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Characteristics of exemplary first-grade literacy instruction

*Research conducted in New Jersey
reveals a portrait of exemplary first-
grade literacy instruction.*

“**W**hat does exemplary first-grade literacy instruction look like?” “Who would be chosen if administrators were asked to identify the most outstanding first-grade educators in their districts?” “When observed, what would these teachers do in their classrooms?” “When interviewed, what would these teachers say about their beliefs and practices regarding first-grade literacy instruction?” These questions and others motivated a large-scale investigation of exemplary first-grade literacy instruction. Observations and interviews related to the topic were conducted in five states across the United States; this article presents a description of the research conducted in New Jersey and an analysis of our research findings.

Theoretical rationale for a study of exemplary first-grade literacy instruction

A vast amount of research regarding early literacy instruction currently exists. Often such studies are designed so that a single component of literacy instruction is evaluated, for example, a specific technique designed to improve reading comprehension or students' vocabulary. This type of research, which can also compare one method of literacy instruction with another, provides valuable documenta-

tion regarding components of literacy programs or methods that are most likely to facilitate children's literacy growth. By examining specific variables or methods, researchers make recommendations about which individual elements should ideally be included in high-quality literacy education programs.

In contrast to research that examines individual variables or methods and then makes recommendations about how these elements can be integrated into the classroom, studies of exemplary instruction fall into the research category of investigations about expert performance. These studies attempt to capture as many dimensions as possible of expert performances. Studies of expert performances allow us to examine real-life situations in which many variables are already successfully integrated. In this capacity, observations of experts teach us through modeling. Experts also inform us through their own descriptions of their work. Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996) state,

Our assumption, consistent with expert theory (Chi, Glaser, & Farr, 1988; Ericsson & Smith, 1991; Hoffmann, 1992), was that effective primary reading teachers would have a privileged understanding of literacy instruction. That is, they would be aware of the elements of their teaching, in part because their teaching is the result of many decisions about what works in their classrooms and what does not. (p. 365)

Surprisingly, however, although studies of experts are a well-used technique in other professions, a review of the literature by Pressley et al. (1996) reported a gap in the literature on early reading instruction from this perspective. This project helps fill that gap.

This project also had a secondary goal embedded within the overall goal of studying exemplary first-grade instruction. This goal was to provide insight from experts about concerns of constructivist, explicit, and balanced instructional approaches that have been discussed for decades. In this project it was believed that studying exemplary teachers' practices and beliefs regarding constructivist models, explicit instructional approaches, and balanced perspectives would meaningfully enhance the reading community's understanding of these issues.

Selection of exemplary teachers

We observed six first-grade exemplary teachers from three different school districts in

New Jersey. Supervisors and administrators in these districts were asked to choose exemplary teachers using criteria we set forth for them. We asked that supervisors select teachers who were successful in educating large proportions of their students to be readers and writers. We also asked them to check the achievement records, test performances, reading levels, and writing abilities of the students belonging to the nominated teachers over the last 5 years. Furthermore, we asked supervisors to identify teachers who could articulate a sound teaching philosophy that matched their practices in the classroom. Supervisors and administrators were asked to consider student enthusiasm and engagement regarding reading and writing in these classrooms. Finally, we asked that supervisors have firsthand observations of the nominated teachers and that they select individuals who were frequently referred to with positive comments from other teachers, administrators, and parents. Supervisors were asked to rate their own confidence in their evaluations of the teachers by indicating whether they were absolutely certain, highly confident, confident, somewhat confident, or not confident in their opinion.

Procedures used to collect and analyze the data

We visited each classroom in the study eight times during its language arts block and twice for a full day during the course of an academic school year. Approximately 25 hours of observation were completed in each classroom. During our visits we recorded information about literacy instruction such as the schedule of the language arts block, word analysis instruction, comprehension development, language development, assessment strategies, social interaction during literacy instruction, affective teaching characteristics, student engagement, classroom management, and the physical environment. During whole-group instruction the entire lesson was recorded. When a small group was meeting as other students worked at centers, the observer would note the variety of activities occurring and then focus on one of them for as long as seemed necessary to understand it. Overall, we attempted to record any information that seemed relevant to understanding the literacy instruction in the classroom. In addition to ob-

servations, teachers were interviewed concerning their philosophies about teaching literacy and practices they chose to implement.

At the beginning of the study each of the four observers coded his or her own data by classifying it into categories that emerged during the observed instruction. After every observer had been in each classroom three times, we compared categories. Together we developed a set of categories that reflected a consensus of the observers about the characteristics of the classrooms. The categories continued to be refined as observations continued. Teacher interviews at the beginning and end of the study were used as data in the coding. The categories that emerged were types of reading and writing, teaching skills, use of teachable moments, content area connections, literacy-rich environments in classrooms, and classroom management.

In writing up the study we chose to create a synthesis of what we had observed in the classrooms rather than reporting on each classroom individually. We therefore combined the data from the six teachers and created a model of the exemplary practices observed. Not all of what we describe occurred in all classrooms; nevertheless, this description is based on what occurred in most classrooms.

An introduction to the teachers and their school districts

Teachers in this study had 9 to 25 years of experience, and all had master's degrees. The districts involved included children from middle to lower middle income families. The school populations were diverse with about 50% of the children being Caucasian, 20% African American, 10% Hispanic, 10% Asian, and 10% from various other backgrounds. The public school districts we chose provided extensive staff development for their teachers, and the principals assumed a major role with instructional issues in the school. Principals tended to visit the classrooms regularly and were respected by the teachers. Teachers were given responsibility for decisions about instruction. In general, a collaborative climate existed among administrators, teachers, and parents in the buildings, thus creating positive and productive atmospheres in the schools.

