



[Book Club](#)
[Forums](#)
[Resources](#)
[Calendar](#)
[Store](#)
[Home](#)

Teaching Kids To Read

Working With Families

News & Views

Teaching Kids to Read

The Basics

At Home

At School

Teaching Effectively

- Pre-K & K
- Grades 1-3
- ESL
- Alphabets
- Fluency
- Comprehension
- Writing
- Spelling

Assessment

Working With Families

School-wide Programs

Professional Development

Search

Teaching Kids to Read > At School > Teaching Effectively

The Six Ts of Effective Elementary Literacy Instruction

by Richard L. Allington

It seems that, finally, those who make educational policy – at the local, state, and federal levels – have begun to recognize just how much good teachers matter.

A series of studies have confirmed what was probably obvious from the beginning. Good teachers, effective teachers, matter much more than particular curriculum materials, pedagogical approaches, or "proven programs" (Allington & Johnston, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Duffy, 1997; Pressley, et al, 2001; Sanders, 1998; Taylor, Pearson, Clark & Walpole, 2000). It has become clearer that investing in effective teaching – whether in hiring decisions or professional development planning – is the most "research-based" strategy available. If we are to hope to attain the goal of "no child left behind," we must focus on creating a substantially larger number of effective, expert teachers.

Good teachers, effective teachers, manage to produce better achievement regardless of which curriculum materials, pedagogical approach, or program is selected.

I am not going to attempt to understand why it has taken education so long to recognize what other industries recognized almost from the start – expertise in teaching. Instead, I am going to describe what the teaching of exemplary elementary teachers looks like and challenge school administrators to examine whether their daily decisions and their longer-term planning is designed to foster such teaching. In other words, I believe school administrators should be crafting policies that ensure that more effective teachers are created each year in their schools.

For much of the past decade my colleagues and I at the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement have been studying some of the best elementary school teachers in the nation (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Pressley, A Wharton-McDonald, Collins-Block & Morrow, 2001). These teachers were selected primarily, from schools that enrolled substantial numbers of poor children and that reflected the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the nation.

We observed first and fourth-grade teachers from six states (New York, Texas, Hampshire, California, Wisconsin, New Jersey). In each case we spent at least 10 instructional days, and often more, observing, interviewing, and videotaping classroom. Two books, a number of articles, and related technical reports and documentary details (the books and articles are cited throughout and the technical reports, along with research summaries, can be found at <http://cela.albany.edu>)

We studied teachers found to be particularly effective in developing reading and

The Si

▶ Time

▶ Texts

▶ Teach

▶ Talk

▶ Tasks

▶ Test

▶ Summa

FREE Newsletter!
 Click here to sign up.

proficiency. Over the course of the study, however, it became clear that the teachers we were studying developed academic proficiencies well beyond higher reading and writing achievement test scores (though the evidence we gathered did demonstrate that these teachers did produce significantly better standardized test performance as a matter of course).

The hundreds of days of classroom observation and the hundreds of interviews with teachers and students provide a clear portrayal of what good elementary literacy instruction looks like. Below I sketch six common features – the 6 Ts of effective elementary literacy instruction – that we observed in the exemplary elementary classrooms we studied.

Time

These teachers had a "reading and writing vs. stuff" ratio that was far better than is typically found in elementary classrooms (Allington, 2001).

In other words, these teachers routinely had children actually reading and writing for much a half of the school day – often around a 50/50 ratio of reading and writing (stuff is all the other things teachers have children do instead of reading and writing). In typical classrooms, it is not unusual to find that kids read and write for little as ten percent of the day (30 minutes of reading and writing activity in a 30-minute, or five-hour, school day).

In many classrooms, a 90-minute "reading block" produces only 10–15 minutes of actual reading, or less than 20 percent of the allocated reading time is spent reading. Worse, in many classrooms, 20 minutes of actual reading across the school day (Knapp, 1995) is a common event, which includes reading in science, social studies, math, and other subjects. Thus, less than ten percent of the day is actually spent reading and 90 percent or more of the time is spent doing stuff.

