

Learning and Teaching at an At-Risk School

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ABSTRACT

This multiple case study documents the literacy learning and instruction of 13 first-grade students in an at-risk school. It is part of a larger study that follows the students from kindergarten to sixth grade. In first grade, the majority of the focal students described in this report came from minority backgrounds, were poor financially, and were learning English as a new language. Their teachers were engaged in a comprehensive schoolwide accountability plan to improve the literacy learning and instruction in their school.

All of the focal children made progress by the end of the first-grade year but with notable differences in levels of literacy achievement. Observations about classroom management, instruction, and assessment are described in an effort to explain the differences in student achievement. The considerable influence of classroom instruction on literacy learning is documented, as well as the need for teachers to individualize instruction and customize the curriculum to meet individual needs. Case studies of two children's divergent paths to literacy are highlighted to demonstrate this effect of instruction on learning.

I anticipate that these descriptions will provide researchers, teachers, and school administrators with additional knowledge about how literacy instruction and learning may be enacted in at-risk schools such as the one described here.

Grandpa took Mary Ellen inside away from the crowd. ‘Now, child, I am going to show you what my father showed me, and his father before,’ he said quietly.

He spooned the honey onto the cover of one of her books. ‘Taste,’ he said, almost in a whisper.

‘There is such sweetness inside of that book too!’ He said thoughtfully. ‘Such things...adventure, knowledge, and wisdom, but these things do not come easily. You have to pursue them. Just like we ran after the bees to find their tree, so you must also chase these things through the pages of a book!’
(Polacco, 1993, p. 30)

Wouldn’t it be ideal if children came to reading enjoying “such sweetness inside of that book” and all books? And wouldn’t it be even more remarkable if these children were learning to read and write in a school considered to be at risk?

My study of literacy learning and teaching took place in an at-risk school. My goal was to better understand literacy learning and instruction in such a setting. This work is important because while we know much about the depressing statistics on the teaching and achievement of children in schools with the at-risk label, we know little about the stories of their learning and instruction on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, this study is noteworthy because there are so few reports that document the reading and writing growth of children in these settings even though these school situations are common in the United States. As Neufeld and Fitzgerald (2001) state, “The need is great to describe and understand what happens with regard to these young at-risk readers” (p. 98). This need is especially pertinent for students who are new to English, since so much of their literacy learning and instruction is coupled with their learning of English. We know very little about how these children make progress in English reading (Garcia, 2000).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is organized into three sections. The first section describes issues related to schools and children considered at risk for school failure. The second section describes recommended literacy instruction for children in the primary grades and targets the importance of literacy learning in the first grade. In the final section, I review recommendations for literacy instruction for students who are learning English as a new language.

Issues of Being a School Considered At Risk

Howard Elementary School (pseudonyms are used throughout), the site of the study, is considered to be an at-risk school because of the children who are

enrolled in it. Dalton (1998) states that “students who have been most dramatically failed by U.S. schools are those whose culture, languages, or dialects diverge from the mainstream of students and teachers” (p. 6). Moreover, Dillon (2000) wrote that “these students [from diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds and with limited English proficiency] are often not getting the support or experiences in school that they need to help them grow as learners and individuals” (p. 11).

Professionals in these schools are frequently described as having a deficit view of the students they teach (Garcia, 1996) because teachers focus more on what students do not bring to school (English proficiency, mainstream learning experiences, etc.) instead of what they do bring (their learning and experiential strengths). Wong-Fillmore (1991) expands on this idea by saying that

when they [language minority students] show up in school, they are seen, not as children who speak different languages or who have different styles of learning, but as children who do not speak English, and who are therefore unprepared for school....In the eyes of many educators the real test of school readiness is English. (p. 43)

Moreover, teachers in schools that are labeled *at risk* frequently make assumptions about parents' lack of interest in their children's learning, which contributes to lower teacher expectations and lower academic learning. Lower teacher expectations about the learning of students, especially the learning of all students in a school, is directly linked to how teachers teach (Brophy, 1983; Contreras & Delgado-Contreras, 1991). As these teachers experience consistent frustration in their teaching endeavors, they tend to excuse themselves from responsibility and blame the students or their families (Allington & Walmsley, 1995).

Another characteristic of at-risk schools has to do with the nature of instruction. Frequently the educational experience for students in urban, poor settings consists of the teacher giving instructions, asking questions, repeating directions, making assignments, and then monitoring seat work (Haberman, 1991; Waxman & Padron, 1995). Sleeter and Grant (1994) and Moll (1998) note that these teachers prefer teacher-centered, large-group instruction where all the students work on the same tasks at the same time. Furthermore, they focus on basic or isolated skills as they feel compelled to provide these to children who they feel lack innate ability or the necessary background for more conceptually complex learning (Haberman, 1991; Nieto, 1999; Padron & Waxman, 1999). This kind of instruction proves to be counterproductive, as children learn lower-level skills but never engage in the quality interactions around print that result in long-term school success (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Purcell-Gates, 1996).

The dismal results of these learning environments for students have been

widely documented. Purcell-Gates (1995) wrote that “poor, minority, and most often urban children fall significantly behind their middle-class counterparts in their ability to read and write” (p. 2). Dillon (2000) noted that students in these high-poverty classrooms “have little desire to learn” (p. 11). Additionally, children raised in middle-class homes with educated parents do well academically, while children who do not share these backgrounds start school behind and stay that way throughout their schooling experiences (Connell, 1994; Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999; Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

While this bleak picture has dominated the literature, there are also stories of teachers and schools where this has not been true. Most notable among this work is the study conducted by Ladson-Billings (1994). She described how successful teachers of African-American children interacted with their students. From these teachers, she constructed a list of the characteristics necessary for a culturally relevant school. These characteristics included (a) providing educational self-determination (knowing what is right for learning and going after it), (b) honoring and respecting students’ home cultures, and (c) helping African-American students understand the world as it is and equipping them to change it for the better (pp. 136–139). Her work demonstrates that children who are enrolled in schools with high concentrations of poor minority children can achieve at least as well as their suburban counterparts.

To summarize, most of the research focused on at-risk schools has documented a dismal picture of teaching and learning. Students in these schools are considered to be deficit learners and are limited to low-level instruction centered on basic curriculum; however, other studies describe different results for students when teachers view students as capable. These teachers take charge of providing students with exemplary instruction that respects their home culture and language.

Recommended Curriculums for Literacy Instruction and Learning

Once children enter school, classrooms become the most important context for successful literacy achievement. Teachers and their classroom environments are especially critical for children who rely on school for the majority of their learning. Classroom climate, particularly the relationship between the teacher and students, is important to students’ academic success. Nieto (1999) recommends that teachers develop positive relationships with students and parents. Delpit (1995) and Ladson-Billings (1994) report a need for teachers who have high expectations for students and care about each child’s academic progress. Nieto and Ladson-Billings view this type of nurturing environment to be just as critical as appropriate literacy instruction in enabling children to learn and demonstrate high academic performance. Likewise, McDermott’s (1977) classic research reinforces the importance of having trusting relationships between a

teacher and students because these relationships are more essential to student success than a specific teaching approach or strategy.

Caring teachers who create nurturing environments are important but not sufficient for successful literacy learning; the curriculum has an important role to play as well.

In *Every Child a Reader: Action Plan* (Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 1997), the authors expect that students in first grade will

- know letters and sounds before formal reading and spelling instruction begin.
- have a balance in instruction between phonics and meaning.
- have books that support their ability to decode and books that support their appreciation of meaning.
- engage in strategies centered on comprehension.
- have opportunities to write.
- be in smaller classes with about 15 students.
- participate in assessment that is tied to curriculum.
- be members of many groups that are organized for learning goals.
- be given tutoring support if necessary.
- be engaged in reading at home.

Coupled with the above-mentioned research on early literacy are findings of the National Reading Panel (2000), which found support for skills-based instruction in primary grades. This instruction includes phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

In addition, Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996) studied effective first-grade reading teachers to learn about the components of their instruction. To the above characteristics, they added the need for classrooms filled with print, with a class library and children hearing stories read daily. For general teaching processes, they noted modeling of comprehension strategies, writing, the use of multiple grouping strategies in conjunction with the use of themes to organize instruction, and a sensitivity to individual student's needs. In reading, effective teachers stressed meaning-making activities, although there were word-level and decoding activities, too. They encouraged prediction, choral and shared reading, and the use of children's literature. The children engaged in writing that included writing stories and responses to stories read. The teachers informally assessed their students regularly on decoding and comprehension. In summary, these authors credit the students' success to their teachers' use of high-quality literature, attention to sound-symbol relationships, writing, infrequent use of the practice of round robin reading, along with efforts to meet the individual needs of their students.