Interview data from teachers

Interviews with the selected teachers about their philosophies and practices used in literacy instruction revealed that they all advocated extended periods of time to develop the language arts. They talked about designing programs around literacy themes, such as the study of poetry, authors, or elements of story structure. They also advocated the integration of a content area unit into their curriculum that also included reading, writing, and math. They believed that skills should be taught within a context and reinforced when opportunities arose. They felt strongly that meeting individual needs required instructing children in small groups based on specific needs. These groups changed often, because student progress was evaluated frequently. They discussed the use of holistic strategies in their teaching, strong programs for skill development, and careful designs for delivering instruction. Teachers recognized the importance of a supportive attitude toward students and a positive atmosphere in their rooms to motivate children to learn. Many also commented on the importance of the home-school connection in supporting children's literacy development. When we observed the teachers we found the ideas they expressed were truly put into practice.

Physical environment in the classrooms

The classrooms we observed had literacy-rich environments. Children's desks were grouped to encourage social interaction. The perimeter of the rooms housed learning centers, including several devoted to literacy. The rooms had colorful rugs for group meetings, listening to stories, and minilessons. All rooms had an abundance of materials on the walls including calendars, weather charts, helper charts, rules for the class, other charts with functional information, and many displays of children's work. There was always a special chair where the teacher read to the children and where the children had the opportunity to tell experiences and read stories they had written. This area also had an experience chart easel.

There were tables for guided reading lessons, most often shaped like a half moon. The teacher sat on the inside of the table facing the rest of the class, and the children sat around the other side. In this area the teacher had a

pocket chart for sentence strips, individual erasable boards for word analysis work, ability-level reading materials, record-keeping folders, and a stand for writing charts. Children often stored their individual reading materials in resealable plastic bags. These were placed in students' personal corrugated cardboard boxes.

Each of the centers, art, math, social studies, science, and literacy, had materials about the content area and special materials for activities linked to current topics. Reading and writing materials were present at all centers. There were open-faced bookshelves featuring special books about current themes, and books in baskets representing different levels and genres. Bulletin boards where children's work was featured were also present. There were also forms for signing into centers and systems for checking out books to take home. Themes and skills being studied were quite evident through the artwork, written work, artifacts, charts, and posters displayed. Poetry charts were hung in the room and matched either the themes under study or the word analysis skill being taught. All materials were visually and physically accessible for the children.

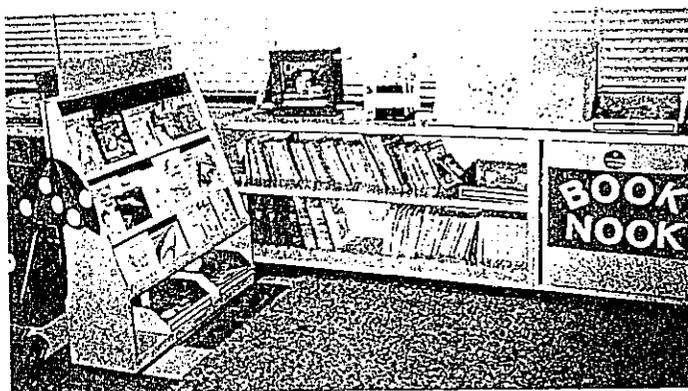
Types of reading experiences

Many types of reading experiences were carried out daily. During the morning meeting children sat on the rug and listened to a shared read-aloud experience for the whole class. The stories read were consistently high-quality children's literature that was tied to the theme being studied by the class. The teacher read sitting in a comfortable chair, facing the children who sat on a rug in front of her. The teacher had a purpose for the reading that was reinforced with discussion before, during, and after the story.

A second type of reading observed in these classrooms was partner reading. Children participated in partner reading independent of the teacher. Sometimes the teachers assigned partners; other times the students were able to select partners themselves. Children then chose stories from a basket that had books related to the authors or themes about which they were learning. The partners took turns reading aloud to each other. They helped each other if needed.

Guided reading groups was a third form of reading in the classroom. These groups met daily and were composed of children having

Photo 1
Rich literacy environments



Photos by Lesley Mandel Morrow

similar reading needs. Teachers typically had four to six reading groups in each classroom. Children brought their individual resealable bags containing all of their needed materials to their reading lesson. During the reading groups explicit instruction occurred. Children read a familiar book they had previously read, and then a new book was introduced. The books came most often from a set of ability-level materials. The teachers helped the children read through the books and took notes about their reading performance: "reads slowly, reads word by word, self-corrected errors, used multiple strategies to figure out words," etc. The book was then taken home in the bag with a reading assignment accompanied by a place for a parent's signature. Teachers evaluated students monthly to change their group placements as needed.

Independent reading was supported by elaborate literacy centers in these classrooms.

Photo 2
Independent reading along with the teacher
and with peers at school



Photos by Deborah Gee Woo

The literacy centers had large collections of children's literature sorted into baskets that were labeled by topics, genre, and levels of reading. This organizational system provided easy access for individual and collaborative reading in school. Colorful rugs, pillows, and stuffed animals attracted students to the area. Simple procedures for borrowing books facilitated reading at home. Storytelling materials accompanied some selections of literature for the students' use and enjoyment. Audiotaped stories, tape recorders, and headsets were also available for the children.

Types of writing experiences

Children wrote daily and in many different forms. In interviews, the teachers noted how

important and closely connected writing was to the development of reading (e.g., "I can often tell children's reading level when I review their writing. Writing helps them with decoding skills and subsequently with reading").

Children had journals and wrote daily, personal entries. Sometimes they used their journals for spelling words and recording special words. Teachers had writing workshops where children selected and wrote about topics that interested them such as a movie they had seen or a person they admired. Before these writings, teachers carried out minilessons about the mechanics of writing such as punctuation or creating well-formed stories. The lessons were based on the needs of students. Children wrote their stories and had a conference with either another child or the teacher about revisions. When the story was finished it was read to other students for feedback. Children were guided on how to offer constructive criticism, such as, "I like the first part of your story, but you need to explain the second part more clearly." When stories were completed, they were bound and placed in the classroom library for others to read. In addition to journal writing, children participated in story writing, content area writing, and writing with a partner. They also observed their teacher's writing. The following is representative of the amount and kinds of writing activities that happened daily.

