacher...

The more the teacher emphasized actual reading of text, rather than drilling of skills, the higher the student achievement.

2. It’s the teacher, not the method.

their approach as direct explanation. What the good teacher explains are strategies that students can use for recognizing words and understanding texts. Many of the strategies are remarkably similar if not identical to the skills emphasized by direct instructionists. The primary difference is that in the direct explanation model, the teacher does a lot more modeling of skill use, emphasizing for observing students his or her thinking as the skills are applied to new situations. For example, the teacher makes clear through modeling and explanation that word attack involves forming hypotheses based on knowing the sounds of the letters in words, blending those sounds, and reflecting on whether a word as sounded out makes sense in the sentence, paragraph, and passage context in which it appears. Similarly, the effective teacher overtly models and explains comprehension by making predictions about what might be in the text that she or he reads to students. The teacher also tells students about images that occur to him or her as a reader, questions that arise during reading, and the big messages that seem to emerge from the text as reading proceeds. In short, the effective teacher articulates and models the strategic activity that is skilled reading, demonstrat-
ing for students how good readers construct meaning and respond to text. The direct explanation teacher encourages students to be active in the ways that skilled readers are active as they process texts (Pressley and Afflerbach 1995).

In related research, Michael S. Knapp and Associates (1995) studied 140 classrooms in high-poverty areas in California, Ohio, and Maryland, observing the teaching and measuring student achievement. They concluded was that effective instruction emphasized higher-order meaning making much more than lower-order skills. The more the teacher emphasized actual reading of text, rather than drilling of skills, the higher the student achievement.

**Student achievement was also higher—**

- the more reading and writing were integrated.
- the more students discussed what they were reading.
- the more the teacher emphasized deep understanding rather than literal comprehension of text.
- the more that discrete skills were taught in the context of actual reading rather than out of context.

In short, the more the active cognitive processes and explanations that Duffy and Roehler favored occurred, the better reading seemed to be; the more that teachers emphasized using the skills taught as part of real reading and writing, the higher achievement seemed to be.
In recent years, much attention has been given to reading in the primary grades, with a great deal of debate about whether sound-, letter-, and word-level skills should be emphasized or whether focus on the reading and writing of real texts made more sense. In a CELA (Center on English Learning and Achievement) study, Pressley et al. (in press) and Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, and Hampston (1998) observed first-grade classrooms to find out how the teaching differed in classrooms where reading and writing went well, compared with classrooms where reading and writing achievement seemed less certain. They found that primary-level classrooms differed in the engagement of students in reading and writing, with the most engaged students becoming readers who read more complicated stories and books and wrote more coherent and complete texts.

These studies also found that teaching that stimulates high literacy achievement differs from teaching that does not. In the classrooms with high literacy achievement, there is more teaching of literacy skills, often in reaction to specific problems students encounter as they read and write real texts. Effective teachers expect and encourage their students to use the skills they learn in a self-regulated fashion, explaining to and modeling for students how to coordinate multiple strategies (e.g., attempt to recognize words by using phonics, wordchunks, and semantic context clues such as accompanying pictures). Comprehension and writing strategies are taught as well, with the consistent message that understanding and effective communications—not just word recognition—are what literacy is about.

In the CIERA (Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement) Beating the Odds study of effective schools and accomplished primary grade teachers, Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (1999)
Teachers in the most effective schools provided more small group instruction, communicated more with parents, had children engage in more independent reading, provided more coaching during reading as a way to help children apply phonics knowledge, and asked more higher-level questions.

compared the most accomplished teachers to the least accomplished teachers and the most effective schools to the least effective schools. The most accomplished teachers had higher pupil engagement, provided more small group instruction, had a preferred teaching style of coaching—as opposed to telling (the preferred style of the least accomplished teachers)—provided more coaching during reading to help children improve in word recognition, and asked more higher-level comprehension questions. Teachers in the most effective schools provided more small group instruction, communicated more with parents, had children engage in more independent reading, provided more coaching during reading as a way to help children apply phonics knowledge, and asked more higher-level questions.

