

Running head: KNOWING THE LEARNER

Knowing the Learner:
A Key Factor for Literacy Growth
Dana L. Barbarick
Concordia University Portland



A Thesis Presented to
The Graduate Program in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Masters in Education

Concordia University Portland

2002

Abstract

Synthesis of best classroom practice reports links a teacher knowing the learner academically and culturally to growth in literacy skills. To communicate with and understand the learner is critical to literacy growth. Included are researched ideas for implementing this practice into the classroom. Reviewed studies include Casey Carter (2000), Education Trust (1998), Reeves (2000), and Wood (1992). Implementation suggestions include such programs as *Learning Record* (Barr & Thomas, 2002), *First Steps* (Rees & Shortland-Jones, 1994), *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy* (Good & Kaminski, 2001), *Texas Primary Reading Inventory* (Texas Education Agency, 2000), and *Success for All* (American Federation of Teachers, 1998). Authentic assessment and personal communication are advocated as non-programmatic approaches to knowing the learner.



Chapter 1

*Knowing the Learner: A Key Factor for Literacy Growth**Introduction*

Education is about the learner. When a teacher enters the classroom, it needs to be with the single-minded purpose of spurring growth in achievement for all students regardless of race or socioeconomic status. In the ever-evolving classroom, a teacher must be the primary drive to change habits and routines through research based professional inquiry. Through study of past practice, attributes and knowledge base can be defined and thus instruction improved to meet the needs of all learners (Darling-Hammond, 1998). This is particularly relevant in the area of reading achievement as research has found it to be the single most important factor in identifying student dropouts (Griffin, 1987).

Much research and debate have surrounded the question of how to assure that all students achieve. An abundance of “best practice” reports exists that seek to find the keys to academic success for all learners. Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde (1998) iterate the importance of bringing education to a higher level through best practices. “If a practitioner is following best practice standards, he or she is aware of current research and consistently offers clients the full benefits of the latest knowledge, technology, and procedures” (Zemelman, et al., p.viii). Though similarities run throughout these reports, the definitive answer to achievement for all remains to be found. However, one striking similarity that permeates “best practice” reports is the underlying yet unstated theme of

knowing the learner by understanding the culture, learning difficulties, interests, and social issues that may impact learning.

Reports on best practices come from a number of different sources and tend to be defined by the psychological view of the author. The cognitive, developmental and constructivist views define best practices as those that are learner driven and defined (Reynolds & Gutkin, 1999; Zemelman, et al., 1998). Learners come to the classroom with thinking skills in place. They learn to channel their own thinking to produce growth. Cognitive developmentalists assert that learners learn on a continuum where one skill must follow another in a developmentally appropriate manner (Reynolds & Gutkin, 1999; Zemelman, et al). A child must be ready for the learning before it is taught. Traditionalists stick to a stance that skills are to be taught based on curricular mandates and that there are certain pieces of information that must be in place for a learner to be successful. “These teachers [traditionalists] felt that I [special education teacher] should not offer any different content from what they were providing; watering theirs down was fine, but nothing different or additional should be included” (Howells, 2000, p.159). A percentile score on a standardized test is of great value to traditionalists. While each of these views seems strikingly different when taken at face value, in reality, all are aimed at the same purpose, learner growth, and seem to have one striking similarity: know the learner.

With new programs and educational reform constantly at the forefront, educators must find ways to keep focused on the goal of learner achievement. In order to do so, each classroom teacher needs a specific and well-defined plan for knowing the learner lest they fall prey to a programmatic approach to teaching that is focused on

implementation of the right programs, not the learners (Howells, 2000; Zemelman, et al, 1998). For the new teacher who is trying desperately to figure out the curriculum and classroom management, or for the veteran teacher who is tired of the constant pendulum of educational trend, it is easy to shift the focal point away from the primary goal (Zemelman, et al).

Is a relationship between the teacher and learner in which the teacher takes time and effort to know the learner crucial for academic growth? This question, though not directly studied, has been interwoven in the fabric of research in American education for centuries. In recent years schools are reported to be failing our children. The key to changing this failing school trend lies not in the right programs, but in the right relationships. A teacher who takes time fully to know the learner is a teacher who will see academic growth in learners.

Like nineteenth-century medicine men, everybody is promoting everything, whether there is any evidence that it works or not. Over here we have vouchers, charters, privatization, longer school days, summer school, and merit pay. Over there we have the frequent testing of students, the testing of teachers, smaller class size, report cards on schools, and high-stakes testing accountability. And over here, a very special offer: student uniforms, flag-raising ceremonies every morning, the posting of the Ten Commandments on schoolhouse walls, and sophisticated diagnostic instruments to identify children at risk for acting violently—when many administrators and teachers can't even identify children who need glasses. (Comer, 2001, ¶ 1)

Comer (2001) recognizes what many educators have lost over the past several

decades. All the programs and reforms are meaningless if they do not help the teacher to know the learner and the learner to achieve greater academic and personal gains. He says that, “we will be able to create a successful system of education nationwide only when we base everything we do on what is known about how children and youths develop and learn” (¶ 2).

In addressing this issue, differentiation and authentic assessment have played defining roles in literacy education since the early 21st century. Cognitive developmental research shows that in order to move a student along a reading continuum of growth, a teacher must have a plan of action for the individual child. This practice of individualizing instruction has become known as differentiation (Kerry & Kerry, 1997; Tomlinson, 1999). Differentiation is not possible unless the teacher knows the learner, and to know the learner carries some heavy implications for a teacher who has a classroom with 30 or more students.

For many teachers, the reality of classroom life is that they teach in mixed ability contexts and, in primary schools, often in mixed age contexts as well. They are presented not only with task setting for the ‘core’ group of pupils within the class—sometimes referred to as the middle band—but also a range of pupils of higher and lower ability, some of whom will be at relatively extreme ends of the intellectual continuum. (Kerry & Kerry, p.440)

Each child brings different background or schema to his/her reading. Each has different areas of strength and weakness. In order to most effectively move readers along a continuum, the teacher must understand the reader’s background as well as the goal or ultimate outcome to be reached through instruction. The ultimate outcome must then be

tested or assessed in a manner that is appropriate to the skill being mastered-- authentic assessment.

Constructivist research asserts that a student uses his/her own thinking processes to drive the learning. Inherent in this idea is the fact that a teacher must be aware of the child's thinking processes. On the other hand, traditionalists are looking for mastery of skills, which requires constant assessment to allow the teacher a true picture of the learner. The cognitive developmentalists, constructivists and traditionalists then all support the real impetus behind student achievement at the ultimate level--knowing the learner.

Is a relationship between the teacher and learner in which the teacher takes time and effort fully to know the learner crucial for academic growth? It seems that schools that are to be effective for all students must foster an environment of camaraderie where teachers know their learners. Yet, many schools still flounder trying to understand why all learners do not achieve in reading. Could knowing the learner be the key?

Background

Historically, the most commonly used method of instruction has been instruction that is teacher-directed and is the same for every child in a class. From an interview with Howard Gardner, Gurskey (1996) hears that many people view schools as "authoritarian, punitive institutions in which somebody smart stands in front of a room and tries to pass information on to large groups of students" (p. 62). This method of instruction encourages a focus on content, sometimes at the expense of learning. In this system, what a student learns is not as important as covering the curriculum (Howells, 2000).

Unfortunately, this means that a good portion of the classroom population is left without mastery of the curriculum.

The 1990s saw a move toward differentiation of instruction based on the constructivist idea that students could and should construct their own learning. After years of teacher-directed classrooms, many students were given the reins. Differentiation allowed for and catered to the differences in learners.

The push toward differentiation is a step in the process of improving classroom-reading achievement for all. Differentiation, to gear instruction to the needs of all kinds of learners, is only effective if the teacher first acquires knowledge of the learner. If a teacher does not know the kind of learner he/she has, differentiation becomes just another program to implement (Kerry & Kerry, 1997). In their study on cultural diversity, the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning (1996) found that though cultural background is valuable for informing instruction, few teachers actually use the information. Further, if a teacher does not have knowledge of learner strengths and weaknesses, instruction cannot be tailored to the individual. This is where authentic assessment enters the picture. In differentiating instruction, the instruction changes according to learner needs. In assessing authentically, in the real context of meaningful learning, the assessment becomes tailored to the differentiated instruction. Whether differentiating instruction or assessing the learning, knowing the learner seems to be the crucial underlying piece.

Purpose of the Study and Rationale

It is imperative that educators understand the importance of knowing the learner. Though differentiation and authentic assessment are steps in the right direction, the

practical classroom implementation is still at issue. To understand and know the learner and then gear instruction to each individual learner still seems an insurmountable task in light of the varying dynamics in any given classroom. Though teachers desire maximum reading growth for their learners, the convenient or manageable often wins out in practice (Kerry & Kerry, 1997). This study will explore the value of knowing the learner as it relates to best classroom practices. In addition the study will explore the impact that knowing the learner has on reading growth, as well as practical implementation in the classroom setting.

Questions

Is knowing the learner really an underlying key to best classroom practices? If so, what does it mean to know the learner? What difference, if any, will knowing the learner make to his/her reading growth? And finally, what are some practical ways for a teacher to know his/her learners? Each of these questions will be explored in order to offer a guide for classroom teachers in the importance and implementation of knowing the learner.

Operational Definitions

knowing the learner. To know the learner in reading is to understand the things a reader brings to the classroom that may impact his/her learning. This may include culture, learning difficulties, interests, social issues, moods, etc. Each of these can play a part in reading strengths and weaknesses. Each can also influence the meaning that a reader gets from a particular reading.

differentiation. Differentiation is a teaching method or a way of planning that gears instruction to the needs of the varied learners present in a classroom. Differentiated

instruction, in theory, allows students to learn in different ways according to their own strengths and interests.

authentic assessment. Authentic assessment is assessment that is real and is given in a real context as opposed to being contrived by an outside source that has no knowledge of the learner's individual pace or strengths. When a learner is assessed authentically, the learner shows that he/she knows what to do by doing it. The best authentic assessment in reading would be to be inside the reader's head when he/she reads. Since this is impossible, the next possibility is to hear the learner read and to ask questions that allow the reader to express the thinking that is going on while he/she is reading.

best practices. Best practices in education are those practices that have been identified by research as most successful in spurring high performance for all learners.



Chapter 2

The Development of the Problem in Published Literature

Overview

Is a relationship between the teacher and learner in which the teacher takes time and effort to know the learner crucial for academic growth? This question, though not directly studied, has been interwoven in the fabric of research in American education for centuries. Most recently, it has been the focus of James P. Comer M.D. (2001) in his studies of best educational practices. His findings articulate the need for students to have meaningful relationships with teachers for development of emotionally sound children who are able to learn. Changes in programs alone cannot create these necessary relationships.

Historical Background

The need for meaningful student/teacher relationships is identified (Comer, 2001) after centuries of questions regarding schooling practices. The essential view of American education in the early 1900s was provision of adjustment and assimilation into American culture. As the mid 1900s approached, the focus of adjustment changed to include acceptance of male and female roles while fostering creativity and independence. After the civil rights movement of the 1960s, schools began to focus on access for all (Albjerg Graham, 1995). Though access for all is necessary and admirable, it created a new set of issues for educators. The issues revolve around educating a diverse group of learners so that all can attain high academic standards set forth for students in American schools.