While all grades in school are important to the learning development of

children, first grade is often singled out as the benchmark year for literacy development. Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) stated that quality instruction in kindergarten and the primary grades is the single best strategy to prevent later reading failure. As early as the first-grade year, children identify themselves as good or poor readers (Hiebert et al., 1997). Additionally, Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey (1997) found that the precursors of school failure are established as early as first grade. Stanovich's research (1986, 1994) documented that learning to read in the early grades was necessary for success in all academic areas. Similarly, Juel's research (1988) recorded that a child who was a poor reader in first grade would most likely be a poor reader at the end of fourth grade. She and Stanovich both noted that children who were poor readers in first grade often had acquired little phonological awareness and that students who had poor phonological awareness were most often associated with poverty backgrounds. Summarizing this research, Baker, Kameenui, and Stahl (1994) stated that "diverse learners face on a daily basis the tyranny of time, in which the educational clock is ticking away while they remain at risk of falling further and further behind in their schooling" (p. 375).

Literacy Curriculum for Students Learning English as a New Language

For this study, it was important to consider the recommendations for literacy curriculum for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse because the majority of students at Howard Elementary School represent such backgrounds. Nieto (1999) discussed the need for a school or classroom to engage in demanding curriculums, respect a child's home language and culture, have high expectations for students, and involve parents. Garcia (1996) extended these suggestions by calling for a "responsive pedagogy" (p. 214) that would integrate students' values, histories, and experiences into the learning process.

Moving from more general characteristics, Moll and Diaz (1987) considered classrooms where Latino students developed into successful or not successful readers and writers. They discovered that teachers who made text meaning and comprehension the main goals of instruction produced students who excelled at reading.

In addition to these curriculum recommendations are suggestions for established routines and procedures so that second-language learners know what to expect in the schedule and can focus on learning (Peregoy & Boyle, 1993; Sutton, 1989). Having parents visit the class to share their expertise places parents in expert roles rather than being viewed as deficient (Abbott & Grose, 1998).

From this research background, I embarked on a study within the context of an at-risk school to study the literacy learning and instruction of 13 first-

grade children. As I observed the students and their teachers, I needed to be mindful of the recommendations for exemplary literacy instruction and learning for children whose home language was English as well as those who had other home languages. I wanted to discover how teachers dealt with the complexity of teaching children to read and write when the majority were learning English as a new language and the teachers were expected to provide all instruction in English. I also wanted to discover how students responded to this instruction and how each one developed competencies in reading and writing.

METHOD

Design

For this research endeavor, I chose a multicase study design (Yin, 1994). This design provided the most appropriate frame to study literacy teaching and learning over an extended period of time. To learn more about the teaching and learning of literacy in an at-risk school, I identified 16 children in kindergarten and observed throughout their elementary school experience from first through sixth grades. Additionally, this design allowed for the exploration of literacy development without any overt manipulation of the classrooms (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994). The case children who were selected for this study provided a lens to the larger classroom environment by creating for me a focus for observations in each classroom. They provided a vehicle for an understanding of the literacy learning and instruction of all of the children in the classroom.

I established trustworthiness for this study by (a) conducting the study through the entire academic year to learn about first grade, (b) including the perspectives of the teachers and students, (c) gathering data systematically and consistently, and (d) sharing notes and summaries with the teachers for confirmation or additions to the data pool. These member checks secured confidence in the recorded observations. They also served as an opportunity to have informal chats about a focal child or the classroom in general.

By incorporating these strategies within this study, I was able to get an understanding of the children's development as seen from a variety of perspectives. The teachers' and children's perspectives allowed for the development of an authentic picture of the children's literacy development (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992) and of the instruction provided to them. After each observation, the observational notes or artifacts were assessed to determine each child's literacy development. An ongoing and routinely revised chart was kept for each child that highlighted literacy development. Additionally, a doctoral student observed each class weekly. We met routinely and discussed our independent observations to seek verification of our tentative findings.

Researcher Stance

I taught first grade for more than ten years before becoming a university professor; therefore, I entered this study with personal knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) and strong beliefs grounded in research which document that children and teachers construct knowledge together (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). I believe that literacy is a social enterprise grounded in communication (Rodriquez, 1999). Likewise, I view exemplary teaching and learning as a dialogic process shared by teachers and students (Wells, 1999). Therefore, I value teaching that includes the voices of students as well as the voice of the teacher.

I think that teachers provide the most appropriate instruction for children when they assess the knowledge that children bring to the classroom and develop instruction based on the strengths and needs of the students in their classroom (Dyson, 1993; Heath, 1983). While I believe that the teacher, not a specific program, is critical to the learning of students, I also know that certain literacy practices are more beneficial than others for beginning readers and writers (Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996). I also believe that children who attend high-poverty schools can become readers and writers who can decode text and understand its meanings as well. I value teachers in such settings who have high expectations for students and help them achieve them (Padron, Waxman, Brown, & Powers, 2000).

Setting

The School

Howard Elementary is one of the oldest schools in a mid-sized urban school district in the western United States. The neighborhood surrounding the school is filled with homes, apartments, and public housing projects. Howard has always had a high enrollment of minority students. It has also been known for its low achievement test scores. Each year when test scores are published in the local newspaper, Howard is typically at the bottom of the list. For example, in the 1998 national report card on schools, Howard scored at the 27th percentile for reading, 26th percentile for math, and 32nd percentile for science.

In response to these low scores, Howard Elementary submitted a plan to the state that included a balanced reading program for the classroom and Reading Recovery as a safety net for struggling first-grade readers. (See Appendix A for details of the accountability plan.) In this plan, large blocks of time were set aside for literacy instruction: all morning for the primary grades, and all afternoon for the intermediate grades. Within their literacy block, teach-

ers provided time for students to be read to; have shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, shared writing, interactive writing, guided writing, writing workshop, and independent writing; talk to and with other students; and attend to letters, words, and how they work.

Howard Elementary typically enrolled 600 students each year. The average daily attendance rate was 92% (the same as the district average), and the transiency rate was 43% as compared to the district's average rate of 33%. Of the children enrolled in this school, 60% were classified as learning English as a second language, and 8% were receiving special education services. Eighty percent of the school population received free or reduced-price lunches. Additionally, the school had a breakfast, lunch, and dinner program for students. Eighty-five percent of the children were classified as being of minority status—most often Hispanic (62%), who formed the majority of the student population in this school. Fifteen percent of the children participated in after-school care and 5% qualified for gifted and talented services.

The experience of the teachers in this school ranged from none to 10 or more years. Eight percent were new to teaching, 42% had between one to three years' experience, 24% had four to six years' experience, 5% had seven to nine years' experience, and the remaining 21% had 10 or more years' experience. The school had two reading consultants available to teachers for collaboration. One consultant worked in the primary classrooms. Reading Recovery was available to first graders. On Friday afternoons, the faculty participated in ongoing staff development that focused on the balanced literacy plan, including the elements noted in Appendix A, and other schoolwide issues.

The Classrooms

The observations took place in the 4 first-grade classrooms in the school. Approximately 15 children were assigned to each teacher. The state had reduced class size for first- and second-grade classrooms throughout the state; however, Howard Elementary did not have sufficient space for stand-alone classrooms. As a result, pairs of teachers were assigned to each first-grade room with approximately 30 students in each room. The classrooms were large enough for this number of students so they were not especially crowded, but they were not intended for a team of teachers. The addition of a second teacher's desk and a table for small-group teaching often made the rooms look cramped for space, and the noise level was often high.

An aide was assigned to each classroom for about one hour. Most of the aides were bilingual with Spanish being their first language. They often pulled a small group of children to work with who were not yet proficient with English.