The teacher wrote the morning message that was dictated by the children. Her writing provided a fine model of manuscript. Then a story read by the teacher was related to a written assignment for the children to complete at center time with a partner. The partners were encouraged to talk about what they would write. For example, after reading *Swimmy* (Lionni, 1973) during a unit about cooperation, the children were asked to write about when a friend helped them. The teacher checked to see that everyone had an idea as a result of a group discussion. The children talked about what they would write with a partner and then did a first draft of their story. After writing, they read their drafts to their partners, who gave suggestions for revisions. The children did their revisions and then read the pieces to each other for final editing.

Writing was integrated into content areas as well. Records of science experiments were kept in science journals. Math projects often

required writing, such as when the students were studying geometric shapes and had to find and list the shapes within objects in their classroom. When studying circles, for instance, Kelly wrote "cookie, clock, and paper plate." Writing was also connected to social studies through a variety of assignments and activities.

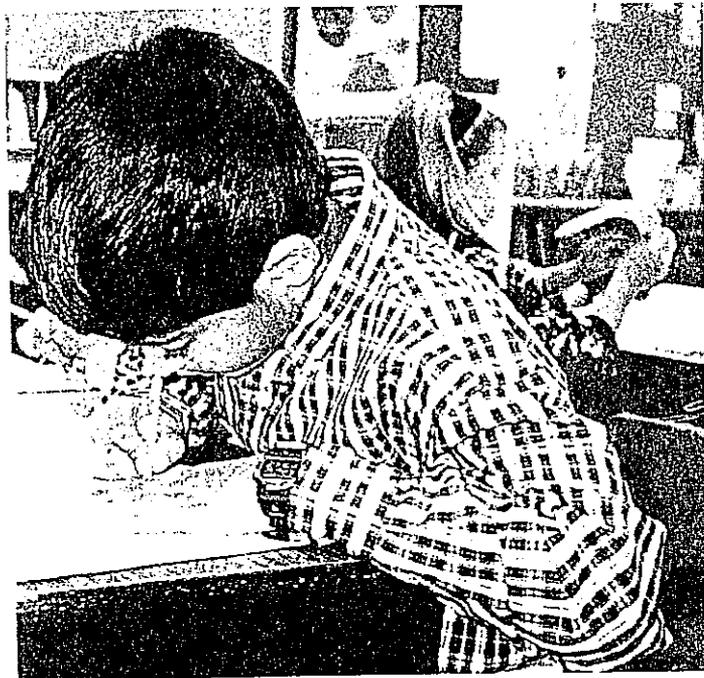
Finally, writing was incorporated into guided reading groups. Often students had to write in response to the books that they had read or the activities that had been completed that day.

How skills were taught

Both planned and spontaneous skill development happened during the school day. Early in the day children's language skills were strengthened when they talked about things brought from home. They had to speak clearly in a voice that could be heard, use complete sentences, and pronounce words to the best of their ability. This was a planned activity in which the teacher spontaneously responded to the students.

In a similar mix of planned and spontaneous instruction, teachers printed initial consonants and word chunks for the children to find at the bottom of each morning message. These consonants and word chunks were the skills being emphasized at the time. There were also minilessons that featured elements in phonics such as learning about digraphs or vowel sounds. The teachers connected the minilesson to the content of a story read. In one observation the class was learning about animals, and the teacher read *Petunia* (Duvoisin, 1950) to promote a discussion about farm animals. She introduced other books about animals, such as *Pet Show* (Keats, 1972), *Pig in the Pond* (Brown, 1973), and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (Potter, 1904). She read the titles to the children, and they discussed the animals in the books. She asked the children to study the letters in the titles of the books and asked if they found anything interesting. Several hands went up. Chris noticed that the letter *p* was in all of them. They proceeded to make a list of words that were animals beginning with *p*. They listed *polar bear*, *panda bears*, *pigs*, and *ponies*. When they couldn't think of any more the teacher asked for any words that included a *p* and wrote those down.

Photo 3
Independent writing and collaborative writing



Photos by Deborah Gee Woo

Much explicit, planned skill development took place during guided reading lessons. The format for the lessons included reviewing words from a story already read, writing in a journal, reading a familiar story already practiced, and building a comprehension strategy into the discussion of the story. After the story was read, children arranged cut up words from the story into sentences and used story sentence strips to sequence and read. They mixed up their words and sentence strips and had to reorganize them to make sense. A word analy-

sis skill taken from the context of the book read was also taught. Each child had his or her own erasable board to work with words. They worked with sound-symbol relationships and phonemic awareness.

A new book and its new vocabulary were introduced. The book was discussed to build background knowledge, and children took turns reading. Teachers took notes as the children read to document their strengths and needs. Each child wrote new words in his or her journal and a new journal entry. Teachers discussed homework that included reading the familiar book to a family member, practicing word cards associated with the book, and reading the new book. At the end of the reading lesson, teachers wrote notes to each family about the child's progress and explained the homework. Children followed along as the note was written. Parents were asked to sign the homework card and add their own notes.

Planned skill development was also fostered through the study of a "focus child" during guided reading group time. Each day in the guided reading lesson teachers focused attention on one particular child. In this way the teacher was able to assess that particular child's strengths and weaknesses. While all children in the group were observed during the activities, the focus child did more tasks than others and was more closely evaluated by the teacher. Thus, all the children had the advantage of a small-group setting, but once a week each child was the target child and received individualized instruction and evaluation. Teachers often used running records to monitor the focus child's performance.

The teachers had systematic methods for teaching comprehension skills. Comprehension development was embedded in both the reading of storybooks and in guided reading lessons. Many strategies were introduced to students, from engaging them in story retelling, to repeated readings of stories, revisiting the text, making predictions, drawing conclusions, and demonstrating knowledge of structural elements of stories. Students studied styles of authors and illustrators and responded to literature in discussions and writing.