In short, excellent elementary literacy teachers seem to have taken lessons from several periods of research on effective teaching. Their instruction is consistent.
with the process-product framework to some extent, especially with regard to engagement, but goes beyond it in ways consistent with Duffy and Roehler’s (1984) direct explanation approach and Knapp and Associates’ (1995) emphasis on higher-order literacy

**Figure 1.** Recent Studies Addressing Characteristics of Effective Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Date Published</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CELA</td>
<td>Pressley, et al.</td>
<td>In press</td>
<td>Effective and more typical first grade teachers in New York, New Jersey, Texas, and Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIERA: Beating the Odds</td>
<td>Taylor, Pearson, Clark, &amp; Walpole</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Four high-performing schools compared to 10 lower performing schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching for Meaning in High-Poverty Schools</td>
<td>Knapp</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>A two year study of 140 classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago Schools With Substantially Improved Achievement</td>
<td>Designs for Change</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Report on seven profile schools with large achievement gains in math and reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title I: Prospects</td>
<td>Puma, et al.</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Five high-performing Title I schools selected from a pool of 400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
instruction (i.e., instruction emphasizing comprehension and communication). Excellent elementary literacy teachers balance skills instruction with more holistic teaching (Pressley 1998). In the best classrooms, students are engaged much of the time in reading and writing, with the teacher monitoring student progress and encouraging continuous improvement and growth, and providing “scaffolded” instruction. Teachers use scaffolded instruction when they notice students having difficulty and provide support such as cues or organizers so that students are able to make progress. Furthermore, this skillful instruction is based on the exact strategies that students need to develop in order to be proficient in literacy.

Figure 1 is a summary of 5 recent studies that addressed effective teachers or their classrooms. Figure 2 summarizes the findings of those studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature Emphasized</th>
<th>CELA</th>
<th>CIERA: Beating the Odds</th>
<th>Knapp</th>
<th>Chicago (Designs for Change)</th>
<th>Title I: Prospects (Puma et al.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent classroom management</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balanced reading instruction</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small group instruction</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher order thinking</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Characteristics of Effective Teachers: Trends Found in Recent Studies
effective reading instruction
Research on effective schools, much of which was conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s, was documented by Hoffman (1991) in a landmark paper, “Teacher and School Effects in Learning to Read,” in the second volume of the Handbook of Reading Research. Hoffman uncovered eight recurring attributes of effective schools:

1. a clear school mission
2. effective instructional leadership and practices
3. high expectations
4. a safe, orderly, and positive environment
5. ongoing curriculum improvement
6. maximum use of instructional time
7. frequent monitoring of student progress
8. positive home-school relationships

Concerned specifically about high-poverty schools, Edmonds (1979) reasoned that research investigating high-achieving, high-poverty schools was needed. Studies in the 1970s of high-poverty elementary schools with high reading achievement found several distinguishing characteristics: (a) a strong emphasis on reading, (b) strong leadership, (c) systematic evaluation of pupil progress, and (d) high expectations for students (Venezky and Winfield 1979; Weber 1971; Wilder 1979).

For a host of reasons, research on effective schools was placed on a back burner in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In recent years, however, a revival of effective schools research...
Effective Schools...

has occurred, most likely due to widespread national concerns that the nation’s schools are failing to meet the needs of the poorest children. Five large-scale studies on effective, moderate- to high-poverty elementary schools were published between 1997 and 1999. What is remarkable about them is that they report strikingly similar findings that both support and extend the earlier research. Details about each study are listed in Figure 3.

### Figure 3.
Recent Large-Scale Studies on Effective Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Date Published</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hope for Urban Education</td>
<td>Charles A. Dana Center</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Nine high-performing, high-poverty schools around the country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIERA: Beating the Odds</td>
<td>Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Four high-performing schools compared with 10 lower performing schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title I: Prospects</td>
<td>Puma, Karweit, Price, Ricciuti, Thompson, and Vaden-Kiernan</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Five high-performing Title I schools selected from a pool of 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful Texas Schoolwide Programs</td>
<td>Lein, Johnson, and Ragland</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>26 Texas Title I schools that surpassed 70 percent pass rate on Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago Schools with Substantially Improved Achievement</td>
<td>Designs for Change</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Report on seven Profile Schools with large achievement gains in math and reading</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Across these five studies, six factors emerged consistently. These six factors, along with their incidence across the five studies, are summarized in Figure 4.

### Figure 4.
**School Level Factors Responsible for High Achievement in High-Poverty Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Hope for Urban Education</th>
<th>CIERA: Beating the Odds</th>
<th>Title I: Prospects Programs</th>
<th>Successful Texas Schoolwide</th>
<th>Chicago Schools With Substantially Improved Achievement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on improved student learning</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong school leadership</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong teacher collaboration</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent use of data on student performance</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on professional development and innovation</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong links to parents</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
effective reading instruction
Focus...

