

# *Creating Classrooms That Work*

**H**ow well does your classroom work? If you are like most teachers, you might respond, “Some days better than others” or “Most days, things work pretty well.” Or you might respond to the question with a question, “What do you mean by ‘work’?”

In 1994, when the first edition of this book was published, it had a bold and optimistic title: *Classrooms That Work: They Can All Read and Write*. The claim that *all* children could learn to read and write was, at the time, not widely accepted. Since 1994, the goal of teaching all children has achieved wide acceptance and is most clearly captured in the phrase “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB). Although we have many concerns about the way NCLB was implemented, we were on record long before NCLB existed as believing that the goal of teaching all children to read and write was reasonable and responsible.



In the years since 1994, a great deal of research has focused on schools and classrooms that “beat the odds.” All over the country—in rural, suburban, and urban areas—there are classrooms where, year after year, *all* the children succeed in learning to read and write. We know what happens in these overachieving classrooms. We know what kinds of environment, instruction, and activities the teachers provide that result in all children becoming readers and writers. In this chapter, we will invite you into the classrooms of unusually effective teachers by sharing the observations of some very clever and hard-working researchers. We will then summarize some of the characteristics you would see if you could be a “fly on the wall” in one of these “odds-beating” classrooms.

## *Observing in the Classrooms of Unusually Effective Teachers*

One of the first research studies that actually observed what was happening in classrooms to try to determine effective classroom practice was conducted by Michael Knapp in 140 classrooms in moderate- to high-poverty areas of California, Ohio, and Maryland (Knapp, 1995). After two years of observations, Knapp concluded that classrooms with the highest achievement gains were classrooms in which teachers:

- Emphasized higher-order meaning construction more than lower-order skills
- Maximized opportunities to read
- Integrated reading and writing with other subject areas
- Provided opportunities to discuss what was read

A team of researchers headed by Ruth Wharton-McDonald (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998) carried out the first extensive observational study to determine what actually happens in the classrooms of outstanding first-grade teachers. Administrators in school districts in upstate New York nominated “exemplary” first-grade teachers as well as “more typical—solid but not outstanding” first-grade teachers. In choosing the exemplary teachers, administrators were asked to consider their own observations of the teacher; teacher, parent, and student enthusiasm; the reading and writing achievement of children in that classroom; and the ability of the teacher to teach children with a wide range of abilities.

Five outstanding teachers and five more typical teachers were identified, and the researchers made multiple visits to their classrooms across one school year. In addition to being observed, the teachers were interviewed across the year about their teaching and how they made decisions. Throughout the year, the observers also looked for indicators of how well the children in these 10 classrooms were reading and writing.

At the end of the year, the researchers reclassified the teachers according to the achievement of the children. Three classes had unusually high achievement. Most of the students in these three classrooms were reading books at or above first-grade level. They wrote pieces longer than a page in length, and their writing showed reasonably good coherence, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. These three classes with the highest reading and writing achievement also had the highest levels of engagement. Most of the students were working productively on reading and writing most of the time.

The researchers then looked at the observation and interview data from these three classrooms with the highest levels of reading, writing, and engagement and compared them with the data from other classrooms. Although there were many similarities across all classrooms, the three outstanding first-grades differed from the others in significant ways:

- All of the teachers provided both skills instruction and reading and writing, but the teachers in the highest-achieving classrooms integrated skills teaching with reading and writing.
- Every minute of time in the highest-achieving classrooms was used well. Teachers in these classrooms turned even mundane routines into instructional events.
- Teachers in the highest-achieving classrooms used lots of scaffolding and coaching—providing support but always trying to get the most out of every child.
- Teachers in the highest-achieving classrooms constantly emphasized self-regulation and self-monitoring.
- In the high-achieving classrooms, there was an abundance of integration of reading and writing. Reading and writing were also integrated with content areas, and teachers made many cross-curricular connections.
- Teachers in the high-achieving classes had high expectations for their children—both for their learning to read and write and for their behavior. Students knew how they were expected to act and behaved accordingly most of the time.
- Teachers in the high-achieving classrooms were excellent classroom managers.