The teachers we observed also had very strong word analysis programs. They introduced vowels, consonants, and word patterns. Whenever we observed, work in some area of

word analysis occurred. Phonic skills were taught within minilessons and reinforced in independent work and in guided reading lessons. Poems were used to emphasize word patterns, and lists of words demonstrating letter patterns learned were printed on charts. Teachers also had Word Walls on which were listed already taught word families, onsets, and rimes.

We were impressed with the knowledge these teachers had about the teaching of reading skills. In their interviews they supported the idea of a strong emphasis upon skills but stated that the manner in which they were taught was also important. They said they taught skills in contextual settings through the use of children's literature and themes in opportunistic situations and rarely used commercially prepared worksheets. Teachers often created their own sheets for skill development that supported their approach to instruction. They also had manipulative games for skill development.

Taking advantage of teachable moments

In addition to planning their instruction, teachers seized opportunities for teachable moments. For example, on the day the children had talked about the *sh* word chunk, Alida brought in her soccer team shirt because the class was talking about sports in their unit about Healthy Bodies and the importance of exercise. The teacher drew the children's attention to the chart where they had written words that had the *sh* sound to see if the word *shirt* had been included. It wasn't on the chart so they added it. In another example, when reading a story, a word might come up that the teacher sensed was unknown to the group. She or he would begin a discussion about the word, write it on the board, and encourage the children to use it in their writing. In the course of conversation, one would hear these teachers say, "Remember when we were learning about the chunk *ap*? Well, the word *trap* that we just talked about uses that chunk." The teachers used teachable moments whenever possible.

Content area connections with literacy

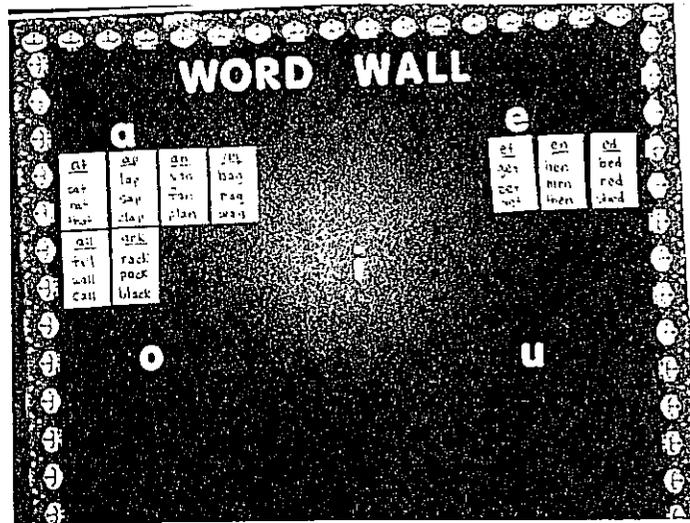
The teaching we observed included extremely strong cross-curricular connections. The classes were consistently engaged in the-

matic studies including author, science, social studies, holidays, and special events. The stories that were read in the classrooms were almost exclusively theme related. Books for partner reading and guided reading materials were often related. Topics for writing were connected, and center activities were thematic as well.

One of the first grades, for example, was studying nutrition. The teacher read the story *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969), and the children discussed the food the caterpillar ate and why he got sick. The snack for the day was composed of foods the caterpillar had eaten, such as apples, oranges, plums, and pears. The teacher selected a poetry book, *What's on the Menu* (Goldstein, 1992), that was about food and also included a great deal of rhyme. The book was selected to match the nutrition theme and the literary theme of rhyming words. The math center had different fruits in a basket, and the students' task was to ask members of the class which type of fruit each preferred for a snack. The students tallied and graphed the preferences. In the art center students created a collage of pictures of healthy foods from food magazines. A selection of children's literature was available to reinforce the focus on rhyming words, and several were about food. For the guided reading lesson there were predictable books and poems to read about food.

The extremely strong presence of themes taught through cross-curricular connections was one of the most extraordinary characteristics of outstanding first-grade literacy instruction. Educators know how difficult it is to pull so many connecting materials and ideas together, but these teachers did it daily, all the time. We were so impressed we asked them about it. They responded: "It was something I learned in college and I believe that it makes learning more interesting and meaningful." "I've worked on this over the years of my teaching. It isn't easy, but I believe it's very important to make skill development purposeful." "Each year I add to my repertoire of stories, songs, poems, art activities, math, science, and social studies for units of study, holidays and other special days. Now it isn't difficult to integrate my curriculum. I have the materials and ideas, but keep adding to them all the time."

Photo 4
Minilessons for skill development



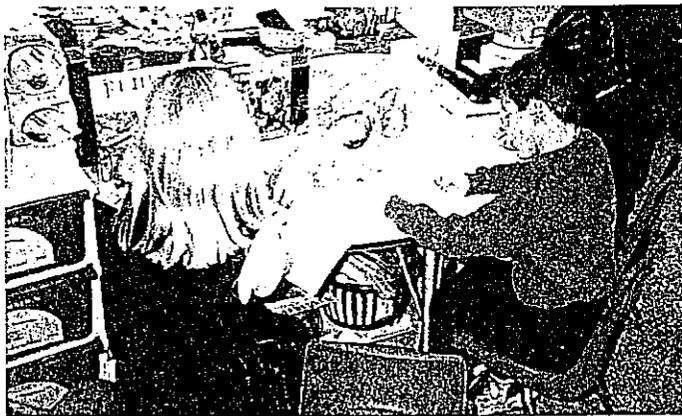
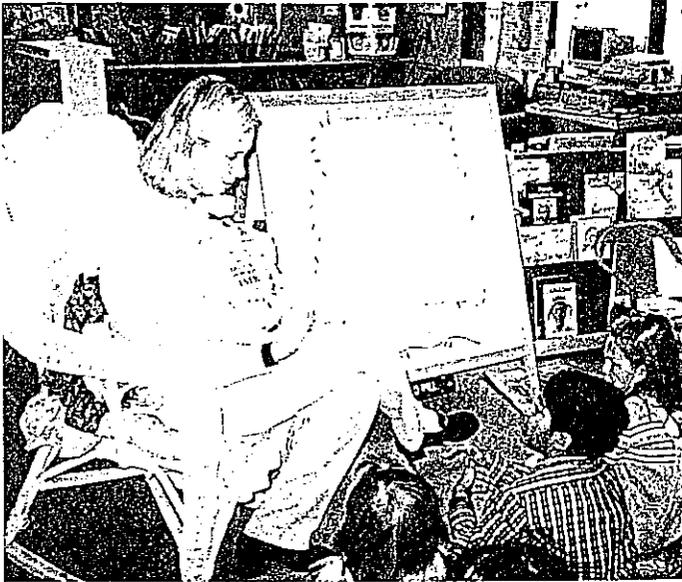
Photos by Lesley Mandel Morrow

