



STRIKING A BALANCE

The Quest for Effective Literacy Instruction

MICHAEL PRESSLEY

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MY VERY CLEAR PERSPECTIVE ON elementary reading instruction is that it should balance systematic skills instruction with rich children's literacy experiences and opportunities to learn how to read and write. Such balanced instruction, well-delivered, is highly motivating because it is tailored to the needs of individual students.

My perspective is definitely not in synchrony with the national policy of my homeland, the United States. In fact, as I write this piece in early summer 2005, the U.S. is reflecting on the first data collected on Reading First, a federally-sponsored, presumably evidence-based approach to reforming beginning reading instruction. At the center of Reading First is an emphasis on developing phonemic awareness in pre-readers, teaching phonics to beginning readers, encouraging substantial reading and re-reading in beginning readers to promote fluency, teaching vocabulary, and teaching comprehension strategies. This federal program includes these skills components because there is scientific evidence to support their impact on learning to read, as substantiated by a federally-sponsored review of the reading research literature a few years ago, known as the National Reading Panel report. That review emphasized evidence produced in controlled experiments – evidence that supports teaching to develop phonemic awareness, phonics skills, fluency, vocabulary, and use of comprehension strategies.

Reading First rolled these five skills instructional components into a reading instructional package that focuses

on those components, often to the exclusion of other components of beginning language arts, such as reading of excellent children's literature and student writing of stories – components that are essential to balanced literacy instruction as I view it. Educators in the U.S. are now reflecting on the first wave of Reading First effectiveness evidence – evidence that shows little improvement in reading achievement.

THE QUEST FOR EFFECTIVE CLASSROOMS

I am not surprised that the federally-sponsored Reading First approach is producing lackluster results, for I have never seen a primary-grades classroom that focused on reading skills instruction alone and produced engaging, clearly effective achievement in beginning reading. This is a striking finding, I think, since I have been on a quest for engaging, effective primary-grades classrooms for about a decade, with some success.¹

My colleagues and I have observed elementary classrooms for long periods of time, typically visiting for several hours a month over the course of a semester or a year. Although we spent more time watching reading instruction and language arts than other parts of the day, such long-term observation permits sampling of everything that goes on in the classrooms. We were attuned to whether students were academically engaged most of the time – that is, were they doing activities that required them to think? In an engaged classroom, much

of the time, 90% or more of the students would be working away at something that required them to work hard. They might be reading a book that is a bit challenging, or writing a story that is a little longer than stories written previously, with the teacher requiring a final draft with correct spelling of high frequency words, invented spellings of lower frequency words, reflecting the sounds in the words, and properly capitalized and punctuated sentences.

In less engaging classrooms, we observed less on task behavior and less challenge. Over the course of this work, we saw classrooms in which many children were not working at all much of the time, were reading books very easy for them, or only looking at the pictures. Writing in these classrooms was also less demanding compared to writing in engaging and effective classrooms, with respect to length, spelling and mechanics in final drafts.

Over the course of a year, differences in achievement between the two types of classrooms were apparent. By the end of the year, the children in the engaging classrooms could read more challenging books than the children in the less engaging classrooms; they were also writing much longer stories that were more mechanically sound compared to their counterparts in less engaging classrooms. The huge differences in engagement during the school year translated into noticeable differences in literacy skills by the end of the school year.

In addition to noting whether stu-



EDUCATORS IN THE U.S. ARE NOW REFLECTING ON THE FIRST WAVE OF READING FIRST EFFECTIVENESS EVIDENCE – EVIDENCE THAT SHOWS LITTLE IMPROVEMENT IN READING ACHIEVEMENT... I AM NOT SURPRISED... FOR I HAVE NEVER SEEN A PRIMARY-GRADES CLASSROOM THAT FOCUSED ON READING SKILLS INSTRUCTION ALONE AND PRODUCED ENGAGING, CLEARLY EFFECTIVE ACHIEVEMENT IN BEGINNING READING.

dents were engaged and making progress in reading and writing, my colleagues and I also carefully noted how and what the teachers taught. Most importantly, we found that the teaching in the most engaging classrooms had many similarities: First, it was intensive. The most engaging teachers taught all the time, and the students read, wrote and thought throughout the day. That is, language arts did not occur only in the language arts morning, but in math, social studies, and science as well. Thus, when the first grade studied the hatching of chickens from eggs in one engaging classroom, they read many books about chickens and eggs and wrote a great deal about the hatching process. The most engaging teachers used different teaching formats across the day, with some whole group instruction, some small group instruction, some buddy reading, and some individual seat work. All of the most engaging teachers read much children's literature to students and encouraged the students to read a great deal of real literature. Although children sometimes composed their own stories, often they wrote in response to the literature being read. Sometimes these responses were first and final drafts, but this was in the context of a great deal of writing instruction that emphasized student planning before writing, drafting, and revising.