The issue is less stuff vs. reading than it is a question of what sorts of and how much stuff. When stuff dominates instructional time, warning flags should go up.

This is true even when the activity, in some form, has been shown to be effective. Activating students' background knowledge before reading (Pearson & Fielding, 1991) and generating discussion after reading (Fall, Webb & Chudowsky, 2000) is useful. Three to five minutes of building background knowledge is probably enough; so most of a 90-minute reading block on building background knowledge is an unlikely strategy for improving reading proficiencies.

In less-effective classrooms, there is a lot of stuff going on for which no evidence exists to support their use (e.g., test-preparation workbooks, vocabulary definitions from a dictionary, completing after-reading comprehension worksheets).

Extensive reading is critical to the development of reading proficiency (Krashe Stanovich, 2000). Extensive practice provides the opportunity for students to consolidate the skills and strategies teachers often work so hard to develop. Exemplary elementary teachers we studied recognized this critical as part of their instructional planning. Their students did more guided reading, more independent reading, more social studies and science reading than students in less-effective classrooms.

Texts

If children are to read a lot throughout the school day, they will need a rich selection of texts.

books they can actually read. This seems a simple statement of fact. But there exists a large and potent research base supporting supplying children with texts of appropriate complexity (Allington, 2001).

Simply put, students need enormous quantities of successful reading to become independent, proficient readers.

By successful reading, I mean reading experiences where students perform with a level of reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. When a nine-year-old reads as few as two or three words in each one hundred running words of a text, the text is too hard for effective practice. That text may be appropriate for instructional purposes but developing readers need much more high-success reading than that. They need instructional difficulty reading. It is the high accuracy, fluent, and comprehended reading that provides the opportunities to integrate complex strategies into an automatic, independent reading process.

The exemplary teachers we studied too often had to teach against the organizational grain. They rejected district plans that "required" all children be placed in the same textbook or tradebook (and do the same worksheets on the same day). They recognized such schemes for what they are: Truly anti-scientific, non-research-based fads designed more, it seems, as an attempt to exert administrative power than to produce high levels of student achievement.

Unfortunately, these exemplary teachers too often had to spend both their own time and personal funds to locate and/or purchase the texts needed to effectively teach the children they were assigned. Some were lucky to work in "smart" organizations. These organizations provided a rich and expansive supply of texts that supported children's learning across the school day (multi-level texts available for social studies and science as well as for reading classes). Organizations that knew that "one-size-fits-all" mandates contradicted virtually everything we have learned about effective teaching.

A primary outcome of these exemplary teachers was the acceleration of reading development in their lowest-achieving students (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Pinn et al, 2001). While students of all achievement levels benefited from effective teaching, it was the lowest achievers who benefited most.

In these classrooms, lower-achieving students spent their days with books they could successfully read. This has not typically been the case in less effective classrooms (Allington, 1983). In too many schools, the lower-achieving readers receive appropriate reading materials only when they participate in special support instruction (e.g., remedial education resource rooms, Title 1 in-class support, bilingual education block). In too many cases the lower-achieving students receive, perhaps, an hour of appropriate instruction each day and four hours of instruction based on grade-level texts they cannot read. No child who spends 80 percent of his instructional time with texts that are inappropriately difficult will make much progress academically.

These exemplary teachers noticed that the highest-achieving students:

1. received a steady diet of "easy" texts – texts they could read accurately, and with strong comprehension
2. consistently out-gained both the average-achieving students and the low-achieving students, year after year.

They seemed to notice that motivation for reading was dramatically influenced by student reading success. They acted on these observations by creating multi-sourced curriculum that met the needs of the diverse range of students.

classrooms.