Classroom management

Effective classroom management begins with the physical design of the classroom. These classrooms were rich with accessible materials. Early in the school year, the children were introduced to the design of the classroom and how the different areas were used.

From the first day of school the teachers worked on helping the children become self-

Photo 5
Content connections for reading and writing



Photos by Deborah Gee Woo

directed learners who could think for themselves. The first few weeks of school were used to master the routines that included whole-class lessons, partner reading, guided reading groups, and the use of learning centers. Children learned how to sit on the rug during lessons and how to take turns. Rules were discussed and developed by the class so the children felt a sense of responsibility to carry them out. Children learned how to function with and without the teacher. Teachers were consistent with routines and enforcing rules.

The effective management of learning centers was integral to the success of these classrooms. Initially students had to master the

basic system for using the centers, such as how many children could be at a center at any one time, and how many center activities needed to be completed in a single day. Some teachers let the students freely choose which centers they would work at as long as a seat was available; other teachers used a chart to manage group rotation. In all the classrooms, however, children had to account for their work at the centers. In one room, for example, students signed a form after completing activities. In most of the classrooms children were able to choose free play, computer time, or reading at the literacy center after they had completed their required center activities. Helping students learn how to become independent learners during center time at the beginning of the school year allowed these teachers to devote their attention to small guided reading groups that occurred simultaneously with center time.

Teachers were extremely aware of what was happening in their rooms. They were virtually always in a position where they could see everyone in the room. If involved in reading groups, teachers were in a corner of the room where they could observe all the children working. Similarly, the teachers seemed extremely attuned to intervening *before* a problem escalated in the classroom. Like good parents, these teachers seemed to possess a sixth sense for when things became too noisy, or even too quiet, in an area of the classroom. This high level of *with-it-ness* was a prominent element of the exemplary teachers' classroom management style.

These teachers realized that good planning of interesting activities acted as a preventative measure for misbehavior. The days in their classrooms were highly planned and included a wide variety of activities that took place in whole-group, small-group, paired, and individual settings. Teachers were also thoughtful about the sequencing of their planned activities, ensuring that their young students had opportunities to move around and talk between quieter, more serious, academic activities. All of this careful planning was designed to increase the likelihood that the students would stay engaged and on task during class, ensuring the likelihood of success and a positive classroom climate. One teacher said, "If children are actively involved in interesting experiences that are challenging but can bring

success, they are likely to remain engaged in their work."

Students rarely needed discipline because the rules, routine, and a respectful atmosphere created by teachers provided an environment where productive work was accomplished. If problems did occur, however, teachers almost always spoke softly and respectfully about the problem. If possible, the teachers seemed to prefer to talk to the child contributing to the problem in a private conversation. When a child was off task the teacher helped the child redirect his or her energies by setting up contingency rules for continued misbehavior.

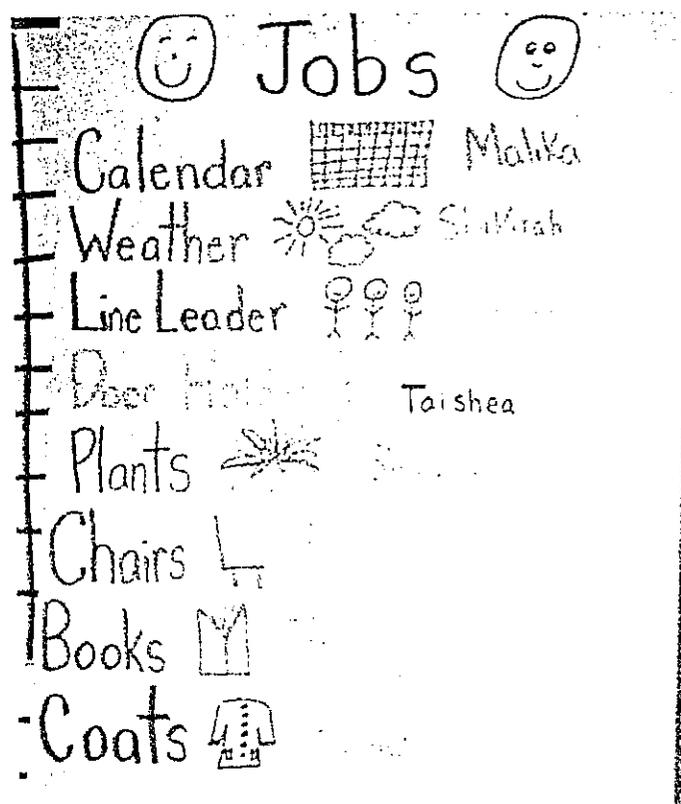
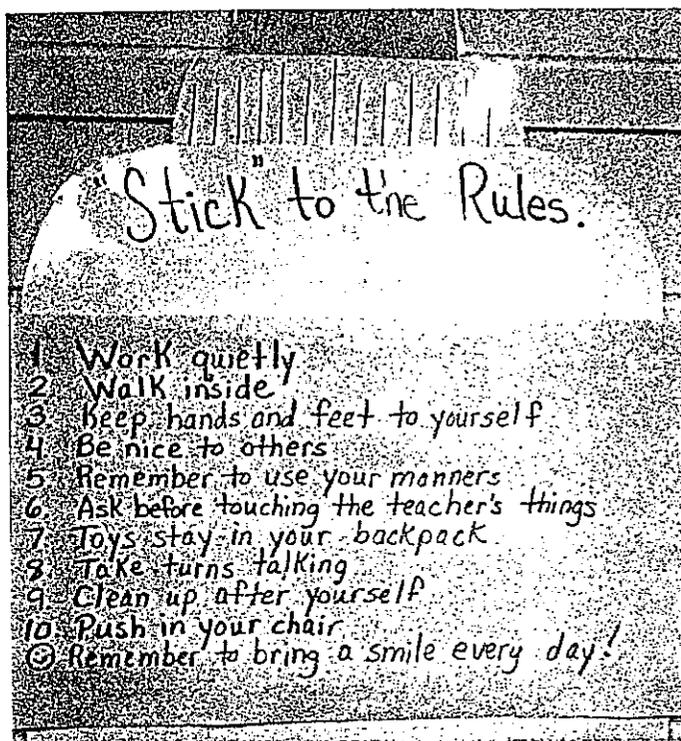
Finally, these teachers interacted with their students in a very positive manner. They often gave positive reinforcement and constructive comments when necessary. The positive reinforcement was given for real accomplishment, and constructive comments were given with genuine concern for each child's self-esteem. The teachers had a large vocabulary filled with encouraging and reinforcing phrases, such as "Good job!" "Wow, you really do understand that," "I bet you'll get that right if you try," "Let me give you some clues about that," "I love the way you are doing your work today," and "I think you'll really like this new job I have planned for you." One of the teachers noted, "I treat the children as if they are adults. I never talk down to them. I address them with respect, since I think they appreciate this. In return, I have found that they treat me and each other in the same way."