Encouraged by the results of the Wharton-McDonald study and supported by a large grant, faculty at the University of Albany and other researchers planned and carried out an observational study of first-grade classrooms in five states (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001). Thirty exemplary or typical teachers were identified in New York, New Jersey, Texas, Wisconsin, and California, and year-long observations and interviews were conducted in their classrooms. At the end of the year, each teacher identified six students—two low achieving, two middle achieving, and two high achieving—and these children were administered a standardized reading test. Based on the results of this test, a most effective and a least effective teacher were identified for each

of the five locations. Comparing observations in the classrooms of the most and least effective teachers revealed the following characteristics of the most effective classrooms:

- Skills were explicitly taught and related to reading and writing.
- Books were everywhere and used in a variety of ways—read aloud by the teacher and read and listened to on tape by the children.
- Children did a lot of reading and writing throughout the day and for homework.
- Teachers had high but realistic expectations of children and monitored progress regularly.
- Self-regulation was modeled and expected. Children were taught to check and reflect on their work and to make wise choices.
- Cross-curricular connections were made as children read and wrote while studying science and social studies themes.
- Classrooms were caring, positive, cooperative environments, in which discipline issues were handled quickly and quietly.
- Classroom management was excellent and teachers used a variety of grouping structures, including whole class, one-to-one teaching, and a variety of small groups.
- Classrooms showed high student engagement. Ninety percent of the students were engaged in their reading and writing work 90 percent of the time.

The researchers followed up their first-grade observational study by looking at exemplary teachers in fourth grade (Allington & Johnson, 2002). Thirty fourth-grade teachers from five states were identified. Classroom observations took place for 10 days in each classroom. Teachers and children were interviewed. Samples of student writing, reading logs, and end-of-year achievement tests provided information about the reading and writing abilities of the children. From their observations, interviews, and data, the researchers concluded that the following variables distinguished the most effective classrooms from the less effective classrooms:

- All kinds of real conversations took place regularly in the most effective classrooms. Children had conversations with each other, and teachers had conversations with children.
- Through their conversations and in their instruction, teachers constantly modeled thinking strategies. More emphasis was put on How could we find out? than on right and wrong answers.
- All kinds of materials were used for reading and writing. Teachers “dipped” into reading, science, and social studies textbooks but rarely followed the lesson plans for these materials. Students read historical novels, biographies, and informational books. Magazines and the Internet were used to gather information.

- Word study focused on building interest in words and on looking for patterns in words.
- Learner interest and engagement were important variables in the teachers' planning. Teachers taught the standard curriculum but tailored it to their students' interests, needs, strengths, and weaknesses.
- *Managed choice* was a common feature in these classrooms. Students were often presented with a topic or problem and allowed to choose which part of it they would pursue and what resources they would use.
- Instruction took place in a variety of formats. Whole-class, various types of small groups, and side-by-side teaching were seen throughout the day.
- Students were expected to work collaboratively and take responsibility for their learning. Working together was valued. When problems occurred, teachers helped students figure out how to solve these problems so the group could successfully complete its task.
- Reading and writing were integrated with science and social studies. Many of the books chosen for the class to read tied into science and social studies topics.
- Teachers evaluated student work with consideration for improvement, progress, and effort. Self-evaluation was also encouraged and modeled.