...on improved student learning

In four of these studies, improved student learning was cited as the school’s overriding priority. This focus on improving student learning entailed a collective sense of responsibility for school improvement; teachers, parents, the principal, and the school staff worked together as a team to realize their common goal of substantially improved student learning.
Three studies documented the importance of a strong building leadership, most often from the principal. The *Hope for Urban Education (Hope)* report highlighted the role of school leadership—not necessarily limited to the principal—in terms of redirecting people’s time and energy, creating a collective sense of responsibility for school improvement, getting staff the resources and training needed, creating opportunities for collaboration, creating additional time for instruction, and helping the school persist despite difficulties. The *Chicago Schools with Substantially Improved Achievement (Chicago)* report specified that the substantially improved schools had more effective principals who served as instructional leaders, closely supervised the change process, unified the school around the mission of improved student learning, and built a strong staff by hiring carefully and providing regular coaching to help teachers improve their instruction. The *Title I: Prospects (Prospects)* report found that the high-performing Title I schools had more experienced principals than other Title I schools.
In addition to, or perhaps because of, strong leadership, strong staff collaboration was highlighted in four of the studies. In the Hope study, school leaders created opportunities for teachers to work, plan, and learn together—with a focus on instructional issues. In the CIERA: Beating the Odds (CIERA) study, teachers reported a strong sense of building communication and used a collaborative model in which classroom and resource teachers worked together to maximize time for small group instruction in the primary grades. In the Chicago study, the teachers worked more effectively as a team, especially in planning and in sharing information about students. In the Successful Texas Schoolwide Programs (Texas) study, cross-grade as well as within-grade collaboration among teachers was highlighted. Frequently, teachers were found to work with those who taught subsequent grade levels to better understand one another’s curricula and expectations.
Consistent...

...use of data on student performance

Four of the studies found that the effective schools systematically used student assessment data, usually on curriculum-embedded measures, to improve performance. In the Hope study, teachers carefully aligned instruction to standards and state or district assessments. In the CIERA study, the most effective schools engaged in regular, systematic evaluation of pupil progress and shared this data to make instructional decisions. In the Texas study, schools and/or districts aligned curriculum staff development efforts with the objectives of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Formative assessments were widely used by teachers to plan instruction. In the Chicago study, it was found that in the substantially improved schools, teachers carefully monitored students’ reading progress through observations and tests. In many of the schools, assessment data were a part of the collaborative model: teachers got together to share data and reach consensus on instructional plans for particular students.
Focus...

...on professional development and innovation

In four of the studies, ongoing professional development and trying out new research-based practices was stressed. In the Hope study, school leaders made sure that teachers felt they had the materials and training they needed to help students achieve at high levels. In the CIERA study, the emphasis was on year-long professional development in which teachers learned together within a building. In the Texas study, teachers were encouraged to experiment with new ideas and to collaborate to help one another improve their instruction. Teachers at these effective schools were continually searching for new, effective ways of teaching and were described as a “community of learners.” In the Chicago study, teachers were encouraged to try innovations, and principals provided workshops, coaching, and assistance to help teachers improve their instruction.
Strong...

...links to parents

All five studies reported strong efforts within schools to reach out to parents. In the Hope study, the school staffs worked to win the confidence of parents and then build effective partnerships with them to support student achievement. In the CIERA study, the most effective schools made more of an effort to reach out to parents—by involving them in an active site council, by engaging them in phone or written surveys or focus groups, and by calling them just to stay in touch. In the Prospects study, the high-performing schools reported a better school climate, better relations with the community, and more parental support. In the Texas study, parents were regarded as part of the team effort to improve student achievement, and parents were treated as valued members of the school family. School staff made a concerted effort to accommodate parents who did not speak English. In the Chicago study, parents were treated with respect, participated in school events, including parent orientation sessions, and were encouraged to help children learn at home.
Conclusions

Recent research on effective teachers and schools is surprisingly convergent. Effective teachers have excellent classroom management skills and provide scaffolded, balanced literacy instruction, often in small groups, characterized by explicit instruction in skills and strategies, as well as frequent opportunities for students to read, write, and talk about text. Effective schools are typically characterized as collaborative learning communities in which staff assume a shared responsibility for all students’ learning, monitor progress as a way of planning instruction for groups and individuals, help one another learn more about the art and science of teaching, and reach out to the families they serve.

It is interesting to note that schools in three of the studies (Hope for Urban Education, CIERA: Beating the Odds, Successful Texas Schoolwide Programs) felt that packaged programs are not the magic ingredient in improving student achievement—in spite of all the pressure for schools to adopt off-the-shelf reform programs. The success of these schools suggests that the common denominator for reading achievement is commitment and hard work that focuses on the classroom-level and school-level practices consistently identified in this research as important in helping students become proficient readers.
References and Resources

1. There is more than one way to be a teacher.

2. It’s the teacher, not the textbooks.


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