A day in these classrooms

From our observations we have combined elements from all classrooms to create what we believe to be an exemplary first-grade language arts/literacy learning block.

When children enter the room in the morning they take out their journals and begin writing about something of interest to them. After all the children are settled and the school's opening exercises are completed, the students come to the rug for a morning meeting. The day begins by discussing the calendar and weather. The students then count how many days have passed in November and how many days are left. Then, using chart paper, the teacher begins the morning message, which has some news about a guest who will help them with an exercise program, because they

Photo 6
Classroom management charts



Photos by Ellen G. Abene

Photo 7
Modeling center activities for independent work

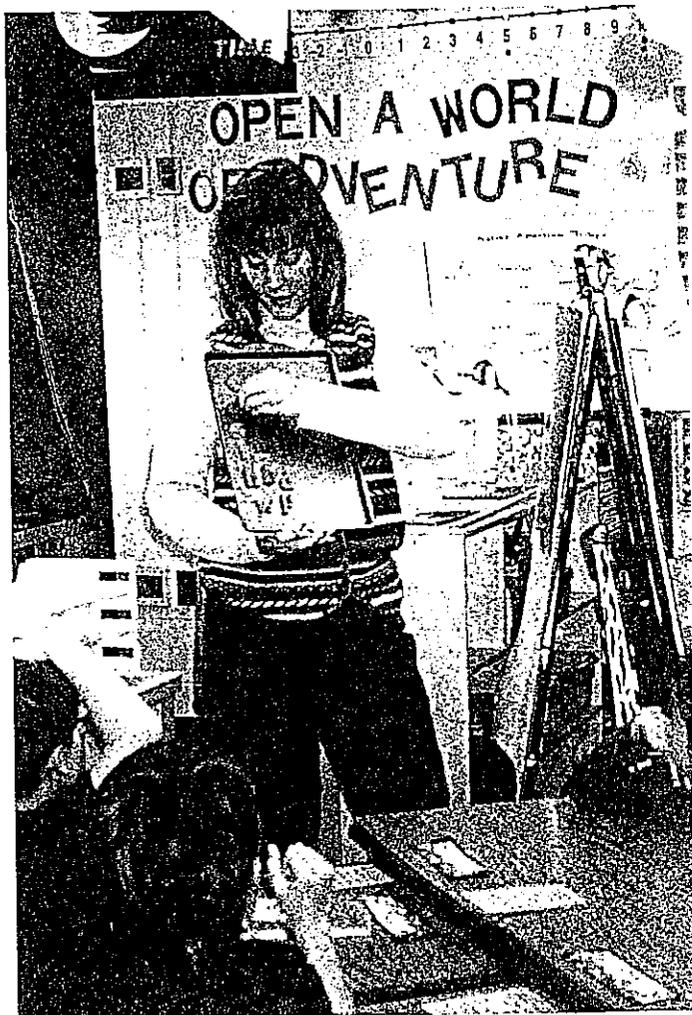


Photo by Lesley Mandel Morrow



Photo by Deborah Hanna

are studying about Healthy Bodies and Healthy Minds. Children dictate sentences about healthy food they ate over the weekend and healthy activities they performed. After the message is written and read the teacher asks the class to look for print within the message related to word analysis elements being studied. They notice that the word *healthy* uses the *th* chunk.

Following the morning message several children have the opportunity to share things brought from home that relate to the current theme. Kim has her mom's grocery list, and she reads the healthy foods on it. Keisha has a cookbook and reads a healthy recipe.

After the children's oral sharing the teacher reads a piece of theme-related children's literature. The story, *Grandma's Helper* (Meyer, 1993), is about a Hispanic child and her grandmother who spoke only Spanish. Because the granddaughter could speak English her grandmother would bring her along food shopping. Prior to reading the story the teacher begins a discussion about foods needed to keep our bodies healthy. Then the discussion turns to helping others as a way to make us feel good about ourselves. One child talks about helping her grandma walk because she has to use a cane.