From the 1960s to present, there has been much focus on how to best meet the needs of the diverse learners in American schools. A 1966 report to Congress by James Coleman stated that home life or socioeconomic status was more critical to educational achievement than school. This conclusion came into question by Ron Edmonds of Harvard University who had evidence of two schools where children were achieving despite socioeconomic status. Edmonds' findings began the quest for the key to effective schools (Raham, 2001). The years of 1966 through 1976 were marked by descriptive studies of schools that were effective. Yet, when the 1980s rolled around, there was still widespread concern that all children were not being educated equally. Then in 1983, the U.S. Department of Education released a report, *A Nation at Risk*, which pushed for the improvement of academic achievement for all children (Sedlak, 1995). The research agenda for schools was challenged to find the key to producing this growth.

In response to this challenge, California, under the leadership of state superintendent Bill Honig, began "a process of reviewing and reconstructing the curriculum in each subject field" (Ravitch, 1995, p.180). Initial reform efforts of the 1980s and 1990s were directed at changing the standards and curriculum to produce high academic achievement for all. This is clearly seen in the 1988 call by President George Bush to create national goals for all schools to be achieved by the year 2000. Included in these goals was the following:

American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible

citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.

(Ravitch, 1995, p.184)

In addition, policy makers began to demand information on achievement of students in their schools. Along with the redirecting of standards and curriculum came a call for accountability.

The challenge of the 1990s and early twenty-first century then became the how. How will we create high academic achievement for all? The *Goals 2000* plan (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) became the impetus for schools and districts to restructure in order to attain the national goals. Though early efforts were aimed at setting necessary standards, later efforts began to be focused on practices. What specific things were occurring in classrooms where all students were high achievers?

Presentation of the Literature

Though Ron Edmonds spurred the research into effective schools in the mid 1960s, the process of identifying key effective practices and implementing them is still being pursued. In 1992, *Schools that Work* by George H. Wood took a look at what was occurring in schools that were producing high achieving children. High achievement was determined by standardized test score data. His study was based on the schools in his own neighborhood and what he saw working in them that could be reproduced in another school. He concluded that reform must occur one school at a time beginning at the school level and working up to the district. No program was suddenly going to solve all the problems in schools.

We all long for the grand stroke that will turn schools around and suddenly solve all our problems. But as quickly as that stroke could be carried out, it could be

undone. Lasting change will take a deep commitment to the daily work of making schools the component of democratic life that they were intended to be. (Wood, 1992, p.230)

Wood (1992) was drawing his conclusions based on evidence seen from the view of a non-educator.

Educators were also diligently seeking methods for raising the academic achievement levels of all learners. In the mid-1990s the practice of looping (a teacher spending two years with the same students) became prevalent (Burke, 1997). Looping moved education in the direction of stronger teacher-student relationships. Burke found that the stronger teacher-student relationships created through looping allowed students to feel more confident. Children in looped classrooms were also found to have greater academic gains than like students in traditional classrooms. Looping allowed teachers more time to know their learners, but it did not solve the problem of how to know the learner.

In addition to looping, educators were looking for detailed classroom practices that would make a difference for all learners. In 1998, best practice reports by educators began with a study by Education Trust, *Good Teaching Matters*. This report emphasized that good teachers are crucial for high achievement. However, this report did not define the qualities inherent in a good teacher. To further this research, studies began in many states by identifying high achieving schools and then systematically attempting to determine what was occurring differently in those schools. In 1999 Education Trust and the United States Department of Education conducted studies. The year 2000 saw studies by the Center for Performance and Assessment (Reeves, 2000), Region VIII School

Support Improvement Center in California (2000), North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (D'Amico & Nelson, 2000), and Casey Carter (2000) as well as others. Each of these reports was seeking the best practices for spurring school improvement.

When studying these reports, the similarities are striking. The reports are from different researchers, different school settings, different students, and yet they reveal similar practices that work for improving achievement. Emphasis is placed on high standards, and frequent detailed assessment aimed at deep knowledge of learner needs and strengths. In addition, the schools have managed to create communities where students' cultural backgrounds and social needs are woven into the fabric of the school. Teachers in these schools are willing to put forth the time and effort to know the learner and individualize instruction to fit the needs of the learner.

In response to the call for individualization came the term *differentiation*. Though first used by the School Examinations and Assessment Council in their report responding to the 1988 Education Act, this term was much later defined to the point of being useful in the classroom (Kerry & Kerry, 1997). Today, the Office of Standards in Education, when observing teachers, looks for skills at differentiating. Despite this, the term is not well defined in their literature. In 1999, Tomlinson wrote a book detailing all the information that was available on differentiation along with practical classroom examples of proper and improper differentiation.

Tomlinson (1999) begins by stating that teachers run up against the same “challenge of the one-room schoolhouse: how to reach out effectively to students who span the spectrum of learning readiness, personal interests, culturally shaped ways of seeing and speaking of the world, and experiences in that world” (p.1). She then

continues to explore ways in which the teacher can divide time and effort to cause maximum growth in all learners. This exploration of differentiation represents a first formal attempt to state that teachers must first know their learners and only then can instruction be geared to the needs of the learner.

While the need for individualization was coming to prominence in the American educational agenda, the equal need for appropriate methods to assess academic achievement was also being explored. In 1989 Grant Wiggins began exploring the need for assessment that was more authentic than standardized tests. If educators were to show achievement based on new standards for all, the measure of achievement needed to fit the learning in the same way that the teaching needed to fit the learner. “If our aim is merely to monitor performance, then conventional testing is probably adequate. If our aim is to improve performance across the board, then the tests must be composed of exemplary tasks, criteria and standards” (Wiggins, 1990, ¶15). Differentiation looks at the needs of the learner and teaches to them. Authentic assessment gives the teacher a clear view of the learner in terms of academic strengths and weaknesses, which informs the use of differentiation for further lessons. As stated in a report by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAQ) (1997):

EQAQ believes that large-scale assessment can contribute to positive educational change when it engages educators, parents and students in thought and discussion about what takes place in the classroom. We are testing what children know and can do. We are measuring against provincial standards to obtain information on what we need to do so that all students can learn more and learn better. (p.3)

Though the question of how to ascertain high achievement for all is not a new one, the definitive answer still escapes American schools. Despite research and best practice reports spanning back to the 1960s, many schools still see little academic growth year to year. Many communities are still crying out for the achievement gap to be closed between children of different socioeconomic or racial groups. Change is slow in coming, but it may be due to lack of identification of a major key to growth. The issue of knowing the learner has been touched on, but never identified clearly as a major factor in producing growth.

Academic achievement is of particular importance in the reading classroom. Part of *Goals 2000* (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) is for all adult Americans to be literate. In order for this to happen, schools must reach the learner long before adulthood. A 1995 report of the Association for Supervision of Curriculum and Development (Carbo & Kapinus, 1995) explored best practices in teaching reading. Again in a 1998 study, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, Eds., 1998), a joint effort of the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, and the National Research Council, and also in the report of The American Federation of Teachers (1998) best practices for reading were explored. These reports found that many of the same practices (namely individualization of instruction and constant assessment of learner strengths and weaknesses) necessary for academic growth in general were also necessary for reading growth.

To reach a goal of high academic achievement for all learners, whether in reading or math or any other area, the key identified practices to date are differentiation

(individualization) and authentic assessment. Differentiation necessitates knowledge of learning styles, interests, and learner strengths and weaknesses. Authentic assessment is a check to see if learners are attaining the necessary skills and knowledge to move on to new learning. To differentiate requires that a teacher know the learner. To authentically assess is to come to know the learner academically. However, as Comer (2001) has discovered, there is a need for a relationship between student and teacher that is key to making the differentiation and authentic assessment successful. This relationship requires the teacher to know more than just academic strengths and weaknesses of the learner. The social and emotional needs of the learner are equally important if academic growth is to occur.

Summary

Whether best practices, school improvement, reading, cultural, or motivational, the school research of the 1990s, and beyond, focuses on how to assure high academic achievement for all. In the year 2000, the *Goals 2000* plan was revamped and the new Bush administration passed the most extensive school reform bill America has seen to date, *No Child Left Behind* (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). This one-inch thick bill is still seeking the same outcome that America was looking for in the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education). The outcome sought: academic success for all.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

Introduction

The ability to read is crucial to nearly every area of a person's life. Teachers are charged with the complex task of finding the best way to move each individual child within a classroom group to maximum reading growth. In light of this enormous task, much research has been done to find the best possible method for moving learners from one level to the next in reading skills. Researchers have studied schools that are successful in attaining growth for all learners regardless of race or socioeconomic level and have compiled the data to give a clear list of practices that are used in these successful classrooms.

Best Practices: High-Performance/High-Poverty

A 1998 report by Haycock, sponsored by Education Trust, spurred an onslaught of research in best classroom practices for reading and all other academic areas. In this report, *Good Teaching Matters*, it is asserted that a well-qualified teacher can make a significant difference in the performance of students. Data from Tennessee, Texas and Massachusetts are presented in support of this assertion. Teachers in these states were grouped in quintiles according to their effectiveness in producing student gains as measured by a standardized test. The data show quantitatively that the least effective teachers may spur a 14% gain in low-achieving students over a one-year period compared to a 53% gain in low-achieving students taught by teachers that are most effective. Low-achieving students who were placed with highly effective teachers for three consecutive years jumped from the 59th to 76th percentile while similar students who had three years

of ineffective teachers dropped from the 60th to the 42nd percentile. This is a significant and alarming difference.

Recommendations of *Good Teaching Matters* (Haycock, 1998) included further research to identify qualities of effective teachers and schools. In response to this recommendation, Education Trust (1999) sought to answer their own questions by compiling nationwide information regarding high-performing/high-poverty (HP2) schools and the practices they found successful in boosting achievement. In addition, researchers sought to dispel the myth that poor had to be equated with low achievement. With partial funding from the United States Department of Education, researchers began by asking states to provide a list of their high-performing/high-poverty schools. States were given latitude to define high performance according to their state standards. In addition to high achievement, the study looked at significant growth as a means of identifying schools that were on the road to high performance. Of the 1200 identified schools, 366 returned the six-page survey of school practices. Those 366 diverse schools from 21 states provided information regarding the practices used in their schools that were believed to aide high performance. Though the survey thoroughly covered demographics, test data and best practices, an admitted weakness of the study is the inconsistency from state to state in tests and thus in reported achievement data. This lack of consistency makes it impossible to know whether these schools were truly high performing as compared to a standard or high performing in comparison only to other high poverty schools.

Data from surveys were compiled to form a consensus of common practices that may be linked to spurring high performance. One common characteristic among the

schools was the use of standards to drive curriculum and assessment. Assessment of student work against standards was regular and methodical in 94% of the reporting schools. A second common characteristic was increased instruction time in reading and math. This instruction time was not an increase in worksheets, rather a 63% decrease took place in the use of worksheets and was replaced by an 83% increase in the amount of time spent discussing and sharing information between students and teachers. A third common characteristic was the systematic method for monitoring student mastery of skills. These schools also had accountability systems in place for parents, administrators, students and teachers. Finally, a concerted effort was made to involve parents in student academics as opposed to fund raising or school activities. Though none of these characteristics clearly states that a teacher needs to know the learner, the emphasis on assessment, skill mastery and family involvement imply a level of familiarity with the student that allows the teacher to know where to move next to help the individual learner.