Teach

Obviously, part of good teaching is planning instructional time allocations and appropriate books. But here I want to focus more on the notion of active instruction, the modeling and demonstration of the useful strategies that good readers employ

Much of what many administrators might consider teaching behaviors involves no active instruction (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, in press). In fact, what many teachers consider teaching is little more than assignment and assessment. Somewhere along the way, active teaching – explicit explanation, direct teaching – has been lost in the shuffle of thinking about classroom instruction.

These exemplary teachers routinely offered direct, explicit demonstrations of cognitive strategies used by good readers when they read. In other words, they modeled the thinking that skilled readers engage while they attempt to decode, self-monitor for understanding, summarize while reading, or edit when composing. The "watch me" or "let me demonstrate" stance they took seems quite different from the "assign and assess" stance that dominates in less-effective classrooms (e.g., Adams, 1990; Durkin, 1978-79).

The dominance of the "assign and assess" model has been too little written about. The truth is that "instruction" of this nature is of little benefit to all but the few students who have already acquired a basic understanding of the strategy that is the focus of the lesson.

As Adams (1990) pointed out in her analysis of traditional phonics programs, when teachers assign a worksheet that requires children to fill in the missing vowel, children who already know the correct vowel response can successfully do the task. And they don't need the practice activity. Children who do not know which vowel to use in the blank space cannot acquire that knowledge from the worksheet. The worksheet is not the actual teaching. In other words, the missing vowel worksheet is an assessment. Children who already know the vowel patterns do not need an instructional activity that will teach them the pattern.

Likewise, when assigned a story to read, with questions presented at the end, children who have already developed appropriate reading strategies can respond correctly, but those who have not developed the strategy cannot. And these latter children cannot acquire the strategy from the story questions. They would need someone to actually teach the strategy to them, someone who would model and demonstrate the strategy to use (Duffy, 1998).

These exemplary teachers seemed to realize that most commercial instructional packages provide no useful information on direct and explicit skills and strategies instruction. In other words, they realized that the scripts that one typically finds in commercial packages offer teachers a "definitional" model. Students are taught that the main idea in a text is the author's most important idea about a topic. They are offered the way of helping children develop useful strategies for determining the importance of the various ideas an author might present on a topic.

Thus, these teachers took on the responsibility of crafting explicit demonstrations of skill and strategy use.

For example, they might demonstrate the use of the deletion strategy when teaching summarization. They might show how to list the various ideas an author presents in a persuasive paragraph through a line-by-line analysis – a "watch me do this" demonstration. Then they might demonstrate through a think-aloud process the strategy of

redundant, trivial, and subordinate information until they have arrived at the statement.

These teachers offer useful strategy models – decoding strategies, comprehension strategies, self-regulating strategies – as separate lessons to the whole class, in targeted small groups, and to individual students in side-by-side instruction. In this literal plethora of instructional activity that truly sets these teachers apart, it explains much of their effectiveness with lower-achieving students (Taylor, et al

We have a wealth of studies demonstrating the power of active teaching, especially for children who struggle to learn to read and write. But for children to come to use powerful strategies being presented they must have enormous successful previous experiences using the strategies independently – extensive successful reading experiences.

The instructional environment must also foster independent strategy transfer and use. A real concern is that when instruction becomes too explicit, too much of the time, children never acquire the independent strategy transfer and use. Use of a strategy in a highly structured, teacher-directed setting is not the same as knowing how and when to profitably and successfully use the strategy when reading independently. Expert teaching requires knowing not only how to teach strategies explicitly, but also how to foster transfer from the structured practice activities to independent use when engaged in reading. It is this transfer problem that makes scripted instructional materials problematic.

Talk

Like the Teach component, classroom talk is under-researched. We saw fundamental differences in the nature of the classroom talk in the exemplary teacher classrooms and the talk typically reported in classroom observational studies. First, we observed these teachers fostering much more student talk – teacher-student, student-student – than has been previously reported. In other words, these exemplary teachers encouraged, modeled, and supported lots of talk across the school day. This talk was purposeful talk though, not simply chatter. This talk was problem-posing, problem-solving talk related to curricular topics (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Jernigan & Woodisde-Jiron & Day, 2001).