Participants

Children

At the beginning of the kindergarten year, I identified 17 children. To identify the focal children, I met with parents to discuss my study and requested their permission for their child to be included. I also had the assistance of a teacher aide who spoke Spanish so that the parents understood the purpose of my study. During these first meetings, I spoke informally with parents about the early literacy experiences of their children.

Soon after the beginning of the year, one child, Nashon, moved and is not included in the analysis. At the end of kindergarten, three children left the school, which resulted in 14 focal children for the first-grade year. Of the remaining 13 children identified, six were boys and seven were girls. Eight of the children are of Hispanic origin, one is Filipino, one is African-American, and three are Caucasian. For nine of these children, English is their second language. Only three children had any preschool experience. For all 13 children, this was their second year at Howard Elementary, having completed kindergarten in the same school (see Appendix B).

Teachers

There were four sets of first-grade teachers. Kirby and Mears taught a combined first- and second-grade class. Mrs. Kirby had been teaching for four years, and her partner, Ms. Mears, taught for three years. Cullen and Adams formed a first-grade team. Mrs. Cullen spent five years teaching first grade, and Mrs. Adams had taught fourth grade for two years, art for two years, and first grade for two years. During the year, Mrs. Cullen had a baby and was absent from the room for six weeks. Shott and Sims formed another first-grade team. Mr. Shott had been in television broadcasting for 30 years before he became a teacher. He spent the majority of his seven years' teaching in the primary grades, and his partner, Mrs. Sims, taught in the primary grades for seven years. The last team of first-grade teachers was Messina and Denton. Mrs. Messina had over 15 years' experience as a first-grade teacher, and Mrs. Denton taught first grade for seven years. None of these teachers were new to teaching, and all had considerable time teaching in the primary grades.

Data Collection

The following data were collected: observations, interviews, and artifact collection.

Observations

I carried out observations in the first-grade classrooms once a week for a half-day in the morning, the time of day set aside for literacy instruction. A Spanish bilingual doctoral student served as research assistant and also carried out observations. She also helped me understand what the children said to each other when they conversed in Spanish.

During the observations, I most frequently acted as an observer (Jorgensen, 1989) in the classrooms. I found an unobtrusive location in the classroom and recorded the interactions taking place. To enhance my observations, I often moved just behind the focal children as they worked in small groups with their teachers.

I recorded my observations and conversations between the teachers and students or among the students on a computer. Usually, I was able to type the words of the participants as they were uttered. I did not use a tape recorder as it would have been necessary to constantly move the equipment and this would have been disruptive to the students.

Interviews

I conducted formal interviews at the beginning and end of the year. During the interviews I talked to the teachers about their goals, how they felt about the year with respect to literacy instruction and learning, and the progress of the focal children. I also informally interviewed teachers periodically throughout the year.

Artifacts

I collected student work on most visits to the classroom. I made copies of story or journal entries along with worksheets. Sometimes I transcribed exactly what a child was reading, using a technique similar to taking a running record (Clay, 1993). I also transcribed the conversations between teachers and students in small-group and whole-group instructional settings. Additionally, I made copies of the informal assessments, most often running records, taken by the teachers.

Data Analysis

The data that were collected through observations, artifacts, and interviews were analyzed using an interpretive approach. I was seeking an understanding of the teaching and learning that occurred in these settings. As data were collected, I constantly searched it to create a literacy profile for each child. I also

asked the teachers to share information about the literacy development of each child throughout the year. These recounts provided a fuller understanding of each child. Through this dialogue, I was able to triangulate my data and enrich my observations by the added insights of the teachers.

Periodically, I made cross-case comparisons among all of the children in the study to note similarities and differences in literacy development. I completed these comparisons by scrutinizing each child's literacy chart and products, as well as my observations and discussion notes. In addition to the close focus on the children's literacy development, I recorded the structure of the classroom and how it was designed to facilitate the literacy learning of students. I also described the literacy strategies that the teachers used in providing instruction.

As a result of continuous searches through my field notes and through discussion with the teachers, principal, research assistant, and aides, broad patterns of classroom learning emerged. These patterns crossed all learning situations and helped to describe the instruction and learning that occurred in these classrooms. The conversations, observations, and searches also enabled me to identify struggles and challenges that the teachers faced as they taught the children in their classrooms.

RESULTS

Summary of Literacy Instruction Across Teachers

As outlined in the accountability plan (see Appendix A), all students were expected to develop into grade-level readers and writers. To that end, all primary-grade teachers blocked the entire morning for reading and writing instruction. There were no special classes scheduled during this time, and there were few interruptions from intercom messages. (See Table 1 for an overview of the literacy instruction that occurred in these rooms.)

To help teachers realize what grade level might be, a text gradient guide was developed within the school indicating benchmark levels for each grade. Importantly the level, rather than specific reading or writing strengths or needs, was seen as the criterion for grade-level reading and writing. Level 16, determined from Reading Recovery levels, was considered appropriate for end-of-the-year first graders. Teachers also assigned levels to stories in the basal texts and used levels to select stories from the basals rather than story content. In addition, they had numerous leveled books to use with students.

Because of the focus on levels, the teachers most often used running records for assessment. They pulled a child aside for this assessment while other children read in their small groups. The only other assessment that I observed was at the beginning and end of the year when teachers checked for alphabet recognition and sound-symbol correspondence of consonant sounds.

Table 1. Description of Literacy Instruction in First-Grade Classrooms

	Kirby/Mears	Cullen/Adams	Shott/Sims	Messina/Denton
Word wall	X	X	X	X
Handwriting	X	X		
Independent reading	X	X	X	X
Reading groups	X (ability -6)	X (ability -2)	X (ability -2 to 4)	X (ability -4 to 6)
Centers	X		X	X
Alphabet and sound/symbol instruction	X	X	X	X
LEA	X		X	
Journals	X		X	X
Shared reading	X		X	
Guided reading	X		X	X
Story time	X	X	X	X
Interactive writing	X			
Reading buddies (5th graders)	X			
Spelling tests			X	X
Home reading	X		X	X
Computers				X

All of the teachers set up their rooms with tables for the students and centers and other workspaces located at the edges of the classrooms. Each classroom had a library and a word wall. All of the first-grade teachers used independent reading, reading groups with students of the same ability based on reading levels, and directed phonics instruction. With the exception of Cullen/Adams, there was also a similarity across teachers in the use of centers, journals, and guided reading and in the expectation that students would read at home.

Of the first-grade classrooms, Cullen/Adams was the outlier with respect to literacy instruction. These teachers began each day with board work. For example, at the beginning of the year the children copied capital *A* and lowercase *a*

on their papers and then they practiced making these letters. As they copied, they were expected to remain quiet and focused on this task. When the alphabet was completed over a few weeks, the children were then expected to copy short notes written by the teacher. For example, in October the children copied

Today is Thursday. There are only 2 more days until Halloween! Today we are having a party! First, we have to work hard on this cold and rainy day.

When the children completed their copying, a teacher came over and checked their work for accuracy. When a child received an okay, he or she could then go to the library area and read a book.

The teachers generally expected the children to continue reading in the library for about an hour. As I observed children during this time, they most often chose several books and then glanced at the illustrations as they simultaneously talked to friends. Few children ever really focused on the text and attempted to read the book. Unfortunately, even if they had focused on the text, most of it was at a frustration level, and they would not have been able to read it and gain meaning.

After recess on most days, the teachers divided the class into two groups. Each teacher read to the children or guided the children through a story in their basals. These groups were large, with about 15 children in each group. After reading, the teachers generally had a worksheet for the children to complete that focused on a phonics concept. Often when I observed the children completing a worksheet, one child would read the paper for all of the children that were near and then decide what answer they should all mark.

The teams of Shott/Sims and Kirby/Mears emphasized shared and guided reading. Mr. Shott read stories to his students and helped them focus on vocabulary. Each day the children learned one or two new words from these stories.

Kirby/Mears relied on small-group instruction for the majority of literacy instruction. They also had their children partake in cross-age tutoring with a class of fifth graders.

The team of Messina/Denton emphasized computer connections to reading and writing. These teachers received a grant to support a technology literacy curriculum and they were also facilitators for the school. Each day students read a story, engaged in phonics activities, or wrote a story at the computer center.