Building on the Education Trust data, similar studies were conducted by the Center for Performance and Assessment (Reeves, 2000). The study involved schools termed as “90/90/90” because they met the criteria of having more than 90 percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, more than 90 percent from ethnic minorities, and more than 90 percent achieving high academic standards. The review of this four-year study does not give extensive information about the selection process or the research methodology except to say that a variety of school settings were used and the populations were highly diverse. Further, the schools being studied maintained detailed records on practices and strategies. What is clear is that a detailed process was used to define common characteristics of these schools.

The published information makes it difficult to determine whether all students in the selected schools were included in test reporting data; also the testing criteria for “high achieving” are not defined. In light of these factors, the validity of the studies comes into question. Nonetheless, authors conclude that there are some “consistent associations” between schools. Five common attributes of the “90/90/90” schools were identified: academic achievement, clear curriculum choices, frequent assessment, emphasis on writing, and external scoring. These attributes point directly at the importance of knowing the learner.

First, the focus on academic achievement was coupled with a focus on improvement. Improvement came from careful, detailed daily assessment of the learner. Frequent assessment sent students the message that the teachers understood them and where they were academically. This understanding translated into opportunity for the student to improve rather than be left behind while the rest of the class moved ahead. One critical piece of evidence provided by this study is that it did not matter which intervention programs were being used; rather, the improvement came from teachers who took time to understand the learner.

A second area that emerged from this research was that of making assessment written. Through written assessment “teachers have the opportunity to gain rich and complex diagnostic information about why students respond to an academic challenge the way that they do” (Reeves, 2000, p.190). Written assessment allowed the teachers a clear picture of learner needs and obstacles.

In addition to the 90/90/90 schools, many high-poverty/high-performance schools exist across the United States that do not fit the “90/90/90,” but are still in the high-

performing/high-poverty bracket. Twelve such schools were analyzed by the Region VIII School Support Improvement Center in California (2000). In addition four such schools received analysis by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (D'Amico & Nelson, 2000). Researchers chose the California schools based on poverty rates of higher than 60 percent, 95% of students tested on state achievement tests, schools Academic Performance Rating, Academic Performance Rating growth, rank in the state, and confirmation of high performance by onsite visits. The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory study was based on four Midwest schools that evidenced a need for improvement. The reports include a profile of each school written by school staff or information received from them. Dissemination of the data is left to the reader, as the purpose of the research was to give information about what is occurring in these high performing schools. The test scores that show high performance have a high degree of validity. However, in California schools, practices were merely reported by staff, making it difficult to know definitively if the practices reported correlate to the high performance. In contrast, to identify key factors in growth, researchers studied the Midwest schools through onsite visits.

Of the twelve California schools included, all but one reported heavy use of formal and informal assessment as a means for understanding their learners and thus tailoring instruction. Formal assessment took place every 6 to 8 weeks in most schools. In addition, most of the schools also reported differentiation of instruction based on student needs as discovered through assessment. It is also interesting to note that with all of the "90/90/90" schools, reading was the major instructional emphasis. This is

significant in that it points toward the conclusion that knowing the learner through assessment in the area of reading supports academic achievement.

A striking similarity in the two studies came in the emphasis on community and family involvement. It was reported by seven of the California schools that teachers made an effort through common language and activities (in and out of school) to connect with students on a level that allowed them to know the complete learner. This connection served the purpose of building student and parent trust and parent involvement. In the Midwest schools, it was reported that community involvement created an easier atmosphere for educators “to see (and hear) how what they were doing affected children’s lives. Seeing the students and their parents in a wide variety of social situations allowed the educators in these four communities to keep track of particular student’s needs” (D’Amico & Nelson, 2000, p.27).

Samuel Casey Carter conducted another high-poverty/high-performance study. In his book entitled *No Excuses* (2000), Casey Carter tells of 21 schools that have demonstrated high performance despite high poverty rates (75% or more free or reduced lunch) in the schools. The performance indicator used for this study was a standardized national academic achievement test. All schools included had to achieve mean scores above the 65th percentile whereas like schools typically achieved at only the 35th percentile. Participating schools placed heavy emphasis on test data and stated that if the children did not succeed, the teacher had failed.

In studying these school profiles, seven common traits were identified: free principals (principals who have latitude to make decisions based on the needs of their building), measurable goals to establish a culture of achievement, master teachers,

rigorous and regular testing, achievement as the key to discipline, principals who work actively with parents, effort which creates ability (Carter, 2000, pp.8-11). Though these traits are the identified keys, they are defined by only one person from qualitative data that were gathered from principals of schools that met the testing criteria. It would be highly possible for another reader to define the common characteristics of these schools with an entirely different set of traits. Further, the schools used in the study were a conglomeration of public, private and charter schools, some of which operated under very different circumstances than most public elementary schools. Finally, no quantitative data was supplied. It is impossible to know how many, if any, were exempted from tests in order to achieve this high percentile rank.

Though this study is technically flawed, the school descriptors hit hard in the area of knowing the learner. The first strong indicator of the importance of knowing the learner in this study is the emphasis in teacher hiring practices. This research shows that the number one value that elementary and middle school principals seek in hiring is “a love of learning and a love of children” (Casey Carter, 2000, p.20). Principals in high achieving, low income schools see the value of hiring teachers who value children as individuals. A second indicator of the importance of knowing the learner is the emphasis on constant assessment. This use of constant assessment allows teachers to have a clear picture of learner strengths and weaknesses on a day-to-day basis. Schools personalize and individualize education based upon assessment of a student’s individual needs. They know their learners.

These schools see the importance of knowing the learner’s skills and abilities, but they also look to know their learners on a deeper level. Alfonso L. Jessie, Jr., the

principal of a Georgia public school featured in the *No Excuses* (Casey Carter, 2000) study, says this: “ ‘You have to get to know the child. You have to get to know the family. You have to spend some Saturdays with them. Then you can get to skill building’ ” (p.50). Yet another principal in the study, Helen DeBerry, worked to develop classrooms that catered to the learning styles of all students particularly in the area of reading. Craig Ergang of George Washington Elementary says, “ ‘with whatever we’re given, we focus our time, money and effort on the individual needs of the children’ ” (Casey Carter, p.58). Throughout each of the case studies, the essential message is know the learner.

To find hard quantitative evidence supporting best practice reports would be a long rigorous process that involved elimination of outside factors that could cause academic growth in order to isolate specific areas that are proven to cause growth. The nature of this type of research makes it unethical due to the withholding of resources in order to prove a point. In light of this, using test scores, growth indexes, observations and school profiles is the most efficient method for analyzing what works in schools. Because the reviewed data came from schools nationwide and was based on quantitative test data as well as demographic information, the commonalities among practices holds significance for schools looking to improve. Most schools included were high poverty schools and many had highly diverse ethnic populations. The generalizability of the conclusions then goes to schools with similar demographics as well as any low achieving school. Knowing the learner through assessment and connecting with the learner’s ethnic and socioeconomic background seem to spur growth in achievement.

Best Practices: School Improvement

Aside from high poverty schools there remain many middle to upper class socioeconomic schools in need of reform to achieve high academic standards. From 1990-1995, the Association for Supervision of Curriculum and Development (Cole, 1995) undertook a research project aimed at improving student achievement for all students. This technical process followed rigorous standards for review of studies relating to school improvement. The resulting document is a highly useable guide for educators of all children in all types of schools. The document is supported by the later research effort of the United States Department of Education (1999) who conducted a case study, *Hope for Urban Education*, to assess the ways in which nine urban elementary schools changed practices in order to produce high academic achievement for all students. An interesting finding of this effort was that principals took time to get to know the teachers and their deep desires in order to affect change for students. It seems that principals were successful when practicing the very knowing process that teachers need to practice with learners.

One factor for change stressed in both reports was extensive review of performance data, which informed instructional practices. Students' strengths, weaknesses, and needs for support were identified through this process. Other changes in knowing learners were aimed at school environment. In one school the principal came to the realization that students and parents of the community had difficulty arriving at school on time. Rather than waste time on punishing, the principal merely instituted a 15-minute delay for the beginning and ending of classes. The problem diminished and time was redirected from discipline to instruction. In taking time to know and understand what

was happening with the learning community, the principal was able to create more time to focus on education. In addition, schools in the study allowed time for students to talk about what was going on in their lives and vent about stress. Staff “listened and provided support that helped students continue to meet behavioral expectations, as well as academic expectations, even when students faced troubling situations” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, *Building Student’s Sense of Responsibility*, ¶ 7).

The Association for Supervision of Curriculum Development (ASCD) advisory panel listed fourteen barriers to academic growth. Of those fourteen, eight were related to knowing and understanding the learners. The area of inappropriate instruction stood out as a major factor. “Clearly, a diverse array of teaching strategies best meets the needs of diverse students” (Cole, 1995, p.13). Their well researched and recommended instructional strategies include modeling behaviors, allowing for exploration of the fullest dimensions of thought, using a multicultural teaching approach, alternative assessments, home/school partnerships, and brain compatible instruction (Kline, 1995).

These studies are critical in showing the need for a deeper understanding of learners. The ASCD clearly identified crucial areas for knowing the learner. In addition, each of the nine schools studied by the U.S. Department of Education made significant turns in academic achievement from low to high. The evidence is indisputable. The reasons for the changes, as with all case study information, cannot be identified with 100% accuracy. However, the nature of change in these schools must be contributed in part to the specific changes undertaken by the leadership. Knowing the learner both academically and on a social level were factors that aided in the change.

Further attempting to define best practices for improvement, Peace, Mayo and Watkins (2000) posed the question, “What really makes a difference in improving learning?” (p.3). The study involved a review of literature intended to weed out the chapters of advice that can be overwhelming to a classroom teacher who is attempting to do the best job possible for all children. In narrowing down the abundance of positive practices, this study proposed three broad categories necessary for improvement in learning.

The first category mentioned is learning environment. It is suggested that environment is not only the physical surroundings, but also a feeling communicated by the teacher. In order to create a positive environment, a teacher must know the learner’s background and identify situations that may cause the learner to feel threatened. The environment must be free of threat as threatening situations cause a step backward in thought processes. A second identified factor for improvement is teaching methodologies and student experiences. Included in positive methodologies is the use of individualization of curriculum based upon student background, interests and learning styles. “It is imperative that teachers identify and understand their students’ background and learning preferences and accommodate these in designing optimal learning experiences” (Allen-Sommerville, 1996 in Peace, et al, 2000, p.2). Assessment and evaluation was the third area of emphasis in this research. The practices recommended for assessment and evaluation included questioning that involves students in higher-order thinking and use authentic or real world tasks to determine mastery of knowledge, abilities and dispositions. Use of such assessment practices gives the teacher an excellent picture of the learner in regards to academic needs and strengths.

As with other best practice studies, Peace et al. (2000) took existing literature and data and identified what they saw to be the most important common characteristics of high performing schools. Steeped in the research of leading authorities in classroom practices, these researchers present a good argument for their stance on what improves classroom learning. However, in reality there is no qualitative evidence that these practices alone will increase student performance. In encouraging teachers to become consumers of their own research, they fail to follow rigorous research methodology themselves.