Was there systematic coverage of skills? Yes, there were planned skills lessons in both more and less engaged classrooms, but in the more engaged classrooms much of the skills instruc-

tion took place in the context of reading real literature, doing real writing, and re-teaching in response to student needs. The most engaging teachers monitored carefully the progress of each student and provided re-instruction of skills that were tailored to the child's needs, with this often occurring in the context of mini-lessons. For example, a child might be offered assistance to sound out the words in a challenging piece of literature. In these engaging classrooms, it was typical to see as many as 20 such skill mini-lessons an hour. This continual balancing of skills instruction and holistic reading and writing gave students many opportunities to practice new skills in contexts that made it obvious when and where those skills should be applied.

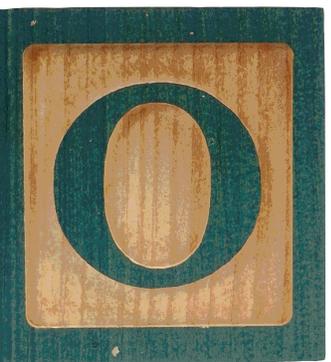
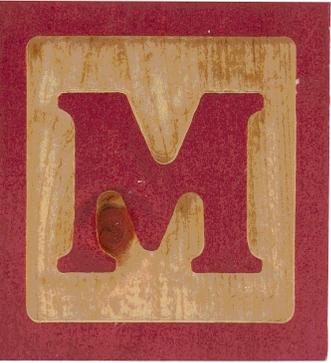
Engaging and effective primary grades classrooms are very positive places where student enthusiasm is a direct result of teacher motivation.² Specific accomplishments are praised ("Wow, you are reading a Level 10 book this week. Just a week ago, you were in Level 8."), and teachers make it clear that the effort students make to apply new strategies pays off ("You spelled all the word wall words in your story correctly because you checked the word wall as you were drafting. Good for you."). Alternatively, when students struggle because they are failing to use strategies already taught, teachers make it clear that applying the strategy would help ("You could read that word if you sounded it out! Try it, you're great at sounding out words").

In addition, the engaging teachers we observed did everything possible to make instruction interesting, emphasizing stories that had proven intriguing to their classes in the past, asking students to write about phenomena that definitely captured student attention (e.g., the hatching of the chickens). As they introduced such material and assignments, they let the students know that they found the ideas interesting and exciting, encouraging the view that what goes on in school is engaging. I emphasize that the attempts to motivate students were at least as salient and frequent in the engaging classrooms as the skills instruction; engaging teachers were often observed 20 or more times an hour doing something to motivate one or more students.

Just as striking in these classrooms was the fact that there was rarely a disciplinary event, or the need for one – one of the by-products of engaging instruction. When students are on task, they do not get in trouble. From the very first day of class, the engaging teacher teaches her students that there is always something interesting they could be doing, and their responsibility is to do it – always another book to read, always another story to write. As a result, students in engaging and effective classrooms are reading and writing all the time, even when the teacher is not explicitly directing them to do so.

In a 1998 book, I was the first to describe this "engaging instruction" as "balanced instruction". I called it that because there was a clear balancing of





WHEN THE FIRST GRADE STUDIED THE HATCHING OF CHICKENS FROM EGGS IN ONE ENGAGING CLASSROOM, THEY READ MANY BOOKS ABOUT CHICKENS AND EGGS AND WROTE A GREAT DEAL ABOUT THE HATCHING PROCESS.

language arts skills instruction and holistic reading and writing opportunities. As I reflected on that further, however, it became more apparent to me that there was also a strong balancing of the academic and the motivational-emotional in these classrooms, and, hence, my more recent writing has emphasized that the academic learning is very much supported by massive attempts to motivate students.³ My commitment to balanced literacy instruction flows directly from the fact that I have never seen an engaging, effective primary-grades classroom that was not balanced in both of these domains.