Literacy Issues Identified by These Teachers

Throughout the year, the teachers talked to me informally about issues that they faced. Some of these issues centered on the children themselves. Mrs. Sims was concerned when children left and went to Mexico during the school year and, in some cases, over the summer. For example, Freddy left to go to Mexico

for almost three months in the middle of the year. Later in the year, Freddy's mother came to school with an interpreter, as she wanted a list of things they should do with Freddy during his summer in Mexico. Mrs. Sims was angry about this. She related to me that she told them that "he should go to summer school, not to Mexico during the summer." (This school had received a grant to provide summer instruction in literacy for students who were not at grade level in achievement.) Her partner, Mr. Shott, was also frustrated with parents. He expressed frustration when children came to school hungry. He blamed the parents for not sending their children to school ready to learn.

All of the teachers said that it was hard to teach children who were not English speakers. Mrs. Denton said, "I spend lots of time teaching vocabulary. A lot of the children don't know the words in the stories." Ms. Mears concurred that she spent more time on vocabulary development than she might in another school, although she also talked about specific children who made remarkable progress. For example, she commented on a child who had just come from the ESL Intake Center (a center where children who are new to the United States go to learn sufficient English to be successful in public school settings) and was reading at Level 20 already.

What seemed to be most important for these teachers was finding appropriate materials for their balanced literacy program. While there were many books available, they were stored in a resource room. These teachers wanted the books to be in their rooms; they did not want to check them out. They also felt that more money needed to be spent on leveled books for the primary grades. This school had adopted the Accelerated Reading Program, and the teachers were concerned that the school was buying books for intermediate students rather than their students. Finally, they were frustrated that each basal text contained so many different levels; some were even beyond expectations for first grade.

Summary of Literacy Learning in Each Classroom

The focal question of this study centered on how these children developed literacy skills and knowledge by being members of these particular classrooms. The literacy learning achievement of each focal child is described in Table 2.

A particularly notable finding is that more than half of the children were still relying on predictable text to read with any fluency. When they moved to more decodable text, they read slowly and sacrificed meaning to decipher a word, behaviors that are not unusual for beginning readers.

Table 3 shows one end-of-year assessment of word knowledge in which the children were asked to spell the words *bed*, *ship*, *drive*, *bump*, and *when* (see Bear & Barone, 1998). These words provided an opportunity to see how children represented initial and final consonants, short vowels and long vowels, and

Table 2. Overview of Children's Learning at the End of First Grade

Anthony	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to represent short-vowel words• Relies on predictable text• Level 13	Josie	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to represent short-vowel words• Independent reader• Level 20
Bonnie	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to represent short-vowel words• Relies on predictable text• Level 12	Julio	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to represent short-vowel words• Relies on predictable text• Level 12
Calvin	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to represent short-vowel words• Relies on predictable text• Level 16	Lucero	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to represent short-vowel words• Relies on predictable text• Level 17
Eric	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to represent long-vowel words• Independent reader• Developing fluency• Level 17	Maria	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able represent short-vowel words and experimenting with long vowels• Independent reader• Developing fluency• Level 20
Freddie	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to represent short-vowel words• Relies on predictable text• Level 12	Maritza	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to represent short-vowel words• Relies on predictable text• Level 14
Heidee	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able represent short-vowel words and experimenting with long vowels• Independent reader• Developing fluency• Level 20	Sandra	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to represent short-vowel words• Relies on predictable text• Level 14
Jaryd	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to represent short-vowel words• Reads word by word• Relies on predictable text• Level 17		

Table 3. Word Knowledge Development at the End of the Year

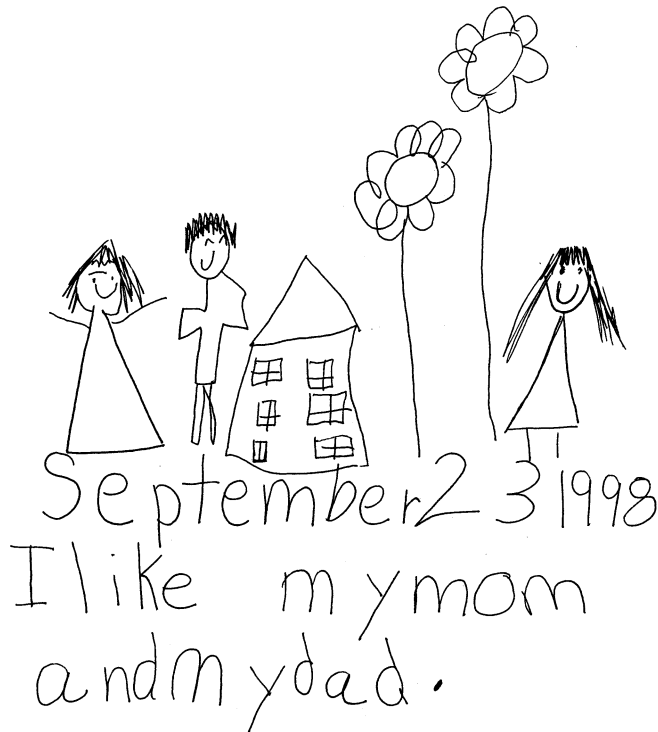
Student	bed	ship	drive	bump	when
Anthony	bad	siq	dive	buq	win
Bonnie	bed	hip	drv	bip	yin
Calvin	bed	sep	briv	bop	wen
Eric	bed	ship	jrive	bump	when
Freddy	bed	heb	hra	bob	wen
Heidee	bed	ship	brive	bop	whan
Jaryd	bid	ship	grive	bamp	wen
Josie	bed	hip	jrive	bup	win
Julio	bed	chep	drav	dop	when
Lucero	bed	hebe	driv	bump	win
Maria	beb	ship	drive	bupe	went
Maritza	dab	sup	daov	bub	wint
Sandra	bed	sep	drif	bab	wen

digraphs and blends. All of the children had acquired the ability to write words using initial consonants and short vowels, and a few were experimenting with long vowels.

Interestingly, despite the variations in literacy instruction in each room and the entry-level literacy knowledge of the children, all of the focal students were representing words very similarly. Even more surprising were the few differences noted between the children who learned English as a new language and those who did not. While the children varied in reading levels from a low of 12 to a high of 20, there were few real differences noted in their representation of words. Eric was the most proficient, but he was still not sure about writing the blend *dr*.

Anthony, Eric, Heidee, and Maria started the year only understanding the relationships between letters and sounds; however, Eric, Heidee, and Maria demonstrated the most significant growth. They developed into independent readers and writers who were also beginning to be fluent. An example of this development is evident in Heidee's writing throughout the year. In one of her

Figure 1. Heidee's Journal Entry (First Grade, September 23, 1998)

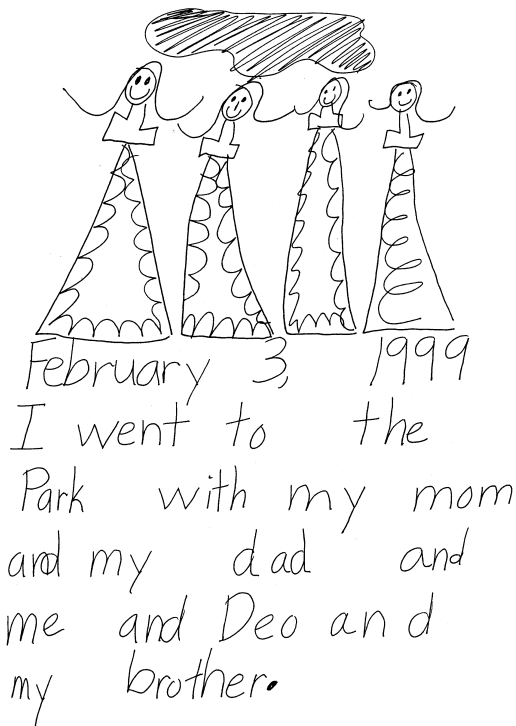


first journal entries in September (see Figure 1), she was able to write a whole sentence with punctuation and capitalization and all words, including the long vowel word *like*, spelled correctly. This is remarkable, for in Heidee's kindergarten, no opportunities were given for children to write other than to copy words from the board.

In February, Heidee was still writing only one sentence in her journal, but she was now filling the whole page by using the word *and* (see Figure 2).