In the late 1990s, Barbara Taylor, David Pearson, and other researchers at the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) began investigating school and classroom practices in schools with unexpectedly high achievement and compared them to what was happening in similar schools in which the children were not “beating the odds” (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). They identified 70 first-, second-, and third-grade teachers from 14 schools in Virginia, Minnesota, Colorado, and California. Teachers were observed monthly and kept weekly logs of instructional activities. They also completed a questionnaire on their reading/language arts instructional practices. Some of the teachers and principals also participated in interviews. In each classroom, data were gathered for two low and two average readers in the fall and in the spring. When comparing the classroom practices of the most effective teachers with those of the less effective teachers, researchers concluded that the most effective teachers shared these qualities:

- Had higher pupil engagement
- Provided more small-group instruction
- Provided more coaching to help children improve in word recognition
- Asked more higher-level comprehension questions
- Communicated more with parents
- Had children engage in more independent reading

For a peek into preschool and kindergarten classrooms that work, we invite you into classrooms observed by Connie Juel and associates (Juel, Biancarosa, Coker, & Deffes, 2003), who followed 200 low-income urban children from preschool to first grade. Juel and her associates tracked the development of these young children in two important areas—decoding and oral vocabulary. While it is generally accepted that young children need to develop phonemic awareness and phonics skills to become successful readers, meaning vocabulary—that is, the number of words students have meanings for in their speaking and listening vocabularies—is often ignored. Meaning vocabulary, however, is essential to comprehension, and deficits in the oral vocabularies of young children are apt to show up as comprehension deficits in future years.

When the 200 children were evaluated on their decoding and meaning vocabulary skills as they entered preschool, most showed deficits in both areas. The children improved in their decoding skills each year. By the middle of first grade, their average decoding scores were slightly above national norms. Although the children did make gains in oral vocabulary between preschool and first grade, they never caught up to national norms. In their vocabulary development, these low-income children were as far behind (nearly one standard deviation) in first grade as they had been in preschool.

Juel and her associates then looked at their classroom observations and coded all the instruction observed into five categories: letter-sound, oral language, anchored word, reading, and writing. The only category of activities that had a positive effect on oral vocabulary was anchored word instruction. Anchored word instruction was defined using an example from Pat Hutchins's *Rosie's Walk*:

The teacher had printed the words *pond*, *mill* and *haystack* on large cards which she places on the floor in front of her students. As she rereads the story, she points to the word cards and asks the students to walk around them the way Rosie walks around each of the locations in the book. The class discusses the meaning of the words *pond*, *mill* and *haystack*. (p. 13)

The article goes on to explain that the teacher then helps children with the sounds in the words *pond*, *mill*, and *haystack* but only after having the children actively involved in adding these words to their oral vocabularies. Choosing important words from reading, printing them on cards, and focusing specifically on their meanings is what Juel defines as *anchored word instruction*.

First-graders who had experienced more anchored word instruction had higher oral vocabulary scores. This increase occurred for children who entered preschool with low, average, and high levels of oral vocabulary. Conversely, the oral vocabulary scores of children in classrooms that spent the largest amount of time in letter-sound instruction decreased. This decrease in scores occurred for children who entered preschool with low,

average, and high levels of oral vocabulary. Juel concluded her research with one of the best arguments for the need for balanced instruction at all grade levels:

Ultimately, effective early reading instruction must help students learn to identify words and know their meanings. With so much research emphasizing the importance of early development in both word reading and language skills, we must consider how to provide instruction that fosters students' vocabulary development without losing the promising results of effective instruction in decoding. It does little good, after all, to be able to sound out the words *pond*, *mill* and *haystack* if you have no idea what they mean. (p. 18)

In 2005, Pat Cunningham conducted a study of effective schools (Cunningham, 2006; 2007). She identified six schools with high levels of poverty and large numbers of children who passed their states' literacy tests. The six schools were located in five different states. All but one school were located in medium-sized cities in the midwest, northeast, and southeast. The non-urban school was on an army base. The percentage of children in these schools who qualified for free/reduced-price lunch ranged from 68 to 98 percent. Students in two of the schools were predominately Hispanic and most of these students were English language learners. One school was almost exclusively African American. Two of the schools had mixed populations of children, with approximately half Caucasian and half African American students. In the army base school, 70 percent of the students were Caucasian. The tests taken by the students varied according to the states in which they were located. Scores on the 2005 state literacy tests indicated that between 68 and 87 percent of students met or exceeded the state's standards for proficiency. All six schools scored better on their literacy tests than other schools in their districts that had lower levels of poverty.