I estimate, based on my work, that perhaps 30% of American primary classrooms are as engaging as the engaging classrooms my colleagues as I studied. That is, two-thirds of the classrooms we observed were less so, with less impressive evidence of student achievement. What kind of instruction occurs in these less engaging classrooms? It is less intense. There is a less clear balancing of skills instruction and holistic teaching, with some classrooms heavily skills oriented and others emphasizing literature and free writing. There are far fewer attempts to motivate students, with less engaging teachers often doing much that potentially could undermine student motivation (e.g., scolding students for being off task, emphasizing failures). These classrooms often seemed boring to me as an observer – certainly compared to the exhilarating, engaging classrooms

that I observed – and they definitely bored many of the students who occupied them.

WEIGHING EVIDENCE

The research my colleagues and I carried out to determine the nature of engaging, effective primary-grades instruction was decidedly scientific. We carefully observed these classrooms, interviewed the teachers, analyzed materials used in instruction, and noticed the outcomes of instruction (i.e., what students could read, how well they were writing). We did not come to conclusions until there was massively converging evidence for the findings that emerged. We replicated our work enough times and in enough settings to be confident that our claims generalize from New York to California and points in between, including in both public schools and private schools.

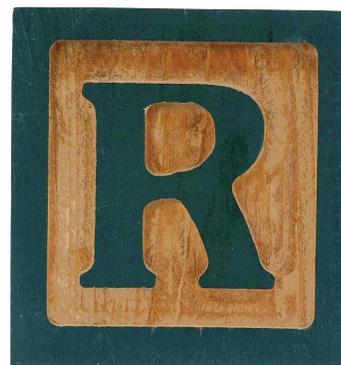
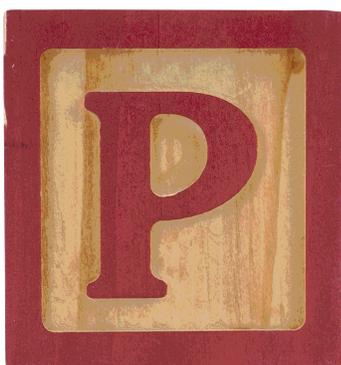
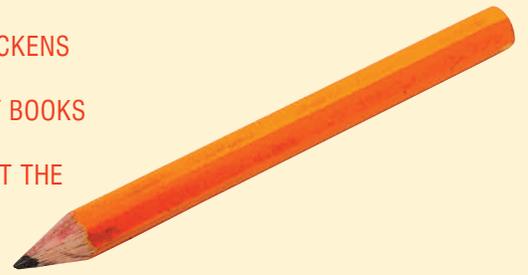
So, why was our work been ignored by U. S. policy makers when they crafted the Reading First intervention? Primarily, because there is no experimental test of the model of engaging instruction developed here. Logically, I could imagine how such a test might be carried out: This year identify teachers who are engaging, effective primary grades teachers and those who are not. Next year, randomly assign students to classes, some taught by an engaging teacher and some by one who is not so engaging. Then measure the students' academic growth over the course of the year of instruction. If I am right, then

the students experiencing the engaging teacher should be reading and writing better at the end of the one-year experiment than the students experiencing the less engaging teacher.

Although I can imagine such an experiment logically, I cannot imagine it ethically. Research on teaching and learning requires that the participants be fully informed. What parents would ever consent to the random assignment of their children to a year of instruction that is not likely to be engaging or as effective as it could be? I doubt the experiment I just described will ever be carried out because of the very obvious answer to that question.

Alternatively, an experiment might be carried out in which teachers who are not engaging are identified. Half of them could be assigned to substantial professional development support while the other half received no professional development. Because I have never encountered an engaging, effective teacher who had not been teaching for at least five years, I anticipate that multiple years of such professional development might be needed. Still, over the course of four or five years, if such professional development improved teaching and produced increased student engagement and achievement, we would have the kind of experimental evidence demanded by U.S. officials as they reflect on reformed primary-grades reading instruction. I believe that serious thought should be given to carrying out such an experiment.