By April, Heidee expanded on her single sentence writing. She wrote about going to school and seeing her cousins. She then added a sentence with the names of her cousins. Her teacher responded to her content and asked, "Do they live near you?" Heidee responded that they did not. By the end of the year, Heidee was using her journal to engage in conversations with her teacher. She checked her journal each day to see what her teacher had written to her.

Figure 2. Heidee's Journal Entry (First Grade, February 3, 1999)



Calvin started the year with Reading Recovery, leaving his classroom each day to work with a Reading Recovery teacher for 30 minutes. As Calvin worked with this teacher, he learned to pay attention to the sounds in words as well as meaning. He was slow when he read a book for the first time, but with rereading, he became more fluent. He told anyone near to him, "I love reading." Even though he was engaged with his Reading Recovery teacher's instruction, he found working in his classroom more difficult. He struggled with the copying task that was expected each day. For example, in February he was to copy and complete the following:

Happy Tuesday morning!
Today is February 16, 1999.
Yesterday was President's Day.
This weekend I...

It took him almost an entire hour to complete the copying, and as a result he infrequently went to visit the library. The teachers expected the children to copy these sentences and to include all capitals and punctuation. If there were any errors, the children were required to correct them. It was clear by watching Calvin write that this was not something he wanted to do. He often leaned on his arm, yawned, and dropped his pencil. Each time he stopped copying, it would take him almost a minute to begin writing again. By the end of the year however, Calvin was considered to be right at grade level and could read books at a Level 16.

There were also several children who did not achieve grade-level expectations at the end of the year. Bonnie, Freddy, and Julio were only able to read Level 12 text satisfactorily; all were learning English as a new language. Freddy came to first grade speaking Spanish predominantly. He found ways to avoid interacting with the teacher in kindergarten and he talked to his friends only in Spanish. He also spent approximately three months of each school year in Mexico. Starting first grade was not easy for him. He was unable to write his name at the beginning of the year and he recognized only the letter *F*. In his early journal attempts, he just drew pictures (see Figure 3).

When his teacher read, he always moved to the back of the group and fooled around with his friends. Freddy and his teachers were upset with his inability to spell the words on the spelling test given the first week of school. Freddy used random letters to spell words like *cat* and *hat*. His teachers also complained that he never brought his homework to school. He would say to them, "I worked at it but I forgot it." Freddy was able to work with the ESL aide for extra help with reading, but he did not qualify for Reading Recovery.

Freddy's teachers were surprised at his abilities when he returned to their classroom after a 3-month absence. They thought he would have lost what they had taught him, but he came back "at the same place as he was before Christmas." Later they found out that he had been enrolled in school while he was in Mexico. By May, he was working with the teachers and not hiding behind other children. On the daily dictation task, he was able to record short vowel words and read them as well. He pointed to the words while he read with his teacher. His teacher stayed close to him as he read and helped him with any difficult words. He was also willing to write in his journal, although most of his entries were single sentences. Freddy's end-of-the-year journal writing demonstrated these abilities (see Figure 4).

Freddy was not considered to be at grade level in literacy but he did make amazing growth during this year. He was now able to converse in either Spanish or English. He read with the support of his teacher, and others could read his writing. Freddy also understood how to represent words with short-vowel words and experimented with long vowels and multisyllabic words as seen in his journal entry.

Figure 3. Freddy's Journal Entry (Early First Grade)

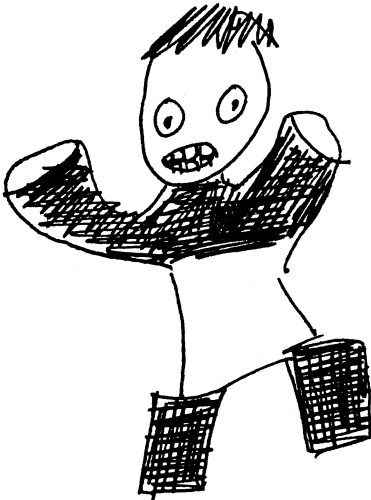


Figure 4. Freddy's Writing (End-of-Year First Grade)



Freddy was not unlike the other children who were still considered below level in literacy at the end of the year. They all made progress, especially in moving from speaking Spanish almost exclusively to being able to use English and Spanish for conversational and academic experiences; however, they were still struggling with their ability to decode words with any pace or rhythm, and they struggled with comprehension.

Overall, at the end of this year, six children were considered above level in their reading (Eric, Heidee, Jaryd, Josie, Lucero, and Maria); of this group of children, Heidee, Josie, Lucero, and Maria had entered school learning English as a new language. One child, Calvin, was considered right at grade level and came from an English-speaking background. The remaining six children—Anthony, Bonnie, Freddy, Julio, Maritza, and Sandra—were below grade level. Of this group, Anthony was the only child with English as his home language.

When comparing the children's academic achievement and classroom placement, there were some interesting results. The teams of Kirby/Mears and Messina/Denton each had two focal children. There were no significant changes in rank for these students throughout the year: high-achieving students continued to be high achieving (Heidee and Eric), and low-achieving students remained low (Julio and Sandra). In the Shott/Sims classroom, only one of the focal children completed the year below grade level (Freddy), and he had missed almost three months of school. In the Cullen/Adams classroom, all of the focal children completed the year below grade level. This result occurred even though three of these children also had the support of a Reading Recovery program. And finally, none of the focal children were recommended for special education assessment.

TWO CASES

The two cases that I have chosen to describe in greater detail are children who were both considered advanced in literacy learning in kindergarten. Heidee came to school with a home language that was not English, while Anthony only understood English. Heidee was considered to be above grade level at the end of the year based on her reading level of 20. Anthony ended first grade below grade level with a reading level of 13 even though he was the most proficient in literacy in kindergarten. The outcomes of these two children run counter to the research that documents that children with sufficient phonemic awareness in kindergarten continue to be successful in first grade and beyond, and that children who do not share the language of the school tend to struggle with reading (Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986; National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Heidee

At Home

Heidee's father described her home literacy experiences. He said, "She loves to read and write, just like her brother. She is always watching him. She wants me to read to her every night and when we go to a movie she compares the book and movie." At the beginning of kindergarten her favorite books were Walt Disney books. He also talked about language use in the home. He said that he only "speaks Tag at home so that she will know both languages. My older children are fluent in both languages and I want that for her." Clearly, Heidee's home has a rich literacy tradition, centered in book-reading episodes that occurred in her home language.

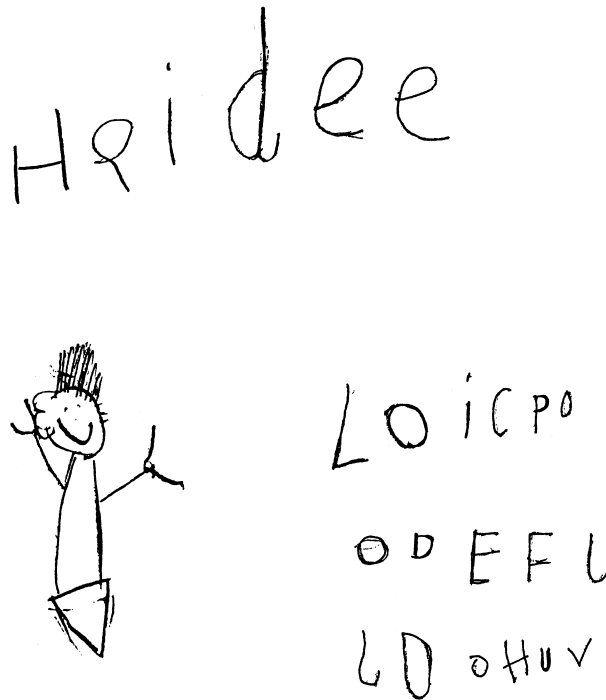
Kindergarten

In kindergarten, Heidee was treated as though her only language was English. Perhaps because her home language was not Spanish, her teacher did not see her as a second-language learner. And unlike the children whose home language was Spanish, Heidee could converse with the bilingual aide only in English. All instruction in this class was in English, and the children were expected to respond to the teacher in English regardless of home language.