Immediately before reading, the teacher sets a purpose for the children's listening. She asks them to listen to find out in what ways the little girl helped her grandmother. After the story is read, the class talks about how the little girl had helped her grandma. The teacher asks the children how they have helped others. She asks students to write about a time when they helped someone during center activities. As a model for what the children will be doing later, the teacher writes on the chart paper how she had helped her mother prepare Thanksgiving dinner.

At the end of the morning meeting the teacher reviews, and in some cases models, the center activities that the children will be expected to complete later that day. In the math center the task is to "Find a partner, have your partner use a timer, and count how many jumping jacks you can do in one minute. Write it down on the paper provided and do the same for your partner." In the science center there is a figure of a child on a felt board and figures with felt backings of a brain, heart, lungs.

and stomach. The children are to place the body organs in the correct part of the body. There is also a sheet with a figure and body parts on which each child is to draw the organs in the correct position. In the art center there are magazines and scissors for children to create healthy food collages. In the language center children are to write all the foods they can think of from A to Z. Working with a partner and using one sheet of paper per letter, children write the food name and draw it as well.

Immediately before the self-directed activities begin the children chant a poem that is on a chart. The teacher asks the children to look for the consonant *t* and the *th* chunk in the words of a chant she wrote.

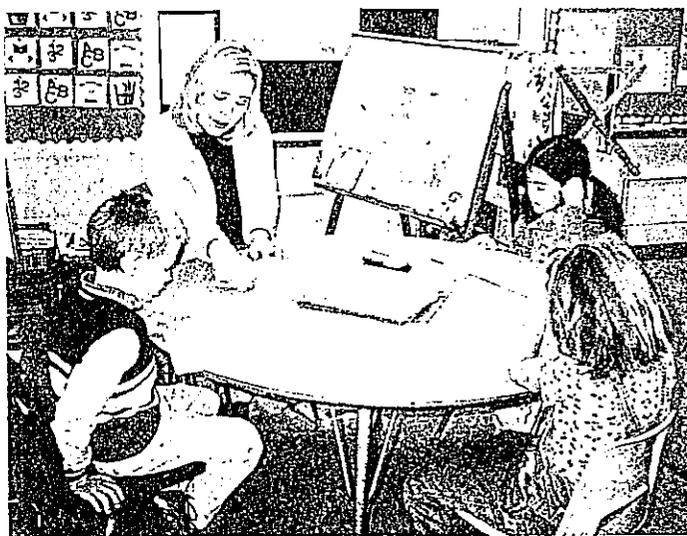
We ate toast on Monday
We ate tomato soup on Tuesday
We ate tacos on Wednesday
We ate turnips on Thursday
We got thirsty on Friday so
We had ice tea and
We ate turkey with trimmings on Saturday. Yum Yum!

The self-directed activities begin with students choosing a book to read about nutrition with a partner. The books include *Grandma's Helper* (Meyer, 1993), *Potatoes on Tuesday* (Lillegard, 1993), *Potluck* (Corbitt, 1962), *Cookies* (Pappas, 1980), *This Is the Plate* (Trussell-Cullen, 1995), and *Engelbert's Exercise* (Paxton, 1993). Partners read together, and when finished they start on their writing activity about someone whom they have helped. They continue their partnerships in this writing assignment, from a prewriting discussion to a conference after the first draft. Following these tasks the children complete their center activities.

While the children engage in these self-directed activities, the teacher meets with small groups for guided reading lessons. The day is so well managed and coordinated that when it is snack time, Jonathan, who is in charge, puts on a tape of classical music that signals everyone to set aside what they are doing, take out their healthy snacks, and eat and socialize. After 10 minutes, Jonathan turns the tape off, and the class returns to their independent activities and guided reading groups.

In the reading groups, familiar books are read, some relating to the Healthy Bodies and Healthy Minds theme. The students work with

Photo 8
A guided reading small-group lesson and running reading assessment



Photos by Deborah Gee Woo

sequencing sentence strips, identifying words from the cut up sentence strips and putting them in order. The story is read and discussed. The initial consonant *t* and the *th* chunk are reviewed. A new book is introduced with background information on the story as well as some phonics skills. The teacher keeps records on the children's performance and sends homework notes home in their bag of materials. Lunch follows these morning activities.

Writing Workshop is in the afternoon. Children work on books about good nutrition, and the teacher leads a minilesson about capital letters at the beginning of sentences and periods at the end. Those who are at the final

editing stages with their stories have conferences with the teacher.

In the afternoon there is also a special class activity. It starts with a written recipe for making fruit salad. With the teacher's guidance the students discuss the types and amounts of fruit they need. One student's mother comes in to help make the fruit salad that they eat before going home. The day concludes with a final class meeting. Here the highlights of the day are briefly reviewed, the children are reminded to complete their homework, and the teacher tells them what they can look forward to tomorrow.

Summary

Our goal was to describe characteristics of six teachers identified as exemplary and combine their practices into one story. This observational approach allowed us to answer the question "What is the nature of exemplary early literacy instruction?"

The classrooms we observed were happy, productive places for first-grade children. Teachers built a community for learning that included cooperation, respect, and strong expectations for work and achievement. These characteristics are found in the research on effective teaching. The classrooms were rich with materials for children to have choices, challenges, social interaction, and success. The children completed pencil and paper activities, were exposure to literature, and worked with commercially prepared reading instructional materials. The classrooms had provisions for whole-group, small-group, paired, and one-to-one instruction. The teachers provided varied experiences that were developmentally appropriate and also included an emphasis on skill development. Teaching was explicit, direct, and systematic. It also included experiences designed to foster the construction of meaning, problem solving, and taking advantage of spontaneous teachable moments.