Yet another study in improvement, *School Reform in Action* (Miller, 2000), took place at the South Florida Center for Educational Leaders. Geared toward analyzing the impact of an action research approach to school improvement, this study involved 55 schools in an attempt to improve student performance. The process for improvement involved the implementation of action research on a three-year cycle for each of the schools. Teachers were to identify areas that they believed needed improvement in their schools. They then undertook the task of being researchers and implementers of new methods as well as assessors of the success of the new methods. The key questions identified in pursuing this action research plan were, “What sources will provide the researcher with information about student learning? How are students doing in the academic, social, and personal domains of the focus area?” (Miller, p.9). Researchers also sought to determine what grades and standardized tests had to say about the learner. High achievement levels were the goal behind identification of this learning information.

Of the schools involved in the study, only six Broward County elementary schools continued into the third year of the study. In summarizing the findings, the majority of schools were said to have benefited from participation.

Working through the phases of the framework gave the study groups a good understanding of the overall student population and academic areas that needed immediate attention. Study groups overwhelmingly responded that the most powerful tool of this initiative was an opportunity through this study to be empowered to develop their professional abilities through collective inquiry to determine the best actions to take to help all student(s) perform optimally. (Miller, 2000, p.17)

Many researchers (Faulkner Robert, 2001; Marzano, 2001; Wylie, 2001) explore variables affecting student performance: school, teacher and student. Wylie (2001) reports on a longitudinal study of 500 New Zealand children who have been tracked from age 5 to age 10. He finds that in order to encourage success in children, adults (teachers and parents) must know the children as individuals and provide activities that interest the children. Marzano (2001) includes in his conclusions the following formula that illustrates the effect level of each factor: $\text{student achievement} = .895 \times \text{student background} + .365 \times \text{teacher characteristics} + .257 \times \text{school characteristics}$. The flaw to this formula lies in the placement of all unidentified factors in the student effect category. The .895 then becomes a possible overstatement of the student effect on achievement. Faulkner-Robert (2001) draws a similar conclusion, but it is based on a qualitative case study of only two African American girls with high reading achievement.

Within the student effect category, Marzano (2001) includes four subcategories: socioeconomic status, background knowledge, interest, and aptitude. Each of these categories plays a significant role in academic achievement. Socioeconomic status overall is found to have the least significance due to the unclear definition (income vs. education vs. occupation). Faulkner Robert (2001) supports this as her case study involved low socioeconomic high achievers. However, when breaking socioeconomic status into subcategories, Marzano finds the home environment to have 1.42 percent significance as calculated using Pearson correlations. Clearly then it is not so much income level that factors into academic achievement as it is home environment. This environment plays a role in building the background knowledge that is crucial to achievement. Difference effect size (difference between experimental and control divided by standard deviation) between background knowledge and achievement was found to be 1.43 while the measure for interest was .80 with outliers removed to present a more accurate picture of the average. Finally, the Esd (difference effect size) with aptitude was 1.71 with outliers removed. Aptitude presented a skewed picture, as it is difficult to separate aptitude from other factors such as interest and knowledge. In fact, when other factors are separated, the Esd for aptitude drops as low as .43 (Marzano, 2001).

As evidenced by these three studies, student effect on academic achievement is immense. Teacher effect is relatively small by comparison. An effective teacher must use knowledge about student home environment, background knowledge, interests and aptitude to drive instruction that is learner centered. In this way the full impact of student and teacher effect can be felt on the resulting academic achievement.

Best Practices: Reading

With multiple best practice reports cropping up, researchers looked not only at whole school reform, but also at specific academic areas. The Association for Supervision of Curriculum and Instruction placed particular emphasis on reading instruction in their 1995 report. A major area of this report concentrated on “accommodating students’ interests, backgrounds, abilities, and reading styles” (Carbo & Kapinus, 1995, p.85). This detailed synthesis of research included rigorous standards for assessing reading studies and formulating recommendations based on the most valid and reliable of the studies. The information came from a wide array of sources and is considered to be generalizable to any elementary school setting. Researchers found that “approaches that capitalize on students’ strengths and interests tend to increase their self-confidence and their reading achievement” (Carbo & Kapinus, p.85). Included in the study is an observation form, the Reading Style Observation Guide (Carbo, 1994), used to determine the reading style of learners. Information from this form can help to guide instruction in a manner most highly effective for the individual learner.

Following the tenets of Carbo and Kapinus, a 1998 action research project, *Hear It, Feel It, See It: Improving Early Reading Acquisition Through a Multisensory Phonemic Awareness Approach*, Churchill, Durdell and Kenney stated that, “knowing students as individuals is one of the keys in developing appropriate classroom instruction” (p.30). Aimed at improving early reading achievement through instructional changes, this research involved a parent survey to discover learning styles, a pre-reading behavior checklist and implementation of activities geared to different learning

modalities. Three sites, including kindergarten and pre-kindergarten classrooms, participated in the study.

Conclusions of the research include details regarding skills to be taught for early readers as well as best methods for teaching those skills. All students made growth in each assessed skill area. “Teacher researchers agree that addressing the various learning modalities of students was key to the intervention” (Churchill, et al., 1998, p.49). Though this conclusion appears to be a fact, the research offered no control group to assess growth as compared to children of same ability without intervention. In light of this research weakness, it is difficult to attribute cause of growth solely to the learning modality intervention, yet a correlation between learning modality intervention and academic growth seems evident.

Another 1998 study, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*--a joint effort of the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, and the National Research Council--took the immense existing knowledge base on reading development and instruction and synthesized it into concise recommendations for reading instruction. Their research purpose was to provide teachers with a means of understanding the needs of an early reader. “The focus of attention has shifted from the researchers’ theories and data back to the teacher, alone in her classroom with a heterogeneous group of children, all awaiting their passports to literacy” (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, Eds., 1998, p.vi). In order to supply a passport to literacy, this research assumes that every teacher will have an intimate knowledge of the learner.

Today's teachers must understand a great deal about how children develop and learn, what they know, and what they can do. Teachers must know and be able to apply a variety of teaching techniques to meet the individual needs of students. They must be able to identify students' strengths and weaknesses and plan instructional programs that help students make progress. (Snow, et al. Eds., 1998, p.279)

These researchers suggest that current teacher training programs are not sufficient for training teachers in the complexities that exist in the classroom. They advocate intense practice settings and case-based instruction as well as continuation of education once a teacher is in the classroom. In addition, this report outlines specific areas of emphasis necessary for the teacher to understand the complete reader. The American Federation of Teachers (1998), in support of better teacher training, followed up with research on specific reading programs that could meet the needs of learners and be easily implementable for teachers. Programs included had to meet the criteria of replicability, high standards, support structures and effectiveness in fostering academic achievement. In all, only seven programs were identified that met the criteria with a $+0.25$ or greater effect size. The seven include a variety of instructional methods, which allow avenues for all teachers to spur academic growth in learners.

Despite identification of these programs, the National Reading Panel was assembled to specify the most effective ways to teach reading (methods, materials and approaches, but not programs) to students of varying abilities. A first step in research involved convening public hearings to establish the needs of the consumers of research information. In response to public hearing requests for scientific evidence, the panel set

up a well-organized method for research review and then proceeded to identify critical topics for review. The panel divided the topics and began research in subgroups. The review of literature was “formal, evidence-based analyses of the experimental and quasi-experimental research literature relevant to a set of selected topics judged to be of central importance in teaching children to read” (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1999, ¶ 4). Due to the rigorous scientific standards set for use of research, only a small portion of the existing research was found competent for analysis. A major disqualifying factor for many studies was the lack of a control group. In light of the application of rigorous standards, the resulting information is highly valid and generalizable.

The findings of this research include information in the areas of alphabets, fluency, comprehension, teacher education and reading instruction, and computer technology and reading instruction. Within the study of alphabets came an emphasis on phonemic awareness, that is awareness of how phonemes work in spoken language, as an indicator for reading success. The high correlation between phonemic awareness and later reading success led the researchers to focus on specific methods for teaching phonemic awareness to learners. Underlying this phonemic awareness instruction is the need to talk with students, hear their speech patterns, understand what they know about the language and thus gear instruction to their needs.

Other findings showed that different types of phonics instruction are valuable for different learners. For example, systematic synthetic phonics instruction was particularly effective in raising skills of disabled readers and readers of low socioeconomic status.

A common question with any instructional program is whether “one size fits all.” Teachers may be able to use a particular program in the classroom but may find that it suits some students better than others. At all grade levels, but particularly in kindergarten and the early grades, children are known to vary greatly in the skills they bring to school. Some children will already know letter-sound correspondences, and some will even be able to decode words, while others will have little or no letter knowledge. Teachers should be able to assess the needs of the individual students and tailor instruction to meet specific needs. However, it is more common for phonics programs to present a fixed sequence of lessons scheduled from the beginning to the end of the school year. In light of this, teachers need to be flexible in their phonics instruction in order to adapt it to individual student needs. (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1999, Findings and Determinations, ¶ 11)

To further detail the work of the National Reading Panel, the *Report of the NEA Task Force on Reading 2000* took best practices and applied them specifically to the teaching of reading. The conclusions were based upon the writing and research of experts in the field of reading research. The task force consisted of eleven classroom teachers assisted by five National Education Association staff members. They were charged with the task of using research and promising practices to develop a set of comprehensive guidelines related to reading instruction. The teams’ use of 49 sources, including the most influential names in reading research, support a thorough examination of methods that are bringing about success in reading classrooms nation wide.

This report argues for a “complete approach” to the teaching of reading. Within the framework of this approach comes the recognition of the need to build on the cultural and linguistic diversity that students bring to the classroom, provide for the reading success of all learners, and provide instructional assessment that best supports the individual in achieving high levels of reading proficiency. In addition, the report calls for meeting the needs of all learners. This is supportive of earlier research (Cooper, 1997), which encourages a balanced literacy approach that is based on individual needs of all learners. Finally, the researchers state “programs must be responsive to the diverse strengths, needs, backgrounds, interests, and ways of learning that students bring to school” (Report of the NEA Task Force on Reading 2000, p.7).

Schools that succeed in creating positive academic achievement changes focus on reading and on a deep knowledge of the learner in this area. As with all school reform efforts, changes in reading are best accomplished when the teacher uses some means to assess and know the learners’ strengths, weaknesses and learning styles. Drawing on the interests and background knowledge of readers is essential to motivating students and thus spurring academic growth for all learners.

Best Practices: Cultural

An area that has become increasingly important in America’s schools is that of cultural diversity. Inez Marquez Chisholm states that a “multi-cultural mosaic unequivocally pervades our American schools” (1994, ¶ 4).

Cultural diversity poses a pedagogical and social challenge to educators.

Teaching effectively in culturally diverse classrooms means using culturally sensitive strategies and content to ensure equitable opportunities for academic

success, personal development, and individual fulfillment for all students.

(Marquez Chisholm, 1994, ¶5)

In order for all learners to achieve, practices must meet the needs of all.

International High School presents a school success story where most would fail (Ancess, & Darling-Hammond, 1994). A collaboration between the New York City Board of Education and City University of New York, this school houses only students who have been in the United States less than four years and who score below the 20th percentile on an English proficiency test. Yet, the graduation rate is above 95% and more than 90% of students go on to higher education. The identified key to success is authentic assessment. In this case, the use of portfolio assessment informs and drives classroom instruction. Students as well as teachers come to a deeper understanding of where the learner is and where he/she needs to go.

International High School represents one success story for cultural best practices. Information gleaned from the study is reliable and valid as well as being generalizable to any setting where students are of diverse cultural background. Though the sample consisted of only one school, it was compared to many schools with like populations who had not had the success that International High School experienced. This points to the portfolio assessment as the impetus for high achievement as it was the primary factor missing in other such schools.