At the beginning of the year, Heidee was very quiet. Her teacher described her as "very bright, very quiet, works hard, and wants to be on top." When I observed her while her teacher was reading to the class, she did predict what might happen in a story when prompted by her teacher. Her answers were not extensive, but she knew what animal would be on the next page in *Brown Bear*, for example. By November, she was able to write her first name, draw a self-portrait, and use letter strings for writing (see Figure 5). She also talked quietly to the teacher when she was called upon. She did not talk to other students and she never volunteered to answer a question posed by the teacher.

In March, Heidee's teacher experimented with a new literacy strategy by having each child determine the words they wanted to learn to read. Heidee decided that she wanted to learn all of the names of the children in her class. By the end of March, she was able to read and spell all of their names. She willingly read these names to the fifth-grade student who came into the room to listen to the kindergarten students read. She could be overheard reading her words to herself as she practiced, although unlike other students she did not read to any of her classmates. She was also willing to contribute during interactive writing. She told her teacher, "I hear an *f* at the beginning of *for*." Later, she spelled *pizza* for the story that was being created.

Figure 5. Heidee's Early Writing (Kindergarten)



At the end of the year, Heidee refined the spelling of her name so that it was an automatic process to write it. She demonstrated sound-symbol knowledge in her writing by correctly representing the initial consonants in words. She was beginning to track text in simple, predictable stories. If she was asked to locate a specific word, she would read from the beginning of the book until she found it. She was successful with this task as long as there was minimal text on a page. And she was easily able to converse in English both with her friends and in academic tasks. She left kindergarten as one of only four children to have sound-symbol knowledge. Her teacher was very proud of her and said, "She is one of the strongest students that I had this year."

First Grade

Heidee entered first grade with adequate phonemic knowledge as demonstrated

in her ability to match letters and sounds. She also was aware that stories needed to make sense as demonstrated in her predicting ability in kindergarten. Her teachers described her as a strong student from the very beginning of the year. As seen in Figure 1, she quickly developed as a writer and was able to represent all the letters and sounds in words and write in sentences by September of her first-grade experience. She was easily able to read the predictable text that her teacher shared with her in reading group.

By midyear of first grade, Heidee was able to represent patterns in words like the *ore* in *store* and the *th* in *with* (see Figure 2). Her teacher felt that she was at Level 13 in her reading and was at the top of first grade. She liked to talk about the stories that she read with her teacher in reading group, and she was able to find the main idea in stories during independent work time. For example, her teacher asked her to write the main idea of a story they had read during group time. Heidee wrote:

The coach showed them how to dribble the ball and how to kick.
Then the kids played soccer.

This was the main idea of a story that they had read about learning how to play soccer.

Heidee had also developed into a fluent reader. By midyear, she was able to read *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (Steig, 1969) with teacher support on the first reading. The children who were in Heidee's group completed worksheets and art projects based on this story. As they engaged in these activities, they had opportunities to reread the story and Heidee became fluent with it. By the end of the year, Heidee was routinely reading simple chapter books like *Little Bear* (Minarik, 1957).

At the end of the year, Heidee was considered to be above grade level in reading as determined by her reading level of 20. Her word knowledge is shown in Table 3. She was beginning to represent long vowels, as seen in her spelling of *drive*. Her teachers described her as "shy, a perfectionist. She blossomed after Christmas break. She ended the year reading at Level 20. She is sensitive and caring. She needs a lot of feedback and doesn't always believe in herself." Heidee thought that in first grade she could "do stuff like play" and she liked it.

Heidee also wrote in her journal daily, generally about her family. Her entries were typically one sentence in length, similar to those shared in Figures 2 and 3. There were few other opportunities offered for her to engage in writing.

Reflection

Heidee was most interesting to observe during these two years because not one of her teachers treated her as a second-language learner; they just accepted her as being quiet. While Heidee might be a quiet child as part of her disposition,

she might also have been quiet because she was just learning English. Her teachers never considered her language background. Fortunately for Heidee, she learned English easily and was able to participate in the academic expectations of the class. Certainly the literacy strengths of her home helped her. As Heidee said, "My brothers play school with me." Her brothers may have provided sufficient instruction in English for Heidee to be receptive to her teachers' literacy instruction, and her parents' rich conversations and reading to her on a daily basis in the home language facilitated her understanding of reading and writing in English.

Anthony

At Home

Anthony lived with his parents and three sisters, one older and two younger. His mother said, "He loves to play school with his sister. He learned to count and his ABCs at Head Start. He looks at the words when I read to him and he can write his name." She also said, "He likes to watch television, especially the Power Rangers. He likes violent shows." As with Heidee, there were many literacy events happening in Anthony's home. His mother read to him routinely, she helped him with the alphabet, and she encouraged his drawing. He also played school with his oldest sister.

Kindergarten

Anthony's kindergarten experience was a bit unusual. He was in a classroom where two teachers split a contract, with each teaching for two days a week. One teacher, Tammy, talked to the children for an hour and then had them complete worksheets. The other teacher, Judy, read a story and then had the children move to centers where they often heard another story and did follow-up worksheets. Tammy constantly complimented Anthony for being so smart. Frequently, she questioned him with, "How do you know all of this?" Anthony basked in this praise and demonstrated his knowledge by being the first child to recognize and spell all of the names of his classmates. By January, Tammy related that Anthony "can retell a whole book accurately and he has memorized many of the books in the room. He knows the initial sounds of most words. He is the smartest kid in my class."

While Tammy felt this way, Judy did not. She was often frustrated when Anthony blurted out answers. She constantly told him to "be quiet and give the other kids a chance." Anthony moved to the margins of his kindergarten class when Judy was the teacher. He infrequently completed assignments on these days, and he spent his time moving around the room avoiding academic tasks.

First Grade

Anthony entered the first-grade room of Cullen/Adams. As described earlier, these teachers were the outliers with respect to literacy curriculum among the four classrooms. Each day began with Anthony copying sentences from the board. He always wanted to be the first one done, and he would often begin this assignment the day before. He knew that it always started with, “Today is...” and he wrote this on several papers that he kept in his desk. When this activity was finished, children were dismissed to the library where they spent the next hour on independent reading. Even though Anthony was one of the first children to go to the library each day, he spent almost no time reading. He looked at books, talked to friends, and just wandered around. Each day his teachers reminded him to read, but he never did. His teachers often punished him for wandering by having him copy all of the words on the word wall.

This was truly unfortunate, for the teachers considered free reading in the library to be the centerpiece of their literacy instruction. Following is a sample of my field notes documenting his behavior:

Anthony moves to the library. He takes a book and looks through it. He gets up and starts wandering. He sits next to a child and looks over at his book. He takes his comb and pushes it into the book. The child moves the book. Anthony gets up and wanders again. He goes over to a child and takes his book away, a book about monsters. He starts to look through this book about monsters by looking at each illustration. When he is done looking at the illustrations, he gets up and joins a group of friends. They talk and giggle. Teacher says it is time to clean up. Reading time is over.

While there were many variables influencing the literacy outcomes for Anthony, his ability to almost never engage with any literacy activity in the classroom certainly hampered his development.

At the end of the year, Anthony was able to read books at Level 13. His teacher said that he had been doing better earlier in the year and “then he had a backslide. I spoke to his mom several times. She said there had been significant changes at home with his dad moving out. So that is why he didn’t do well this year.” Anthony still considered himself to be smart, however, despite what his teachers thought. He wrote in his journal, “I am smart.” He also showed me all of the words that he could write (see Figure 6). It was clear that he was now representing vowels in his words, although he still confused them (e.g., *a* for the vowel in *bed*).

Reflection

While Heidee was engaging to watch, Anthony was frustrating. He brought so

Figure 6. Anthony's Writing (First Grade)

I a m Smrt
my Nam is Anthony

bad (bed) Dog
Sia (ship) cat
Dive (drive) hat
Bug (bump) Boy
Win (when) morhing
Good

much literacy knowledge to his kindergarten and first-grade experiences; however, only one teacher, Tammy, was able to engage him with classroom activities. His first-grade teachers, especially, did not engage him with literacy. He complied with the copying tasks, but he did them without enthusiasm. And although his teachers valued independent reading, he never engaged with a book during this time. He avoided any serious involvement with any book that was in the classroom library. The synergy of Anthony's literacy instruction, and his reaction to it, left him as a below grade-level reader by the end of first grade. Coupled with this below grade-level status, Anthony had learned to exist in the margins of the classroom. He resisted many of the activities provided by his teachers, and he minimally complied for the others. Anthony's rich home literacy background and his phonemic knowledge in kindergarten were not sufficient for him to be a successful first-grade reader and writer. His resiliency

and identity as a learner will be interesting to watch as he moves through elementary school.