In the meantime, however, I also



think that serious efforts should be made now to enrich Reading First instruction and related skills-intensive efforts in ways that are consistent with the engaging instruction documented in my work. Why? Because there is already support for the individual components of balanced instruction that were left out of Reading First. Although we should hope for more documentation of the positive effects of children's literature on literacy development, we know that exposure to children's literature positively impacts children's language comprehension, including vocabulary development. Other world knowledge increases as a result of balanced instruction, as well. For example, children can learn science concepts from reading stories about science. And there is a great deal of excellent scientific evidence (including many experiments) that children can be taught how to write in the elementary grades. Beyond being good for their cognitive development, immersion in reading literature and writing increases children's enthusiasm for doing things literate. And, with respect to teachers using those other instructional mechanisms intended to increase student motivation – there is plenty of support for each of them.⁴

CONCLUSION

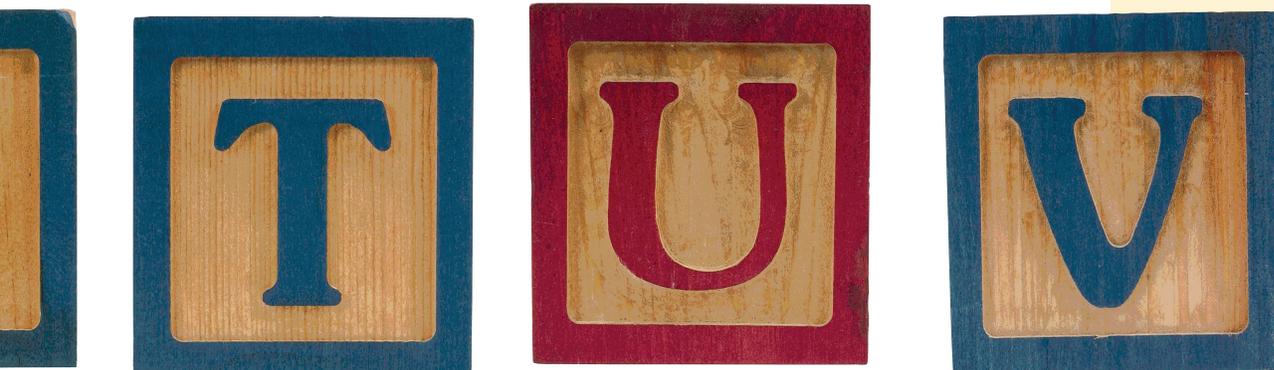
In summary, the perspective about primary-grades instruction that emerges from considering all of the scientific evidence is that excellent primary-grades instruction is balanced as I have been describing it since 1998. Efforts that focus only on increasing phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies are incomplete from this perspective, and they are, thus, not fully informed by evidence. More positively, the most com-

EN BREF Les éducateurs et les éducatrices des É.-U. analysent actuellement les premiers résultats de l'initiative Reading First et leurs implications. Ceux-ci révèlent qu'il y a eu peu d'amélioration dans le rendement des élèves en lecture. Cela n'est pas surprenant puisque les efforts pour améliorer l'enseignement de la lecture au niveau primaire, qui ont surtout porté sur l'amélioration de la reconnaissance des phonèmes, la fluidité de la lecture, l'expansion du vocabulaire et des stratégies de compréhension, comportent une grave lacune. En effet, même si les responsables de ces programmes disent qu'ils s'appuient sur les résultats de la recherche, ils ne tiennent manifestement pas compte des conclusions de nombreuses études qui indiquent que le niveau d'engagement des enfants en classe est un facteur déterminant de leur succès dans l'apprentissage de la lecture. Les enseignants du primaire qui tiennent réellement compte de la recherche offrent des programmes d'alphabétisation équilibrés, lesquels comprennent la lecture des meilleurs livres pour enfants, des exercices de rédaction quotidiens et l'enseignement d'aptitudes de lecture et d'écriture dans un milieu stimulant et propice aux efforts pour susciter l'engagement des élèves.

FROM THE VERY FIRST DAY OF CLASS, THE ENGAGING TEACHER TEACHES HER STUDENTS THAT THERE IS ALWAYS SOMETHING INTERESTING THEY COULD BE DOING, AND THEIR RESPONSIBILITY IS TO DO IT – ALWAYS ANOTHER BOOK TO READ, ALWAYS ANOTHER STORY TO WRITE.

plete reading programs that include the components emphasized in Reading First also include excellent children's literature, promote children's writing, and do what they can to motivate literacy engagement.