It wasn't just more talk but a different sort of talk than is commonly found in classrooms. We described this difference as "more conversational and more interrogational." Much previous work has well-documented the interrogational nature of most classroom talk. Teachers pose questions, children respond, teacher evaluates responses. That is the dominant pattern observed in study after study, grade after grade (Cazden, 1988; Nystrand, 1997).

The classroom talk we observed was more often of a conversational nature and more interrogational nature. In other words, teachers and students discussed concepts, hypotheses, strategies, and responses with others. The questions that were posed were more "open" questions, where multiple responses would be appropriate. For instance, consider the difference between the three after-reading questions

- Q1: So, where were the children going after all?
- Q2: So, what other story have we read that had an ending like this one?
- Q3. Has anyone had a problem with a pet like the boy in the story?

Responses to Q1 are strictly limited to a single "correct" response as dictated by the story content. But Q2 and Q3 offer the opportunity for multiple "correct" responses in addition, while a response to Q1 leads only to a "Right" or "Wrong" teacher response. Q2 and Q3 lead to follow-up teacher queries along the lines of, "Explain how the

are similar" and "Tell us more about how your pet problem was like the problem story." While Q1 offers an assessment of appropriate strategy use, Q2 and Q3 offer an opportunity to examine the thinking – the strategy in use – and the opportunity for instruction. Q1 assesses recall; Q2 and Q3 assess a broader understanding to make children's thinking visible.

The nature of classroom talk is complicated and too little understood. While there is evidence that more "thoughtful" classroom talk leads to improved student comprehension (Fall, et al, 2000; Johnston et al, 2001; Nystrand, 1997), especially in high-poverty schools (Knapp, 1995), we still have few interventions available that help on helping teachers develop the instructional expertise to create such classroom talk. Few of the packaged programs offer teachers any support along this line. Conversation cannot be scripted or packaged. The classroom talk we observe is highly personalized and focused on a targeted reply to student responses. Teacher expertise was the key, not a scripted, teacher-proof, instructional product.

Tasks

Another characteristic of these exemplary teacher classrooms was the greater use of longer assignments and reduced emphasis on filling the day with multiple, short tasks. In these classrooms, students often worked on a writing task for ten minutes or more. They read whole books, completed individual and small group research projects, and worked on tasks that integrated several content areas (reading, writing, and science studies).

The work these children in these classrooms completed was more substantively challenging, and required more self-regulation than the work that has been commonly observed in elementary classrooms. We observed far less of the worksheet-type tasks and a greater reliance on more complex tasks across the day and across subject matter. Perhaps because of the nature of this work, students seemed more often engaged and less often off-task than other researchers report.

Relatedly, the tasks assigned often involved choice – student choice. We describe the instructional environment as one of "managed choice." Students did not have an unlimited range of task or topic choices, but it was less common to find every student doing the same task and more common to observe students working on similar but different tasks. For instance, in a fourth-grade unit on insects, each child caught a different insect to class. They then sketched the insect using magnifying glasses to discover detail. These sketches were then labeled for body parts (thorax, antennae, etc.). Students also observed the insect in its natural environment and took field notes about observed behaviors and habits. They wrote a short description on these notes and constructed a model of the insect from craft materials. Finally, they presented their insect to classmates and then posted their sketches, models, and descriptions on the classroom wall where classmates could review and study them.

Choice of this sort has been documented to lead to greater student ownership of work and greater engagement with the work (Turner, 1995). A related characteristic is that such an array of student work makes it more difficult for students (and teachers) to rank student work from best to worst. Low-achieving students may select one of the more interesting insects to research and display. Peers may gain new information on an interesting bug rather than seeing the same insect work they just completed.

Test

Finally, these exemplary teachers evaluated student work based more on effort and improvement than simply on achievement status. This focus meant that all students