DISCUSSION

Before engaging in the discussion of this study, it is important to consider its limitations. This study was centered in the first-grade classrooms in one school. Teachers and researchers may find commonalities between what was discovered here and in their experiences, but these results are not meant to be generalizable. Additionally, I only studied the in-school experiences of 13 children. Some of the variability in their literacy development is certainly tied to their in-home literacy experiences (Purcell-Gates, 1996).

Classroom Organization and Teacher Beliefs

The teachers organized their classrooms for instruction and utilized a variety of groupings for instruction. The majority of these classrooms were places where the children knew the expectations for behavior and learning, and they respected them. The establishment of daily routines early in the year helped all of the children, especially those learning English, participate in the learning activities (Freeman & Freeman, 1993; Peregoy & Boyle, 1993).

The teachers' efforts in classroom management closely paralleled the recommendations of Pressley et al. (2001) and Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, and Hampston (1998). These teachers, with the exception of one team, had no real discipline issues and were able to group students appropriately and provide scaffolded instruction. Moreover, the rooms were inviting and positive. The teachers demonstrated through their hugs and ongoing private conversations with students that they cared about their students. They did struggle with ways to help the children take on more independence for their learning.

The team of Cullen/Adams was the exception. Perhaps because of Mrs. Cullen's 6-week absence (due to maternity leave), they had difficulty creating a well-organized, positive classroom with opportunities for reading and writing. Mrs. Cullen was frustrated by this situation, as demonstrated when she said, "The kids never learned the routines and there were discipline problems all year. I hated it."

The classroom organization variables are interesting to consider when pondering the literacy achievement of the children. In the Cullen/Adams room, the focal children made the least progress in literacy, and many required Reading Recovery support for this progress. This was the room that struggled with discipline. It is important to remember that these teachers also asked children to copy, and the majority of literacy instruction involved unstructured reading in the library. The interaction of classroom management and instruction certainly did not enhance the children's opportunities for learning.

In addition to classroom organization, all teachers were expected to have their students read and write at grade level by the end of the year. They accepted this challenge, and for the most part, they did not lay blame on their students for their home backgrounds; however, they did attribute deficiencies to their students. The teachers frequently talked about the children's lack of familiarity with English and the lack of vocabulary necessary to read stories. While this was clearly the case for the majority of children in this school, I rarely observed the teachers use strategies to help children move from their home language to English. They did use ESL aides to work with small groups of children for instruction; however, in other instruction the children were treated as though their first language was English. Mr. Shott was the only teacher who consistently tried to use Spanish when he engaged children in conversation.

Unlike the classrooms described by Haberman (1991) and Waxman and Padron (1995), in which teachers in high-poverty schools were predominantly direction givers, the teachers at Howard Elementary had some variability in their instructional organization. For example, in most classrooms, the day started with all of the children performing similar tasks with similar expectations. In the Cullen/Adams class the children all copied from the board, and in the Messina/Denton class the children participated in a dictation activity. In these activities, even though they were systematic, all children were expected to work independently, regardless of their literacy backgrounds. As a result, some children struggled on a daily basis with this instruction, and little to no learning resulted. Following these whole class activities, the children were assigned to ability groups for reading instruction. What was noticeable in each room was the limited time for students to engage in conversation with their teachers about their learning. Even in small-group instruction, the teachers seemed to be more focused on the way children pronounced words rather than their personal connections to a story being shared. This focus resulted in little time for children to talk about stories or for the teacher to address particular students' successes or frustrations with the reading process itself. In whole class and small-group settings, the students received little individualized instruction.

Literacy Instruction

The first-grade teachers certainly used aspects of a balanced literacy program in their classrooms. When comparing the strategies they used to those described in *Every Child A Reader: Action Plan* (Hiebert et al., 1997) and the report of the National Reading Panel (2000), certain strategies were used while others were not evident. All of the teachers provided time each day for the children to learn letters and sounds and how to spell words. The majority of instruction in these classrooms favored phonics instruction over meaning. Even when children

interacted with stories, the focus was on decoding rather than comprehension. Comprehension activities typically centered on books that the teacher read to the whole class. The children did engage in writing on a daily basis, either in copy work or in journal writing. However, there was little time set aside for writing that would result in stories or informational text.

These classrooms employed a number of strategies recommended by Hiebert et al. (1997) and the National Reading Panel (2000). The classes were small; the teachers used running records for assessment on an ongoing basis; there were a variety of classroom groupings; tutoring through Reading Recovery was available for the lowest-ability readers; and the teachers expected that children would read at home. The only notable exceptions to the recommendations were the lack of writing and small-group instruction centered on meaning.

When comparing these teachers and the strategies they used to the work of Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996), there are more differences apparent than in the previous comparison. The teachers did have classroom libraries available to the children, but not all of the libraries had books that the children could read independently. Most of the children had stories read to them daily. The teachers did model oral reading, but they did not focus on comprehension or what a child might do when the reading did not make sense. They did have children read chorally each day from predictable text and from the stories in their basal texts. Teachers listened in to how the children were pronouncing words, and they helped them correct miscues.

Unlike the teachers described by Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996), these teachers focused more on decoding and phonics than on meaning. Additionally, they taught more to the whole class and paid little attention to the individual differences of children, except when they were in small-group reading instruction. Apart from this time, all children were held to the same academic expectations.

In constructing a gloss of the reading instruction in these classrooms, the major elements for instruction were phonics and decoding practice. This focus has been noted in other research, where children in high-poverty schools had instruction that also centered on lower-level skills (Battistich et al., 1995; Nieto, 1999). Similarly, the first-grade teachers at Howard Elementary focused on the basics as a way of developing grade-level readers. Their use of running records supported this focus on oral reading as well. When interpreting the results of the running records, they noted how a child pronounced words and the overall accuracy of their pronunciation instead of analyzing which sources of information (meaning, structure, and visual) were used and which were neglected, as Clay recommends (Clay, 2001). As a result, there was no attention paid to whether or not students comprehended what they were reading.

Literacy Learning

As noted earlier the children did grow in literacy knowledge throughout the year. There were notable differences in some of the rooms, however, with respect to literacy achievement. The children in the Lott/Sims room demonstrated the most consistent achievement, with all but one of the focal children reading beyond grade level. In this room, there was consistent phonics instruction. In the Shott/Sims room, in addition to consistent phonics instruction, Mr. Shott engaged the children in story reading each day; the children would converse with the teacher about the story's meaning and vocabulary (see Moll & Diaz, 1987; Wilkinson & Silliman, 2000). Perhaps this conversation was sufficient for the children to gather an understanding about the meaning of stories as well as how to decode the words in them. He also was the only teacher to try to include Spanish words in his discussion with children. In this way, the children saw him as valuing their home language, and they responded positively to this inclusion, as seen in their achievement.

Beyond these activities, the Shott/Sims room was the only class where children were allowed to enter the room before school began. Mr. Shott and Mrs. Sims welcomed their students into the room, talked with them, and provided books for them to read. Through their actions, these teachers created a classroom that valued personal relationships with students (Nieto, 1999).

Contrary to the success in this room were the dismal academic results in the room of Cullen/Adams. None of the focal children in this class were at grade level at the end of the year. By the end of the year, about 50 percent of the children in this room had or were receiving Reading Recovery support.

What was especially interesting as I observed in these rooms was that while reading levels varied from 12 to 20 at the end of the year, the word knowledge, as demonstrated in the children's writing, showed almost no variability. Why might this be? These classrooms certainly provided phonics instruction for these children, although in most cases this instruction was the same for all students. I surmised that because the instruction was not tailored to the strengths of the students, they did not make individual progress. For example, Eric came to first grade with considerable word knowledge and knowledge about books; however, the words he was asked to write each day did not build on any particular spelling pattern. He learned to spell the words, but he did not learn how to take the spelling patterns in these words to the spelling of novel words (Bear & Barone, 1998).

Additionally, none of the children engaged in much writing in any of these rooms. Therefore, the children had few opportunities to represent words using problem-solving strategies. They either copied words from the board or they wrote journal entries that did not require corrections; thus, they did not develop an eye to the way words were accurately represented other than through reading.