The problem in the U.S. is that there are many other programs – meeting only the minimal requirements of Reading First – that are gaining plenty of customers because of the legislation. At the same time, though, as the standards movement expands, individual U.S. states are mounting primary-grades reading standards that go well beyond the basic skills favored by Reading First (see <achieve.org>), demanding student literacy learning (e.g., recognizing and being able to write a variety of genres) that can only be accomplished in a broadly balanced





program. In those jurisdictions, which have decided in favor of instruction informed by a full range of the available scientific evidence, it would be a violation of state policy to offer a program as skills focused as the most extreme versions of Reading First.

Primary-level literacy educators who want to be truly evidence-based offer strongly balanced teaching of reading and writing skills, which includes reading excellent children's literature, writing every day, and teaching literacy skills and literacy experiences in an environment that is bubbling over with teacher attempts to motivate students' academic engagement. |

Suggested Reading

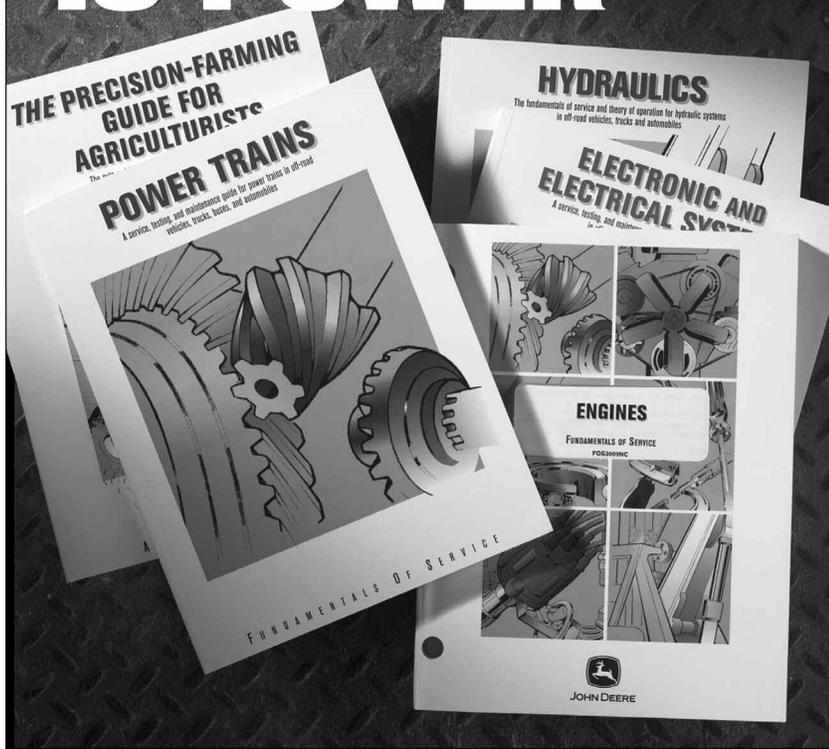
Michael Pressley, "Balanced Elementary Literacy Instruction in the United States: A Personal Perspective," in N. Bascia, A. Cumming, A. Datnow, K. Leithwood, and D. Livingstone (eds.), *International Handbook on Educational Policy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2005).

MICHAEL PRESSLEY is a University Distinguished Professor in the College of Education at Michigan State University. His work on literacy has been honored by the International Reading Association, the National Literacy Conference, the American Educational Research Association, and the American Psychological Association. He is the incoming editor of the journal *Scientific Studies of Reading*.

Notes

- 1 M. Pressley, R. Allington, R. Wharton-McDonald, C.C. Block and L.M. Morrow, *Learning to Read: Lessons From Exemplary First Grades* (New York: Guilford, 2001).
- 2 J. Brophy, *Motivating Students to Learn*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah NJ: Erlbaum & Associates, 2004); M. Pressley, S.E. Dolezal, L.M. Raphael, L.M. Welsh, A.D. Roehrig and K. Bogner, *Motivating Primary-grade Students* (New York: Guilford, 2003).
- 3 Michael Pressley, *Reading Instruction That Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching*, 3rd edition (New York: Guilford, in press).
- 4 Ibid.

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