The third factor all three schools shared was that they used the Four Blocks framework to organize their literacy instruction. Four Blocks, a framework for balanced literacy in the primary grades, began in the 1989 school year in one first-grade classroom (Cunningham, Hall & Defee, 1991). Since then, it has expanded to include a Building Blocks framework in kindergarten and a Big Blocks framework in upper grades. At all grade levels, instructional time and emphasis is divided between a Words Block, which includes sight words, fluency, phonics, and spelling; a Guided Reading Block, which focuses on comprehension strategies for story and informational text and building prior knowledge and vocabulary; a Writing Block, which includes both process writing and focused writing; and a Self-Selected Reading Block, which includes teacher read-alouds and independent reading.

The six schools had three things in common: They had large numbers of poor children, they had done better than expected on their states' literacy tests, and they all used the Four Blocks framework. What did they do that allowed them to achieve their success? To attempt to answer this question, 12 factors were identified that research suggests are

important to high literacy achievement: assessment, community involvement, comprehensive curriculum, engagement, instruction, leadership, materials, parent participation, perseverance, professional development, specialist support, and time spent reading and writing. Through interviews and school visits, it was determined that all 12 factors were valued by the schools and played important roles in school decision making. To determine which of the 12 factors was most important to the schools' success, teachers and administrators completed a survey in which they ranked these 12 factors according to their perceived importance.

None of these factors is unimportant, but when the teachers and administrators in these schools were forced to decide what contributed most to their success ranked instruction, *time spent reading and writing*, the *engagement* of their students in the literacy activities, and their *perseverance* in sticking with the Four Blocks framework as the most important factors.

## *What We Know about Classrooms That Work*

Based on the research studies of effective classrooms, we can draw some firm conclusions about what it takes to create classrooms in which all the children learn to read and write.

### **The Most Effective Classrooms Provide Huge Amounts of Balanced, Comprehensive Instruction**

*Balance* is an overused word these days, but it is still an important concept in classroom instruction. Balance can be thought of as a multiple vitamin. We know that many vitamins are required for good health, and we try to eat a balanced diet. Many of us take a multiple vitamin each day as extra insurance that we are getting all the most important nutrients. The most effective teachers provide all the important ingredients that go into creating thoughtful, avid readers and writers. Exceptional teachers teach skills and strategies and also provide lots of time each day for children to read and write. The Juel study, in particular, points out the importance of balance (Juel et al., 2003). When teachers spend too much time on one component—teaching decoding—the development of another important component—oral vocabulary—suffers.

### **Children in the Most Effective Classrooms Do a Lot of Reading and Writing**

We have long known that the amount of reading and writing children do is directly related to how well they read and write. Classrooms in which all the students learned to read and write are classrooms in which the teachers gave more than “lip service” to the importance

of actually engaging in reading and writing. They planned their time so that children did a lot of reading and writing throughout the day—not just in the 100 minutes set aside for reading and language arts.

## **Science and Social Studies Are Taught and Integrated with Reading and Writing**

In a misguided effort to raise test scores, some schools have eliminated science and social studies in the primary grades and asked teachers just to focus on “the basics.” Unfortunately, children who have not had regular science and social studies instruction usually enter the intermediate grades with huge vocabulary deficits. Science and social studies are the “knowledge” part of the curriculum. Young children need to be increasing the size and depth of their meaning vocabularies so that they can comprehend the more sophisticated and less familiar text they will be reading as they get older. Exemplary teachers don’t choose reading and writing over science and social studies. Rather, they integrate reading and writing with the content areas. As children engage in science and social studies units, they have daily opportunities to increase the size of their meaning and knowledge stores and real reasons for reading and writing.