Similar results were documented by Durkin (1974/1975). In her research of children who learned to read before coming to school, she noted that unless schools were willing to build on students' individual strengths, it was meaningless for students to come to school with advanced abilities in reading and writing. She felt that it was necessary for schools to tailor their literacy curriculums to the strengths of their students. If they did not, then these early readers did not continue to develop in exceptional ways; they became like the other children in their classes who did not enter school with such understandings about literacy.

In this present study, the teachers taught about phonics and words to the whole class as if all the students were the same in their knowledge and experiential and language backgrounds. As a result, the children were very similar in word knowledge at the end of the year.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Unfortunately, even with systemic staff development, additional funds, smaller class sizes, and adequate materials, not all of the children were reading at grade level by the end of the year. Half of the focal children were reading at grade level; four of the nine students learning English as a second language were judged to be at grade level.

The teachers did implement some of the strategies shared in staff development. They started with skill-based instruction and a focus on decoding. Perhaps, given another year of staff development, they will build from this foundation and include more meaning-based activities and more time for writing; once these strategies are in place, they may consider and teach to the unique capabilities of their students.

The teachers clearly understood how to help children read the words in stories. While this is necessary for children to become independent readers, it is not sufficient for them to understand the essential meaning aspects of reading. These understandings are for the most part being left to the second-grade teachers to develop. This is not to fault the first-grade teachers who saw their major task as helping children learn how to decode print and therefore organized their entire curriculums to achieve this goal. It is just to say that their curriculums would benefit children more by truly being balanced in their orientations to skills and meaning (see for example, Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995).

What can be learned from this study? First, first-grade teachers in a school considered at risk focused on letter- and word-level instruction even though ongoing staff development stressed more meaning-based activities. Second, the assessment that teachers used guided the instruction that they provided to students. In this case, they used running records only to note errors in oral reading

without analyzing the types of cues that readers were using and neglecting, leading teachers to focus on decoding. Third, teachers, while being aware of differences in literacy knowledge among children, strove to bring all children to a satisfactory level of performance. Fourth, more complex understandings of reading and writing were pushed to the fringes of the curriculum. And fifth, language diversity, while being recognized, did not result in any major adjustments within the curriculum. All children, regardless of language background, were expected to talk, read, and write in English from the first day of school.

This study demonstrates that children, even in at-risk schools, can be at grade level or above by the end of the year. This is an important accomplishment in that first grade is such a critical year in determining the future success of students (Juell, 1988). It is worrisome, however, that so many of the below grade-level readers were those learning English as a new language.

Coupled with these achievements is the students' instruction and learning. For the most part, they would probably not be considered exemplary (Hiebert et al., 1997; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996). Most likely, they would be considered limited because of their narrow focus. The question still remains about how this narrow focus on oral reading and word and letter knowledge will contribute to or hinder these students' future literacy understandings. Will they ever get the opportunity to engage in conversations about text, or will their curriculums always be focused on low-level skills instruction? What exactly are the long-term results of such a limited first-grade curriculum?

This paper began with a quote from Polacco (1993), who described learning to read as discovering the sweetness inside of a book. Her characters talked about the "adventure, knowledge, and wisdom" (p. 30) that can be found there. The children at Howard Elementary did not learn about this sweetness. Instead, they learned about how sounds and symbols work and how to read words. Hopefully, these lower-level skills will provide the foundation for them to explore the sweetness that books have to offer.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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APPENDIX A

Howard Elementary Accountability Plan

(written by the principal)

- Friday afternoons must be used to enhance our instructional program.
- Can we guarantee that our scores will improve? How? I suggested that I would send out a schedule to be filled out to monitor the reading instructional program. There was a real concern that the mainstream teachers were not instructing all their students. A concern was mentioned that assistants and ancillary teachers were responsible for the reading instruction for the lower-achieving students. Reading groups **MUST** be rotated so the classroom teacher is instructing all students. Teacher assistants cannot be responsible for planning curriculum or instruction.
- We will be visiting [name of a school] to observe their balanced literacy program.
- We will have monthly grade-level meetings and your reading facilitator will meet with you individually at least monthly.
- The district will be testing this year's third-grade classes at midyear on the Terra Nova test. This will give teachers the opportunity to focus on the lower-achieving students to prepare for the test this spring.
- We have ordered approximately \$2,000 worth of multiple sets of leveled books.
- We will shift our remediation focus from 5th grade to 3rd grade.
- We will pilot a reading test in February for Grades 2 through 6 and in April for K and 1.

APPENDIX A
continued

Fill out the schedule.

Scheduled time for:

- _____ reading to students (reading aloud)
- _____ reading with students (shared reading)
- _____ reading by students (guided reading/independent reading)
- _____ writing to students (shared writing/interactive writing)
- _____ writing with students (guided writing/writers workshop)
- _____ writing by students (independent writing/integrated learning skills)
- _____ talking to, with, and by students
- _____ letters, words, and how they work (attending to the visual aspects of print)

Time for balanced literacy

Kindergarten to Grade 3: 8:45–11:30 [165 minutes]

Grades 4 to 6: 12:45–3:00 [135 minutes]

APPENDIX B

Information About Focal Children

Student Name	Home Language	Preschool Experience	Home Literacy	End of Kindergarten Literacy	Teacher Assignment in First Grade
Anthony	English	Yes	Mom reads to him frequently and he follows the words as she reads.	Writes first and last name. Sound/symbol knowledge. Able to track memorized text. Uses book language to retell stories.	Cullen/Adams
Bonnie	Spanish	No	Mom reads to her occasionally.	Writes first name. Recognizes X and can sing alphabet song. Looks at books.	Cullen/Adams
Calvin	English	Yes	Mom reads to him occasionally.	Writes first and last name. Recognizes all letters except T and Y and can sing alphabet song. Looks at books.	Cullen/Adams
Eric	English	Yes	Mom reads to him frequently and he brings books from home to school.	Writes first and last name. Sound/symbol knowledge. Uses book language to retell stories.	Messina/Denton
Freddy	Spanish	No	No reading at home.	Writes first name as FRBPIE. Recognizes F. Looks at books.	Shott/Sims
Heidee	Tagalog	No	Mom and Dad read to her frequently.	Writes first and last name. Sound/symbol knowledge. Uses oral language to retell stories.	Kirby/Mears
Jaryd	English	No	Mom reads to him occasionally.	Writes name as FTAP/FTPA. Recognizes 3.	Shott/Sims
Josie	Spanish	No	Mom reads to her occasionally.	Writes first name. Recognizes E, S, L, J, N, O, and L and can sing alphabet song. Looks at books.	Shott/Sims
Julio	Spanish	No	No reading at home.	Writes first name. Recognizes C, J, P, and M and can sing alphabet song.	Messina/Denton
Lucero	Spanish	No	Mom reads to her in Spanish.	Writes first and last name. Recognizes most letters except U, V, W, and Y. Uses oral language to retell stories in Spanish and English.	Shott/Sims
Maria	Spanish	No	Mom and Dad read to her occasionally.	Writes first name. Sound/symbol knowledge. Uses oral language to retell stories.	Shott/Sims

APPENDIX B
 continued

Student Name	Home Language	Preschool Experience	Home Literacy	End of Kindergarten Literacy	Teacher Assignment in First Grade
Maritza	Spanish	No	No reading at home.	Writes first name. Recognizes B, M, P, T, A, and can sing alphabet song. Looks at books.	Cullen/Adams
Sandra	Spanish	No	Mom and Dad read to her in Spanish and English.	Writes first and last name. Recognizes most letters except U and W. Looks at books.	Kirby/Mears

Notes

- Reading was assessed by what the children did with books while they were reading independently. *Looking at books* indicates that the child turned the pages of the book and made no comments except to comment on an illustration. *Retelling using oral language* indicates that the child retold the story to himself or herself or a neighboring child by talking about the illustrations on each page. *Retelling using book language* indicates that the child retold the story using language that is particular to books, for example, “once upon a time.” *Able to track memorized text* indicates that a child can read and point to text in short, predictable books like those published by the Wright Group.
- Alphabet and name knowledge was determined from teachers’ assessments.