To further the diversity studies, a 1995 study conducted by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning found that instructional conversations (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) aided community-assisted second language learners in bringing the known to the new. These instructional conversations

were intended to help students apply their cultural background and knowledge to the new learning of a new cultural setting while learning to comprehend reading materials. “The ICs (instructional conversations) gave the teacher and her students a tool to elicit student knowledge and incorporate divergent student backgrounds into the classroom discourse” (Patthey-Chavez, Clare, & Gallimore, 1995, p.2). Further evidence of this is found in the report of the Association for Curriculum Supervision and Development (Saravia-Shore, & Garcia, 1995). The National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning (McLaughlin, & McLeod, 1996) also identified characteristics of exemplary schools in assisting English language learners to high-level competence. “Rather than using a single model for all students with limited English proficiency, teachers adjusted curriculum, instruction, and the use of primary language to meet the varying needs of students” (p.7). Teachers were encouraged to learn about the students’ home communities in order to understand their behaviors and then use culturally relevant teaching materials.

In the study of instructional conversations, one experienced teacher, along with her 27 fourth grade students, became the subject. The school, located in Los Angeles, housed a predominantly Latino population where children in the class had Spanish as a first language and were expected to gradually transition to English instruction. Data collection took place through observations, videotapes of lessons, and student portfolios. Researchers analyzed topics of discussion, traced recurring ideas through student writing and analyzed specific input of students and teachers during instruction.

Though limited in scope and generalizability, this study offers significant information in regards to the growth possible in second language learners when a teacher

takes the time to talk with them. This talk was not merely light conversation; rather it was focused on who the student was as a learner and where the student's beliefs and values were rooted. This information allowed the teacher to tailor lessons to the needs of the individual learners in such a way that each learner's ideas were applauded. The study set out to prove that the growth of individual students was tied to instructional conversations, but no academic growth data was provided. Samples of student work that demonstrated change in students' thinking processes were included in the study and were likely more authentic measures than a standardized test. However, with no quantifiable evidence of growth, it is difficult to prove that instructional conversations were indeed a growth factor. Regardless, the work of the Association for Curriculum Supervision and Development (Saravia-Shore, & Garcia, 1995) and the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning (McLaughlin, & McLeod, 1996) supported the findings in studies that were comprehensive enough to generalize to other second language populations.

The significance of all three studies lies in their emphasis on conversations and knowledge of community, which allowed a safe place for students to grow and thrive. The positive impact made by this process, taking time to know the learners, is evidenced in the improved understanding shown through student writing. Students began to think and embellish ideas in ways that showed their understanding based on their cultural values instead of being stifled by having to answer in a manner that was unnatural for their background. In a 1998 report entitled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, the emphasis on cultural knowledge of the learner is reiterated.

If non- or limited-English-speaking students are in an English as a second language program, where they are learning to read in English, teachers must be skilled in helping these students confront a double challenge: learning to read while learning English as a second language. At a minimum, their teachers should be aware of the pertinent linguistic and cultural differences. (Snow, et al., Eds., 1998, pp.298-299)

Sociocultural theory is founded on the principle that learning is socially constructed and rooted in specific cultural-historical contexts and through interaction (Monzo & Rueda, 2001; McLaughlin & McLeod, 1996). The sociocultural theory shows through research that to know the learner is crucial in spurring academic growth. Monzo and Rueda (2001) examined 32 Latino paraeducators and their interactions with learners. “Findings suggest that knowledge of students’ culture and communities, their primary language, and the interactional styles with which they are familiar facilitates meeting their academic and social needs” (p.6).

This qualitative study took place in two Southern California elementary schools that had high Latino populations leaving questions of generalizability of the study to other settings. Eight to ten classroom observations as well as informal and formal conversations and interviews provided the data for analysis. Resulting conclusions suggest that though knowledge of a student’s culture, experiences and family life would be beneficial for engaging the student in learning, these factors are rarely used as an impetus for instruction. “When teachers do not share their students [sic] cultural background, the teaching-learning process may be impeded by misunderstanding and frustration” (McLaughlin & McLeod, 1996, ¶16). Instead, teachers’ feeling of

responsibility for the academic achievement of all learners allows rare moments for social interaction. Significant to the need for knowing the learner is the finding that “Teachers’ and paraeducators’ recognition of community constraints and needs allows them to structure classroom activities to support students’ learning and social needs” (Monzo & Rueda, 2001, p.13).

Best practices in bringing about academic growth for culturally diverse learners seem to have many of the same characteristics as all positive school reform efforts. It is important to note that research on best cultural practices places heavier emphasis on connecting with the learner on a personal basis by taking the time to talk and listen and be involved in students’ lives than other best practice reports. Best cultural practices recommend valuing the learners for who they are and what they bring to the learning. The teacher must take time to understand the background and needs the learner brings to the classroom and then use these as an impetus for instruction. Instruction rooted in sociocultural theory brings about academic growth.

Best Practices: Motivation

Lack of student engagement in the process of learning presents a problem, which can impede achievement progress. In 1997, Petty, Rummel and Thompson conducted an action research project aimed at proving that authentic assessment would increase student motivation and thus achievement. The project involved three classes, one sixth grade and two ninth grades, in two schools. Parents, students and teachers completed a survey to assess the kinds of tests generally administered, amount of preparation time, and feelings about test taking. An additional survey assessed disposition of students in regard to

school. Previous semester grades for the same subject were also gathered and used for comparison purposes.

Survey responses indicated that at site one most students and teachers preferred multiple-choice tests. Forty-three percent of students surveyed indicated feeling upset or confused at testing times and more than 50% of students were disengaged from school in desire and motivation. Site two students preferred true/false tests, but were most often given short answer tests. Attitudes toward school and testing were similar at both sites. Teachers from the two sites were not interested in changing test procedures because they liked it simple and expressed a lack of desire to work at it when--in their perceptions--students would not study anyway.

Petty, et al. (1997) proceeded to create change in these classrooms by implementing cooperative learning groups coupled with authentic assessment of knowledge. The change in student achievement came in these classrooms when teaching strategies were changed to elicit a true understanding of what learners knew. The multiple choice and short answer tests were stifling students who had knowledge that was not represented on the tests. Entrance cards were given for each unit to elicit prior student knowledge. Teachers then built units based on what students already knew rather than regurgitating unnecessary information. Semester scores at site one increased an average of 7.4 percentage points while scores at site two increased by 4.5 percentage points.

Student motivation plays an undeniable role in academic achievement. A study by Kariotakis, Kelly-Moutvic and Roberts in 2000 found that motivation could be drastically changed through the process of differentiating instruction in order to individualize learning. Three treatments were used to aid in differentiation and thus improve student

motivation: cooperative learning groups, teaching to the multiple intelligences and authentic assessment.

Sixth and eleventh grade students in Chicago suburbs were the subjects of this action research aimed at improving student motivation and ultimately achievement. Motivation level was determined pre- and post-intervention using a survey. During the study, teachers kept a checklist of observed behaviors that related to student attitude and motivation (Kariotakis, Kelly-Moutvic & Roberts, 2000). From survey information, a change in motivation was positively correlated to the three interventions. It would have been valuable to the research if researchers had administered treatments one at a time in an effort to ascertain which treatments were most effective. Nonetheless, authentic assessment and teaching to the multiple intelligences both require or foster knowledge of the learner and were positively correlated with motivation. Further value would have been added to this research had it gone on to correlate motivation to achievement.

Knowing the learner through assessment and then individualizing learning can create positive student motivation. Positive student motivation in turn can create greater desire to learn and achieve. Achievement and knowing the learner are then linked in an inseparable manner.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Classroom teachers often have opportunity to conduct their own experiments based on hunches or facts obtained from observing students in action. David Ruenzel conducted just this type of research in reflecting on his own teaching. In his article entitled *Past Imperfect: A Former Teacher Realizes that Giving in to Uncertainty is the Essence of Good Teaching* (1996), he described his exploration of information from past

students, all 1990 graduates. In contacting the students, he hoped to have them answer five questions regarding their feelings about their high school education. The questions ranged from value of academics to value of teacher relationships. This study consisted of only 21 students from a small high school with a relatively high socioeconomic status. The students who were interviewed repeatedly mentioned one teacher who had made a lasting impact by his open-ended questioning which pushed students to think and arrive at answers on their own.

Ruenzel concluded that students were willing to overlook nearly any fault or weakness in a teacher as long as the teacher “evidenced a transcendent concern for the learning of his or her students. Moodiness, rashness, peevishness could be absolved as long as there was nothing counterfeit about the teacher’s commitment to the students” (Ruenzel, 1996, p.25). The informal research went on to tell about a student who now in college wished for some teacher to have had time to have a conversation with him on his own, to ask his opinion. In reflecting back, students found they were pushed to excel by the teachers who took the time to talk with them. This study, though somewhat limited in scope, suggests that teachers who give them the gift of time motivate students. The time they desire is quality time of listening and interacting to come to a deeper understanding.

Another qualitative survey study conducted in a small southeastern United States high school showed a positive correlation between student-teacher relationship and achievement. The instrument used for data was the Comprehensive Assessment of School Environment (CASE) instrument. Reliability for the study was .84 for teacher-student relationship. A weakness of the measure was the inability to account for student diversity. Due to this measuring error, a subscale reliability correlation for racial relationships was

.66. Finally, academic achievement was measured by current semester grade point average.

In order to assure an adequate sample size, Niebuhr and Niebuhr (1999) administered the survey in a school auditorium where all participants were working at the same time. Responses were not anonymous as survey results had to be matched to grade point average. In light of this issue, student honesty comes into question. Researchers concluded that the student/teacher relationship is of particular importance in spurring academic achievement, but the validity of the information is questionable due to sampling procedure. However, the information given in surveys and the grade point average measure showed a positive correlation between student/teacher relationships and achievement.

Further supporting the positive correlation between student-teacher relationship and academic achievement, a study of teacher-student attunement was conducted by John Poulsen (2001). It was his contention that without attunement or emotional connection between teacher and student, learning was compromised. Out of 203 students included in the initial survey, 24 fourth grade students were chosen to participate in the study. Researchers matched 12 pairs of students according to gender and age. The study compared the performance of these two groups who were both exposed to attuned and non-attuned lessons. Attuned lessons allowed latitude for teachers to build on the knowledge they had about students and to allow student interaction at all levels through drama. Non-attuned lessons used reading of the text and viewing of films to present information. All lessons were videotaped and later rated by trained raters (inter rater reliability of .94 to .96) looking for focused attention, positive emotions, and a sense of

oneness between student and teacher. Not only were the students participating in the attuned lessons more engaged, but they also experienced a 360% (over the non-attuned lessons) improvement in scores as assessed by pre- and post-tests. Results positively support the need for a connection between student and teacher in order to produce maximum academic gains. This study also supports the research of Ruenzel (1996) in that it suggests students are motivated by a teacher-student connection, which is made through quality time spent talking and listening.

Teachers are powerful motivators. The motivation may be positive or negative dependent upon the time a teacher is willing to invest in connecting with and getting to know the learners and recognizing their needs. For a teacher to be the impetus behind academic growth, he/she must find ways to become positively connected to students. Teacher-student relationship affects motivation, and motivation brings about a desire to learn.