## **Meaning Is Central and Teachers Emphasize Higher-Level Thinking Skills**

In today’s society, where almost every job requires a high level of literacy, employers demand that the people they hire be able to communicate well and thoughtfully as they read and write. Low levels of literal comprehension and basic writing are no longer acceptable in the workplace. The most effective teachers emphasize higher-level thinking skills from the beginning. They ask questions that do not have just one answer. They engage students in conversations and encourage them to have conversations with one another. They teach students to problem solve, self-regulate, and monitor their own comprehension. Classrooms in which all the children learn to read and write are classrooms in which meaning is central to all instruction and activities.

## **Skills Are Explicitly Taught, and Children Are Coached to Use Them while Reading and Writing**

Excellent teachers know what skills children need to be taught, and they teach these skills explicitly—often through modeling and demonstration. More importantly, these excellent teachers never lose sight of the goals of skills instruction. When working with children in a small group or in a one-on-one reading or writing setting, these teachers remind children to use what they have been taught. Because the children are doing a lot of reading and writing, they have numerous opportunities to apply whatever skills they are learning.

## **Teachers Use a Variety of Formats to Provide Instruction**

The argument about whether instruction is best presented in a whole-class, small-group, or individual setting is settled when you observe excellent teachers. Teachers who get the best results from their children use a variety of formats, depending on what they want to accomplish. In addition to providing whole-class, small-group, and individual instruction themselves, excellent teachers use a variety of collaborative grouping arrangements to allow children to learn from one another. Excellent teachers group children in a variety of ways and change these groupings from day to day, depending on what format they determine will best achieve their goals.

## **A Wide Variety of Materials Are Used**

In some schools today, there is a constant search for the “magic bullet” to increase reading achievement. “What program should we buy?” is the question these schools ask. Not a single one of the exemplary teachers found in the various observational studies was using only one program or set of materials. All the teachers gathered and used the widest range of materials available to them. Administrators who restrict teachers to any one set of materials will find no support for this decision in the research on outstanding teachers.

## **Classrooms Are Well Managed and Have High Levels of Engagement**

In order to learn, children must be in a safe and orderly environment. If there are many disruptions and behavior management issues in a classroom, they will take the teacher’s time away from teaching and the children’s focus away from learning. All the teachers in the most effective classrooms had excellent classroom management. They expected children to behave in a kind and courteous manner and made these expectations known. These classrooms all had high levels of engagement. Almost all the children were doing what they were supposed to be doing almost all the time. If this seems a bit unreal to you, think about all the factors underlying these well-managed, highly engaging classrooms. Instead of doing a lot of worksheets and repetitive drills, the children were engaged in a lot of reading and writing. Because the teachers took into account the interests and needs of the children, the students were interested in what they were reading and writing. The fourth-grade classrooms, in particular, featured a great amount of managed choice and collaborative learning. Children spent time investigating topics they cared about with friends with whom they were encouraged to have conversations. Teachers focused their evaluations on improvement and progress, and they guided the children in becoming self-reliant and

responsible for their own learning. Classrooms in which the activities seem real and important to the children are classrooms in which children are more engaged with learning and less apt to find reasons to be disruptive.

## *Creating Your Own Classroom That Works, Even Better*

From the first edition to the current edition, we have been writing this book for you—the classroom teacher. It has been clear to everyone for decades that the teacher is the most important variable in how well children learn to read and write. The critical role of the teacher in determining reading achievement was confirmed by Nye, Konstantopoulos, and Hedges (2004) in a large study that showed that teacher effects were more powerful than any other variable, including class size and socioeconomic status. Although there are many restrictions on what elementary classroom teachers can do, most teachers are still given a great deal of freedom in deciding exactly how their classrooms will be run, how the various materials will be used, what the daily schedule will be like, what kinds of instructional formats they will use, how they will monitor and assess the progress of their students, and how they will create a well-managed, engaging environment. By learning from the most exemplary teachers—teachers who “beat the odds” in helping all their children achieve thoughtful literacy—you can create classrooms that work *even better* than they have in the past. We hope the practical information contained in the rest of this book will help you make your teaching even more exemplary and more effective.

