

**Title:** “Looking Inside Classrooms: Reflecting on the ‘How’ As Well As the ‘What’ in Effective Reading Instruction

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**Subject(s):** Higher Order Thinking Skills, Professional Development

**Grade Level:** K, 1–2, 3–6

**Synopsis:** The article draws from the findings from year 1 of a larger national study on school reform in reading (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2001) funded by the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA). Teachers were observed in 8 high-poverty schools. The article seeks to describe teacher practices observed in the classrooms, analyze the relationship between teachers’ practices and students’ growth in reading, and provide vignettes that show what those practices look like in action.

Grouping. In all grades (K–6), whole-group instruction was more frequent than small-group. “In contrast, a greater occurrence of small-group rather than whole-group instruction was found to be a characteristic of the most effective schools in our earlier study of primary-grade reading instruction in schools that were beating the odds (Taylor et al., 2000).” (p. 274)

Balance Between Word Work and Comprehension. “Word-level activities were observed more in grades K–1 than 2–3 or 4–6, and comprehension work was seldom observed in the primary grades.” Teachers are focusing on phonics instruction in kindergarten and first grade.

“Across all grades a relatively small amount of higher level questioning or writing related to stories read was observed. . . . It is important to note that effective teachers and teachers in more effective schools are more frequently observed asking higher level questions than less effective teachers and teachers in less effective schools (Knapp, 1995; Taylor, Pressley, & Pearson, 2000).” (p. 274)

Teachers’ Interaction Styles. “Telling and recitation were major interaction styles of teachers in all grades; coaching was seldom observed. In our earlier study (Taylor, Pearson, et al., 2000), teacher interaction style varied by level of teacher accomplishment: The least accomplished teachers preferred telling while the most accomplished preferred coaching as their primary interaction style.” (p. 274)

Student Involvement. “Across all grades, students in the present study were engaged in passive responding more often than in active responding. Passive responding included turn taking during oral reading (e.g., round robin), oral turn taking, or listening to the teacher. Active responding included reading, writing, and manipulating. In contrast, Pressley et al. (2001) found that exemplary first-grade teachers had their students actively engaged in actual reading and writing.” (p. 274)

### Conclusions

“The descriptive data of typical effective classrooms indicate that, in general, a shift in certain teaching practices, such as higher level questioning, style of interacting, and encouraging active pupil involvement, may be warranted. . . . Several practices were found to be beneficial at particular grade levels: active responding (grade 1), small-group

instruction (kindergarten), word skill work (kindergarten), and higher level questions (grades 4–6).” (p. 275)

Detailed descriptions of an effective teacher and of a typical, less-effective teacher are provided.

“A consistent finding . . . was that the more a teacher was coded as telling children information, the less the children grew in reading achievement. . . . Excessive amounts of ‘telling,’ especially in situations where coaching students to come up with their own responses is possible, may rob children of the opportunity to take responsibility for their own skills and strategies.” (p. 278)

“Similarly, students in grade 1 demonstrated more growth in reading fluency the more they were coded as actively, as opposed to passively, responding to reading activities. Instead of listening to the teacher or engaging in reading turn taking or oral turn taking, these students were observed actually reading or writing more often than other students.” (p. 278)

“We did find some evidence for the differential impact of curricular activities across grade levels. Higher level questions emerged as a significant predictor of growth in grades 4–6, while word work emerged most clearly in kindergarten. In light of these findings and those of the National Reading Panel Report . . . , a gradual shift in emphasis may be warranted.” (p. 278)

“Classroom literacy instruction needs to reflect best practices as identified in the research. In addition to *what* teachers teach, the findings at the classroom level in the current study in corroboration with earlier research suggest that *how* teachers teach is also important to consider when seeking to make changes in reading instruction to improve students’ reading achievement.”

#### Research Cited

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**Quote(s):** “It is important to note that effective teachers and teachers in more effective schools are more frequently observed asking higher level questions than less effective teachers and teachers in less effective schools (Knapp, 1995; Taylor, Pressley, & Pearson, 2000).” (p. 274)

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