Teachers were consistent in their management techniques, so children knew what was expected of them and consequently carried out work that needed to be done. The day flowed smoothly from one activity to the next, and routines were regular. The activities were varied to keep the children engaged. Furthermore, the affective quality in the rooms was exemplary: teachers were warm and caring. They

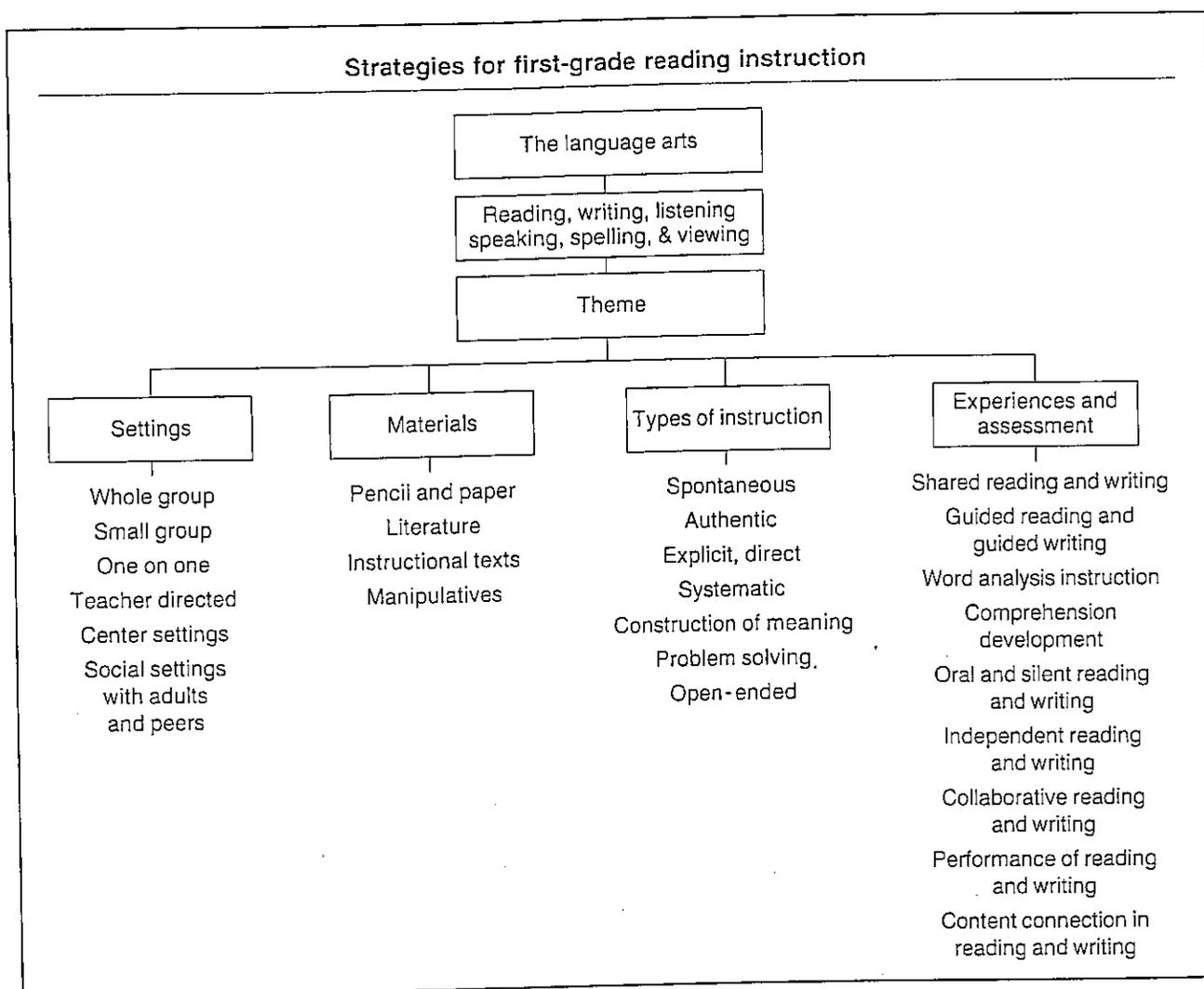
were concerned about how children were treated. In such an atmosphere, children learned to respect the teacher and one another.

The children in these classrooms experienced literacy in a variety of forms. Shared reading and writing activities, independent reading and writing, social collaborative reading and writing, and guided reading and writing for skill development took place throughout the day. Children took part in oral and silent reading, writing, and minilessons modeled by teachers. Content area themes were integrated into the reading and writing experiences to bring meaning to skill development. Children had opportunities to perform or share reading and writing accomplishments. The Figure presents the characteristics observed in exemplary first-grade literacy instruction.

The teachers based their classrooms on their philosophies of how children learn. They were consciously aware of their philosophies and could articulate them. Moreover, the teachers worked in schools that supported and expected outstanding performance from them. The atmosphere in their buildings was professional with frequent staff development sessions. Teachers met regularly by grade levels to share and plan, and the principals played an important role in supporting curriculum development. These teachers took the initiative to expand their knowledge by obtaining graduate degrees in education, attending professional conferences, and reading professional materials.

This study confirms some of what we already know about early literacy instruction and also adds new insights. The descriptions of the teachers in their classrooms and the responses to the questionnaires suggest that teachers use what has been referred to as a balanced perspective for literacy instruction. Children were exposed both to the direct, explicit instruction for skill development associated with traditional literacy instruction and to the experiences that encourage social collaboration and constructive problem solving associated with an integrated language arts approach. The instruction in early literacy that we observed involved explicit skill development taught in the context of authentic literature and integrated with writing and content area connections. All of the language arts instruction was embedded in classrooms with outstanding classroom management systems

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and positive affective climates. These exemplary teachers used both transmission and constructivist models of learning. Their explicit teaching of skills provided a strong foundation for constructivist activities, and the constructivist activities subsequently permitted the consolidation and elaboration of skills.

Exemplary teaching involves a great deal of knowledge, experience, and expertise. The classrooms that we observed occurred as a result of careful thought, planning, and a conscious knowledge of a philosophy of education. These teachers exemplify the best that first-grade literacy instruction can offer. We believe a great deal can be learned from studying their practices, beliefs, enthusiasm, dedication, and very hard work.

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