Summary

Throughout best practice reports for all academic areas there is a common theme. In high-performance/high-poverty schools, there is an emphasis on assessment, skill mastery, and family involvement. Assessment practices that work involve a systematic gathering of information about the learner that supports the process of curriculum development. Assessment involves knowing the learner academically as well as culturally. Skill mastery only comes after sound assessment that informs the teacher of learner strengths and needs. In order to take skill mastery to the ultimate level, there must also be involvement of the family.

Similarly, best practice reports for school improvement employed assessment information to change practices to fit the needs of learners. Teaching strategies in improving schools were diversified to further meet the needs of learners. In order for school improvement to come, heavy emphasis was placed on assessment and individualizing based on student backgrounds, interests and learning styles, which helped the teacher to know the learner.

Virtually all schools that have seen vast improvement place school-wide focus on reading. In reading as with other best practices, the teacher needs to know and understand student strengths and weaknesses as well as interests, background, and reading style. Individualizing based on student needs is seen as the best method for moving students along a continuum of reading achievement. Since there is no “one size fits all” method for improving reading skills, knowledge of the individual learner is crucial to selection of the proper instructional method.

In addition, because schools in America are extremely diverse in culture, the question of how to meet the needs of a diverse array of cultures has been at the top of the research agenda of the 20th and 21st centuries. Again, best practice reports suggest that a deep knowledge of the learner is necessary to inform instruction. Sociocultural theory suggests that learning is constructed in a social manner based on the cultural background of the learner (Monzo & Rueda, 2001; McLaughlin & McLeod, 1996). For the teacher to know and understand the cultural background is necessary.

As with all other areas of learning, student motivation seems to be linked to the teacher having knowledge of the learner. Assessment practices are a common ground for increasing student motivation. The very thing that gives a teacher the most valuable

information about a learner is the thing that tends to spur the learner to desire further learning. In using authentic assessment practices, the teacher and the learner come to a deeper understanding of student strengths and needs.

Best practice research indicates that the relationship between student and teacher is important in spurring achievement. This relationship is born of time spent coming to know the learner. In investing this time, the teacher that is most effective comes to know and understand the learner academically as well as culturally. In turn, the learner tends to respond positively to a teacher who invests in him/her and will be motivated toward higher achievement.

Best practices in education are based on the underlying factor of a teacher knowing the learner. This knowing comes through sound assessment that drives individualized instruction. In turn, individualized instruction spurs motivation and greater achievement in the learner. The greater achievement is recognized through sound assessment and thus the cycle begins again. A deeper knowledge of the learner comes with each trip through this cycle.



Chapter 4

*Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**Findings*

Is a relationship between the teacher and learner in which the teacher takes time and effort to fully know the learner crucial for academic growth? Though there are best practice reports in abundance, this question has not been specifically explored as a factor for spurring high academic achievement for all learners. Despite the lack of specific research, knowing the learner is addressed indirectly in reports from all areas of education.

Research informs teachers that best practices in high-performance/high-poverty schools include frequent and detailed assessment of learner strengths and weaknesses as well as knowledge of learner socioeconomic status and ethnic background (Carter, 2000; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000; Education Trust, 1999; Haycock, 1998; Reeves, 2000). Best practices in school improvement show that teachers must use what they know about learners to drive instruction. This knowing includes interests and background of the learner (Cole, 1995; Faulkner Robert, 2001; Kline, 1995; Peace, Mayo, & Watkins, 2000; Marzano, 2001; Miller, 2000; United States Department of Education, 1999; Wylie, 2001). In the area of reading, best practices again include frequent and detailed assessment as well as knowledge of learner background (American Federation of Teachers, 1998; Carbo & Kapinus, 1995; Churchill, et al., 1998; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1999; Report of the NEA Task Force on Reading 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, Eds., 1998). Diversity of culture is another area addressed

by best practices. Though this area also looks at authentic assessment as a best practice, heavier emphasis is placed on knowing and understanding the cultural background and time spent interacting with the learner (Anness & Darling-Hammond, 1994; Marquez Chisholm, 1994; Patthey-Chavez, Clare, & Gallimore, 1995; McLaughlin, & McLeod, 1996; Monzo & Rueda, 2001; Saravia-Shore, & Garcia, 1995; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, Eds., 1998; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Student motivation is yet another crucial area in education where best practices seem to fall along the same path as other best practices. Individualization of learning spurs motivation, which in turn spurs academic achievement (Kariotakis, Kelly-Moutvic and Roberts, 2000; Petty, Rummel, & Thompson, 1997). Finally, a crucial piece, which effects implementation of each best practice, is the student-teacher relationship. This relationship is powerful in producing motivation and is dependent upon the time invested in coming to know the learner (Niebuhr & Niebuhr, 1999; Poulsen, 2001; Ruenzel, 1996).

Though the studies do not directly correlate knowledge of the learner to academic achievement, the evidence of its necessity is compelling. Individualization of instruction, authentic assessment, knowledge of learner background and cultural practices all imply and necessitate a relationship between the student and teacher in which the teacher knows the learner and uses what is known to improve instruction. The learner tends to be motivated through the very practices that are mentioned above. Therefore, the teacher knowing him/her motivates the learner. Student motivation then spurs academic achievement. A relationship between the teacher and learner in which the teacher takes time and effort to fully know the learner is then crucial for academic growth.

Summary

In reviewing best practice reports, it is evident that the direct relationship between the teacher knowing the learner and academic growth is not specifically studied. Rather, the research focuses on practices. Repeatedly, best practice reports mention the need for the teacher to have a clear view of the learner's strengths and weaknesses and to help the learner activate prior knowledge. In addition, these reports discuss the need for frequent and authentic assessment of learners in order to tailor instruction to learner needs.

This frequent assessment is one mode for coming to know the learner. Another mode is a personal connection in which the teacher comes to understand cultural, motivational and socioeconomic factors that may impact a child's learning. Schools that are beating the odds in achievement are schools where teachers are taking time to find the factors that impact learning and then working through them to create success in all students.

Recommendations

In theory, knowing the learner to spur academic growth may seem simple. In practice it can be challenging. It is idealistic to think that a teacher will enter the classroom and be able to watch, communicate with and truly know 30 or more learners. To make this task achievable, there are many tools available. In exploring these tools, it is important to remember that they are only tools. Each learner comes to the classroom with different needs. No one program will magically fix or reach all learners. With this in mind, when used properly (not as a set of fixed rules and procedures, but as a guide for

learning about the learner), the following programs may be valuable aids in the process of school reform.

The primary language record. One such tool is the *Primary Language Record* (PLR) (Barrs, Ellis, Hester & Thomas, 1988). Teachers in England who desired a more authentic method of recording children's reading progress created the Primary Language Record in 1985. It provides a systematic method for recording student growth as indicated through the use of personal communication and performance assessment.

Darling-Hammond, Ancess & Falk (1995) say,

Teachers who use the PLR find that it enriches the way they look at children, the way they look at families, and the ways in which they teach. The PLR supports teachers in better understanding how children learn by providing a framework with which they can examine their students' learning strategies. It helps teachers to see their students even more closely as individuals. (p.188)

The PLR process includes parent interviews, language literacy conferences between the child and teacher, observations focused on the child as a language user, and information to be passed on to the next teacher. It also involves the use of reading scales. The reading scale is based on current research in the area of reading development and places the learner on a continuum from inexperienced (needs a great deal of support) to exceptionally experienced (enthusiastic and reflective reader).

Each part of the PLR process is guided by the use of forms. Part A of the forms is used to record information from the parent-teacher discussion at the beginning of the year and from the language literacy conference. Part B is used in the spring to record specific areas of growth as per conversation with and listening to the individual. Part C is for

recording the concluding conference with the child and parents as well as information for the next teacher. The record also includes a diary of observations by the teacher to be filled out during the course of classroom instruction.

In implementing the PLR, the Inner London Education Authority conducted two survey studies. These studies validated the scale score's potential for assessing reading achievement. The survey concluded that the PLR provided more wide-ranging information on a pupil's progress than standardized tests and could also be used also for diagnostic purposes (Feeney & Hann, 1991). "The PLR reflects an overall shift in thinking about the learning process--a shift that recognizes that good teaching is based on intimate knowledge of the child" (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Falk, 1995). This type of tool shows where the learner is academically while supporting and informing day-to-day teaching.

Learning record. In 1990, California piloted a program based on the Primary Language Record. In doing so, they expanded the program to all subjects and grade levels. Chapter 1 picked up sponsorship of this program and it was adopted as the California Learning Record in 1991. The name of the assessment tool was later changed to the Learning Record (LR) in order to market it outside of California. One of the key players in development of the Learning Record, M.A. Syverson, argues that the LR is the best manner of showing learning growth in the varied situations that exist in the lives of learners (Syverson, 1999). "The Learning Record is an open system of literacy and mathematics assessment, K-12, maintained and monitored by the classroom teacher to provide evidence that students are moving toward agreed upon goals and standards" (Barr & Thomas, 2002). The LR is similar to the PLR in that it requires interviews, personal

reflections, observations, work samples, as well as mid-term and final self-analysis and teacher analysis. In the end, the Learning Record is a structured and well-defined manner in which to put together a portfolio that shows student growth over time.

First steps. Another effective tool in helping the teacher to know the learner is *First Steps* (Rees et al., 1994). “Effective teachers have always used systematic observation and recording as a means of assessment. The First Steps materials have been developed to give teachers an explicit way of mapping children’s progress through observation” (Rees & Shortland-Jones, 1994, p.2).

This mode of recording and analyzing information to better know the learner is based on the Reading Developmental Continuum (Rees & Shortland-Jones, 1994). Using key indicators, learners are placed on a continuum of reading development. The handbook provides explicit information regarding each of the stages on the continuum. The actual recording of information is done on the continuum. Because the details of the continuum are so explicit, the teacher has a guide of behaviors to look for, a place to record mastery of the behaviors, and a support for understanding behaviors that are not present. There is also a companion book, *Reading Resource Book* (Rees et al., 1994), which gives ideas for how to teach or support each particular reading behavior.

The *First Steps* program is advantageous to teachers in that the tests are not prescribed. Rather, the necessary reading behaviors are clearly laid out and the teacher is given a framework for identifying these behaviors within the realm of day-to-day classroom activity. If used properly, the learner will leave the classroom with a clear outline of skills that are mastered as well as reading skills yet to master. These characteristics make this an extremely useful tool for the teacher, the learner, the parents

and the upcoming teacher. The ensuing document is a compelling piece of evidence of learner growth.

Dynamic indicators of basic early literacy. Yet another tool for knowing the learner in the area of reading is *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* known as DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2001). This tool was developed at the University of Oregon and is based on the essential early literacy domains that are addressed in the report of the National Education Association Task Force on Reading (2000). The one- to three-minute tests measure phonological awareness, alphabetic understanding, automaticity and fluency.

The DIBELS measures have been extensively researched and found to be highly reliable and valid. The short tests are administered from monthly to three times per year and each provides a steppingstone to the next measure. Success on one portion of the test is predictive of success in that area of reading. One attractive feature of this testing system is that it allows schools to tabulate data that will show how reading instruction is working in the school as a whole while at the same time, each test is predictive and prescriptive for the individual learner. The drawbacks to this system are the heavy emphasis on fluency at the expense of comprehension as well as measurement of early literacy only. The measure is of little use for upper elementary teachers who are trying to grasp the areas of reading strength and weakness in already-fluent readers.

A similar measure to DIBELS is the *Texas Primary Reading Inventory* (Texas Education Agency, 2000). This measure again provides tests and systematic implementation of these tests focused at kindergarten through second grade. The first tests are screening devices that “permit quick and fairly accurate identification of students

who exhibit development of key reading concepts” (Texas Education Agency, 2000-2001, p.3). Follow-up tests are then given at least two more times during the school year, but can be given more often for frequent anecdotal purposes. The areas of knowledge covered by these tests include graphophonemic knowledge, phonemic awareness, book and print awareness, listening comprehension, word reading, reading accuracy, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. Though these tests are very thorough, they must still be used in conjunction with personal communication and performance assessment of day-to-day tasks in order to be useful for guiding the curriculum and knowing the learner.

Other reading programs. In addition to these tools, the American Federation of Teachers produced a report in 1998 that detailed the pros and cons of seven programs that held promise for improving reading skills. In order to be included in this report, the program had to help all students reach high academic standards, be proven to raise academic achievement levels of all learners, be replicable, and provide support for teachers. The programs included in the list are: Cooperative Integrated Reading and Comprehension (CIRC), Direct Instruction (DI), Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction (ECRI), Junior Great Books (JGB), Multicultural Reading and Thinking (McRAT), Open Court Collections for Young Scholars (OC), and Success for All (SFA). Of these seven programs, thorough research on academic achievement had been completed on only four. Of the four proven through detailed and longitudinal studies to improve academic achievement, all included a method for coming to know the learner. DI and CIRC used heavy assessment and CIRC also used individualization to know the learner while ECRI used an inquiry method of questioning. SFA was the most impressive of the seven programs in that it is a whole school reform with reading as the core focus.

Imbedded in the reform is frequent assessment, identification of student needs in areas outside academia, one-on-one tutoring, and a family support team that aids in solving behavioral or social problems. Interestingly, CIRC is also used in conjunction with SFA to provide the necessary assessment and individualization of instruction. Though achievement results for each of these programs is impressive, SFA has shown an effect size in reading of +.34 to +.82 and in word attack of +.51 to +4.22 (American Federation Teachers, 1998). Any effect size difference over +.25 is considered to be significant. CIRC research results show an effect size of +.15 to +.99 in reading comprehension and +.31 to +.47 in writing. Combining SFA and CIRC then appears to be an efficient manner of having a framework for knowing the learner that spurs academic achievement.

Conclusions. These recording or assessment tools all have pros and cons. In general, a tool that allows a teacher to observe change and growth daily while the student is engaged in everyday learning is most useful and user friendly. The use of DIBELS and TPRI would be excellent for the primary grades and for use with another daily assessment method. DIBELS allows users to download and administer tests at no cost. If a school chooses to use the data recording and reporting system, there is a cost of one dollar per student entered into the databank. TPRI is available at a cost of \$60.00 per class set of tests.

The LR, First Steps, and SFA, though considerably more expensive, encourage and promote daily assessment in a real setting as well as a deeper understanding of the learner and what he/she brings to the learning. The cost of implementing the LR is approximately \$8000.00 for each of the first two years with a drop to \$5000.00 for the third and following years. This cost includes an on-site coach and administrative

oversight. First Steps can be implemented at a similar cost. There are two methods for effective training in First Steps. The first is a two-day professional development at a cost of \$325.00 per teacher with a minimum of 25 participants. The second method is to train district trainers. The cost of this option is \$3300.00 per person with a minimum of 15 participants, but participants may come from several school districts. Finally, SFA has the flexibility to be funded as a schoolwide Title I project. The estimated first year cost is \$90.00 to \$100.00 per student. Each of these programs offer valuable methods that drive coming to know the learner in a deep manner, which in turn drives instruction that brings about academic growth.

Schoolwide reform programs. The American Federation of Teachers (1998) also released a review of six promising schoolwide reform programs. The criteria for inclusion in this report were the same as the criteria for the reading programs. Listed in this report were the programs Success for All (SFA), School Development Program (SDP), High Schools that Work (HSTW), Direct Instruction (DI), Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline (CMCD), and Core Knowledge (CK). Again, at the time of the review, achievement results were preliminary on three of the six programs. The three that had been proven to spur academic growth were SDP, DI and SFA. Because SFA and DI are both promising reading reform programs and promising schoolwide reform programs, they show greatest promise for tools to aid in knowing the learner at the elementary level. On the practical side, implementation of DI as a stand-alone reading/language arts program may be slightly less expensive than implementation of SFA. DI has a cost of \$65.00 to \$100.00 per student as compared to SFA at \$90.00 to \$100.00 per student. However, DI uses scripted lessons, which take an immense amount

of training to bring to a user-friendly state. This training adds to the expense considerably. SFA shows greatest promise for school and reading reform that supports teachers in coming to know the learners.

Personal communication. Though the mentioned programs are all useful, there are informal modes of coming to know the learner that should not be lost in a program implementation. These methods come with no cost aside from the time and energy invested by a caring teacher. Personal communication is one of the most powerful tools a teacher possesses in knowing the learner. No standardized test can pick up on the learner's mood at the time of assessment, the struggle behind the work, the cultural bias of the learner, and so forth. A classroom teacher has the advantage of watching, asking questions, listening, communicating with parents and conferencing with students in order to have a complete picture of the learner. Goodman (1985) refers to this personal communication mode as "kidwatching." "Kidwatching" helps teachers to understand and support complete student development. In turn, this complete picture translates into instruction and goal setting that is tailored to the learner.

One of the main modes of authentic assessment that involves personal communication is the use of one-on-one conferencing. Teachers have found student-teacher conferencing to provide an immense amount of information about the student's knowledge as well as affect regarding reading.

From doing interviews we all found out more than we knew, all that's not revealed so clearly in the classroom. We may have known what the social worker or psychologist's report said about a child's home life, but talking to children one-

on-one is different. We developed an intimacy. We were struck by how eager the kids were to connect. (Darling-Hammond, Ancess & Falk, 1995, p.188)

In a one-on-one conference, a teacher typically listens to the child read, discusses with the child what he/she is reading, and helps the child set a specific goal for future reading. This is a time individualized for the child. The teacher listens and jots down notes either during or after the conference. This may be a time when the teacher becomes aware of an area in which a lesson needs to be taught. It may also reveal strengths in reading.

Personal communication can be coupled with performance assessment. Miscue analysis and running records are both forms of performance assessment that are often used during one-on-one conferencing. Another tool for use in one-on-one conferencing is the Major Point Interview for Readers (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). These measures are valuable to show accuracy and comprehension in reading while being prescriptive. Running records are intended to be given at any time or place on any text that the child is reading. The teacher records everything a learner does while reading. Marie Clay (1979) has a specific and well-defined program for recording the reading behaviors that occur while the child is reading the text. Miscue analysis is similar to running records except that it is usually done using teacher-selected reading. The Major Point Interview for Readers (1997) solely determines comprehension strategies used effectively by the reader. Many teachers use these tools to guide the conference. Whatever the method, the one-on-one conference is a time for the teacher to connect with the learner in a meaningful way--to know the learner.

Another mode of personal communication is class or small group discussion. This may take the form of literature groups, guided reading or whole-class discussion on a

topic. It is crucial that whatever the group method, the teacher pay attention to particular student input and feedback. West (1998) says, “Stay alert for comments from children who have been struggling or have not been showing much development or those who seem to be noticing something unusual” (p. 554). This may be a time when the teacher discovers that Johnny related the text to an event in his life or Susie can decode a word that is unknown to her. Because each situation and context is different, the teacher needs a system for recording the information gained. Karen West (1998) uses an on-the-spot note-taking approach. She jots down observations on a clipboard or sticky note and then rewrites them at the end of the day in an evaluation notebook.

Journaling. Journaling is yet another form of personal communication that can be powerful in coming to know the learner and in assessing what the learner knows or does-not-yet know. By having a student write about and share what he/she has read, a teacher is able to pin point strengths and missing links (Brenner & Pearson, 1998). Often the journal spurs a discussion that sheds further light on the student’s response. One type of journal used in the classroom is a dialogue journal. In this journal, students and teachers write messages back and forth to each other. The student messages focus on self-assessment and evaluation of learning. Teachers then read and respond in writing to the student. Stiggins (2001) states that, “this process links you and each of your students in a personal communication partnership” (p.246).

Performance assessment. As previously mentioned, performance assessment is another powerful tool for knowing the learner’s skills and abilities in reading. As Stiggins (2001) powerfully states,

Students and teachers live in a world of constant interaction in which both are watching, doing, talking, and learning. A teacher's greatest assessment asset is the opportunity to observe student achievement continuously over time. This permits the accumulation of bits of evidence over extended periods of time, and makes for big samples of performance. It offers opportunities to detect patterns, to double check, and to verify. (p.212)

To know fully what a learner gets from a reading, a teacher must hear and see the reader in action. As in the use of running records, miscue analysis, and the Major Point Interview for Readers, performance assessment is often coupled with personal communication to provide an immensely powerful tool for knowing the learner. An example of performance assessment in reading would be to allow a student to respond to the reading by showing in some way his or her connections, comprehension and analysis of the text. This may be in the form of a journal entry, an essay, a poem, a play, and so forth. Whatever the performance, the criteria need to be very clearly defined and the task must be designed in such a manner that the teacher is sure the learner is displaying the necessary criteria. To use performance assessment in the most efficient manner, the performance assessment needs to be instructional, realistic (reflective of real world reading tasks) and provide a record or tracking of specific tasks students have accomplished (Guthrie, J.T., Van Meter, P. & Mitchell, A., 1994).

Other informal modes. Aside from reading conferences and personal communication, there are multiple informal modes for coming to know a learner. Some such modes might include eating lunch with students and supporting them in events outside of school such as sports or cultural events. Others might include requesting a

letter from the parent giving information about the child, interest inventories, learning styles inventories, small group work, conversation, observation, after school clubs, one-on-one time, bulletin boards devoted to student photos, and other creative ideas that may be found in classrooms of outstanding teachers nationwide. These practices are key to finding out what the learner is about and translating that information into individualized instruction. As a teacher gleans information about the learner, the formal programs allow modes for recording or translating what is known to instruction. Because knowing the learner spurs academic growth, teachers must find a method that works for coming to know the learner.

Suggestions for Further Research

It seems a logical conclusion from research that teachers who know their learners have learners who make academic growth. However, there is no research to directly tie these two factors together. Further qualitative research is needed in the form of a survey of teachers, students and parents to find teachers that know the learners. This information then needs to be correlated quantitatively to achievement information. For purposes of proof that knowledge of the learner impacts reading achievement, there would need to be a longitudinal study that tracked students through various classrooms in order to have comparative data on achievement.

In addition, further research needs to be true experimental research where a control group shows the growth level without the teacher knowing the learner fully. This may be accomplished by selecting schools or districts where one focuses on high standards and expectations alone while another focuses on high standards with authentic assessment and differentiation as key factors in classroom instruction. In conducting the

research, it would be important to identify the practices of individual teachers, as a school program does not necessarily dictate what actually occurs in the classroom.

To further insure the validity of the research, researchers would need to identify and define specific areas in which a teacher might desire to know a learner. Suggested areas include learning styles, learning strengths, learning weaknesses, interests, cultural background, social strengths, social weaknesses, and family practices. Definition of each area would need to include specific ways in which this knowledge may be evidenced and measured. Because of the nature of this information, survey and observation with field notes would be the recommended study method. Surveys and observation data would then need to be correlated to the test scores or achievement data of specific students.



CONCORDIA
UNIVERSITY

References

- Albjerg Graham, P. (1995). Assimilation, adjustment, and access: An antiquarian view of American education. In D. Ravitch & M.A. Vinovskis (Eds.), *Learning from the past* (pp.3-24). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Allen-Sommerville, L. (1996). Capitalizing on diversity. *The Science Teacher*, 63(2), 20-22.
- American Federation of Teachers. (1998). *Building on the best, learning from what works: Seven promising reading and english language arts programs*. Washington DC: Author.
- American Federation of Teachers. (1998). *Building on the best, learning from what works: Six promising schoolwide reform programs*. Washington DC: Author.
- Ancess, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (1994). *Authentic teaching, learning, and assessment with new english learners at international high school*. Pleasantville, NY: National Center for Research in Vocational Education.
- Barr, M. & Thomas, S. (2002). *The learning record*. Retrieved February 10, 2002 from Center for Language and Learning website: <http://www.learningrecord.org>
- Barrs, M., Ellis, S., Hester, H., & Thomas, A. (1988). *The primary language record*. London: ILEA/Centre for Language in Primary Education.
- Brenner, D. & Pearson, D.P. (1998). *Authentic reading assessment in the middle school*. In K. Beers & B.G. Samuels (Eds.), *Into focus: Understanding and creating middle school readers* (pp. 281-310). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

- Burke, D. L. (1997). *Looping: Adding time, strengthening relationships*. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Early Childhood Education.
- Carbo, M. (1994). *Reading styles training manual*. Level 2, 23a,b. Syosset, N.Y.: National Reading Styles Institute.
- Carbo, M., & Kapinus, B. (1995). Strategies for increasing achievement in reading. In R.W. Cole (Ed.), *Educating everybody's children: Diverse teaching strategies for diverse learners* (pp.75-98). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision of Curriculum and Development.
- Casey Carter, S. (2000). *No excuses: Lessons from 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools*. Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation.
- Churchill, K., Durdell, J., & Kenney, M. (1998). *Hear it, feel it, see it: Improving early reading acquisition through a multisensory phonemic awareness approach*. Chicago, Illinois: Saint Xavier University and Skylight Training & Publishing.
- Clay, M. (1979). *The early detection of reading difficulties*. New Zealand: Heinemann.
- Cole, R.W. (Ed.). (1995). *Educating everybody's children: Diverse teaching strategies for diverse learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision of Curriculum and Development.
- Comer, J.P. (2001, April 23). Schools that develop children. *The American Prospect*. 12(7). Retrieved May 14, 2002 from http://www.prospect.org/print_friendly/print/V12/7/comerj.html
- Cooper, J. (1997). *Literacy: Helping children construct meaning*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

- Darling-Hammond, L., Ancess, J. & Falk, B. (1995) *Authentic assessment in action*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1998). Teacher learning that supports student learning. *Educational Leadership*. 55(1), 14-19.
- D'Amico, J.J., & Nelson, V. (2000). *How on earth did you hear about us? A study of exemplary rural school practices in the upper midwest*. Oakbrook, Illinois: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory.
- Education Trust. (1999). *Dispelling the myth: High poverty schools exceeding expectations*. Washington D.C.: Author.
- Education Quality and Accountability Office. (1997). *Provincial report on achievement: English language schools*. Toronto, Canada: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Faulkner Robert, P. (2001). *Literacy in the face of poverty: Two case studies of high achieving low-income African American fifth grade readers*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED454330)
- Feeney, K., & Hann, P. (1991). *Survey of reading performance in year 2: Summer 1991*. Lewisham, England: Lewisham Education.
- Good, R., & Kaminski, R. (Eds.). (2001). *Dynamic indicators of basic early literacy skills (5th edition)*. Eugene, OR: Institute for the Development of Educational Achievement. Retrieved February 12, 2002 from the University of Oregon Web site: <http://dibels.uoregon.edu/>

- Goodman, Y. (1985). *Kidwatching: Observing children in the classroom*. In A. Jaggar & M. Smith-Burke (Eds.), *Observing the language learner* (pp.9-18). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Griffin, J.L. (1987, July 31). Dropout rate tied to early failure. *Chicago Tribune*.
- Gurskey, D. (1996). The unschooled mind. In V.Lanigan (Ed.), *Thoughtful teachers, thoughtful schools: Issues and insights in education today* (pp. 59-63). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Guthrie, J.T., Van Meter, P., & Mitchell, A. (1994). Performance assessments in reading and language arts. In P. Afflerbach, & B. Kapinus, (Series Eds.) & S. Barrentine (Vol. Ed.), *Reading assessment: Practices and principles for teachers* (pp.100-108). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Haycock, K. (1998, Summer). *Good teaching matters: How well qualified teachers can close the gap*. Washington DC: The Education Trust.
- Howells, K. (2000, January). Boldly going where angels fear to tread. *Intervention in School & Clinic*. 35(3), 157-160.
- Kariotakis, C., Kelly-Moutvic, K., & Roberts, C. (2000). *Teaching strategies to improve student motivation*. Chicago, Illinois: Saint Xavier University and Skylight Training & Publishing.
- Keene, E. & Zimmerman, S. (1997). *Mosaic of thought: Teaching comprehension in a reader's workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Kerry, T., & Kerry, C.A. (1997, November). Differentiation: Teacher's views of the usefulness of recommended strategies in helping the more able pupils in primary and secondary classrooms. *Educational Studies*. 23(3), 439-458.

Kline, L.W. (1995). A baker's dozen: Effective instructional strategies. In R.W.Cole (Ed.), *Educating everybody's children: Diverse teaching strategies for diverse learners* (pp.21-45). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision of Curriculum and Development.

Marquez Chisholm, I. (1994, Winter). Preparing teachers for multicultural classrooms. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students*. 14, 43-68. Retrieved May 14, 2002 from <http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/miscpubs/jeilms/vol14/Chisholm.htm>

Marzano, R. (2001). *A new era of school reform: Going where the research takes us*. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.

McLaughlin, B. & McLeod, B. (1996, June). *Educating all our students: Improving education for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds*. University of California Santa Cruz: National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning. Retrieved May 14, 2002 from <http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/miscpubs/ncrcdssl/edall.htm>

Miller, Dr. C. (2000). *School reform in action*. Boca Raton, FL: South Florida Center for Educational Leaders at Florida Atlantic University.

Monzo, L.D. & Rueda, R.S. (2001). *Sociocultural factors in social relationships: Examining latino teachers' and paraeducators' interactions with latino students*. University of California Santa Cruz: Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence.

- National Education Association. (2000, February 12). *Report of the NEA task force on reading 2000*. Retrieved March 7, 2002 from <http://www.nea.org/readingmatters/expert/tfrfinal.pdf>
- National Education Association. (2001). *Making low-performing schools a priority: An association resource guide*. Retrieved May 5, 2002 from www.nea.org/issues/lowperf/prioritieschools/
- National Institute of Child Health & Human Development. (1999). *Report of the national reading panel: Teaching children to read*. Retrieved May 10, 2002 from <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/intro.htm>
- Niebuhr, K.E. & Niebuhr, R.E. (1999, Summer). An empirical study of student relationships and academic achievement. *Education*, 119(4), 679-682.
- Patthey-Chavez, G. Genevieve, Clare, L. & Gallimore, R. (1995). *Creating a community of scholarship with instructional conversations in a transitional bilingual classroom*. Santa Cruz, CA: National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning.
- Peace, T.M., Mayo, K. & Watkins, R. (2000). *Becoming consumers of our own research: What really makes a difference in improving learning?* Presented at the 2000 AACTE Annual Meeting. Chicago, Illinois (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED440078).
- Petty, P., Rummel, R., & Thompson, C. (1997). *Increasing student engagement and retention through the use of cooperative groups and authentic assessment*. Chicago, Illinois: Saint Xavier University & IRI/Skylight.

- Poulsen, J. (2001, January/February). Facilitating academic achievement through affect attunement in the classroom. *The Journal of Educational Research*. 94(3), 185-191.
- Raham, H. (2001, Spring). Tracking the trends: Effective school research. *Education Analyst*. 4(2). Kelowna, B.C.: Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education.
- Ravitch, D. (1995). The search for order and the rejection of conformity: Standards in american education. In D. Ravitch & M.A. Vinovskis (Eds.), *Learning from the past* (pp.167-190). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Rees, D., & Shortland-Jones, B. (1994). *Reading developmental continuum*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Rees, D., Raison, G., Shortland-Jones, B., Barrat-Pugh, C., Sinclair, A., Dewsbury, A., et al (1994). *Reading resource book*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Reeves, D. B. (2000). *Accountability in action: A blueprint for learning organizations*. Denver, CO: Advanced Learning Press.
- Region VIII School Support Improvement Center. (2000). *High-performing, high poverty schools*. Retrieved May 5, 2002 from <http://www.vcss.k12.ca.us/region8/HP2page.html>
- Reynolds, C.R. & Gutkin, T.B. (Eds.). (1999). *The handbook of school psychology*. Third Edition. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Ruenzel, D. (1996). Past imperfect: A former teacher realizes that giving in to uncertainty is the essence of good teaching. In V. Lanigan (Ed.), *Thoughtful*

- Teachers, Thoughtful Schools: Issues and Insights in Education Today* (pp.21-26). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Saravia-Shore, M., & Garcia, E. (1995). Diverse teaching strategies for diverse learners. In R.W. Cole (Ed), *Educating everybody's children: Diverse teaching strategies for diverse learners* (pp.47-74). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision of Curriculum and Development.
- Sedlak, M.W. (1995). School delivery of health and social services. In D. Ravitch & M.A.Vinovskis (Eds.), *Learning from the past* (pp.57-94). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Snow, C.E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington DC: National Academy Press.
- Stiggins, R.J. (2001). *Student- involved classroom assessment*. New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Syverson, M. A. (1999). *The wealth of reality: An ecology of composition*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Texas Education Agency. (2000-2001). *Texas primary reading inventory teacher's guide* (revised). Austin, TX: author.
- Tharp, R.G., & Gallimore, R. (1988). *Rousing minds to life: Teaching, learning, and schooling in social context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- U.S. Department of Education. (1994, January). *Goals 2000: Educate America*. Retrieved May 9, 2002 from <http://www.edgov/legislation/GOALS2000/TheAct/>

- U.S. Department of Education. (1999, December). *Hope for urban education: Improvement strategies*. Retrieved May 9, 2002 from <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/urbanhope/improvement.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2001, January). *No child left behind*. Retrieved May 9, 2002 from <http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/>
- West, K. (1998). Noticing and responding to learners: Literacy evaluation and instruction in the primary grades. *The Reading Teacher*, 51, 550-559.
- Wiggins, G. (1989, May). A true test: Toward more authentic and equitable assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 70(9).
- Wiggins, G. (1990, December). *The case for authentic assessment*. Washington DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED328611).
- Wood, G. H. (1992). *Schools that work: America's most innovative public education programs*. New York: Plume.
- Wylie, C. (2001). *Ten years old & competent: The fourth stage of the competent children project: A summary of the main findings*. Wellington, New Zealand: Council for Educational Research.
- Zemelman, S., Daniels, H., & Hyde, A. (1998). *Best practice: New standards for teaching and learning in America's schools*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.

