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Exploring the Foundations of Leadership for Literacy

The knowledge is now available to make worthwhile improvements in reading throughout the United States. If the practices seen in the classrooms of the better teachers in the best schools could be introduced everywhere, the improvements would be dramatic. (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 3)

We have good evidence that most children can become literate alongside their peers. Not just a majority, but virtually all. Not someday, but along with their peers. (Allington, 1995, p. 2)

Setting the Stage

The knowledge exists to teach all but a handful of severely disabled children to read well. (American Federation of Teachers, 1999, p. 5)

We know much about how to design reading activities that promote a solid and successful start in reading and literacy for every child in America. (Kameenui, Simmons, Baker, Chard, Dickson, Gunn, et al., 1998, p. 47)

In this introductory chapter, I establish the framework for an exploration of literacy leadership. Following some initial comments about the focus of the book, I summarize the four areas that were mined to create it: effective schools, quality instruction, successful reading programs, and leadership in schools in which all students master literacy. I feature a comprehensive design for strengthening literacy at the primary grades. I attend, in particular, to the importance of consistent efforts across all levels of the educational system—from classroom, to school, to district, to state. Some key insights from this nested perspective for successful literacy education are enumerated. In Chapters 2 through 4, I extend this introductory material by framing the concepts of literacy and leadership that are at the heart of this book, by discussing the current state of literacy in the United States, and by reviewing foundational principles of high-quality reading programs.

Focus

We know how to give students a good start and a proper foundation, and we should do it. (Williams, 1991, p. 17)

While I illuminate many facets of the concept of literacy in this volume, the spotlight shines most brightly on the early years of schooling. I focus here because a consensus has emerged over the last twenty years about the critical nature of the primary grades (preK–3) in terms of literacy development (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). As Taylor and her colleagues (1999) remark, “our number one priority for funding research should be to improve classroom reading instruction in kindergarten and the primary grades” (p. 1). Taylor and Traxis (n.d.) make a parallel argument in terms of resource deployment in education. Much of this consensus emanates from data revealing that many youngsters arrive in kindergarten with literacy backgrounds that place them at significant risk of school failure (Hart & Risley, 1995; Smith, 1997). This knowledge, coupled with our inability until now to develop successful post-primary interventions for students

with low literacy achievement (Pikulski, 1994) and the growing recognition that students who remain behind after the second or third grade face very long odds in the race for school success (Honig, 1997; Juel, 1988), forcefully directs our attention to the literacy of young children.

While I cover the spectrum of students defined by ability and family background, I also provide space to investigating ways to ensure high levels of literacy for youngsters who historically have not fared well in our schools, that is, those children on the wrong side of the achievement gap (Spiegel, 1995). As Snow and her colleagues (1998) remind us, the group includes:

- (1) children living in low-income communities;
- (2) children with limited English proficiency;
- (3) preschool children slated to attend an elementary school where achievement is chronically low;
- (4) children suffering from specific cognitive deficiencies, hearing impairments, and early language impairments;
- and (5) children whose parents have a history of reading problems. (p. 137)

Given the moral imperative of addressing the underachievement of these children, as well as the shifting economic and political landscape that heightens both the problem and the demand for its resolution, it seems especially appropriate to target strategies that promise to strengthen literacy outcomes for students at risk. In understanding this endeavor, the featured mechanism is prevention of problems rather than their remediation, as recommended by a host of reading analysts (Clay, 1994; Duffy-Hester, 1999; Slavin & Madden, 1989). Throughout, however, the focus is on reading and writing for purpose, not as ends in themselves. In addition, I am concerned with explaining success as well as describing it.

Finally, it is important to note that the material in this book is constructed from the best available knowledge—"a productive interplay among research and application" (Jones & Smith-Burke, 1999, p. 263)—about policies, practices, and behaviors that promote literacy achievement. Following Allington's (1997a) advice, my aim is to build up a "generally compelling basis for modifying current practice" (p. 34). While I am cognizant of the ways that answers to literacy questions have been informed by "polemics" (Stanovich, 2000, p. 388), "half-baked philosophy" (p. 411), and "political" rather than "scientific" criteria (p. 401), the touchstone here is "the basic research on reading that has allowed the community of reading scientists and

educators to agree on what needs to be done” (American Federation of Teachers, 1999, p. 7). How far we have progressed in developing that knowledge can be gleaned by reviewing the state of the art in reading research in 1960, 1980, and 2000.

The purpose of the [1959] meeting was to map out programs of needed research. Participants agreed that the problem of beginning reading, although acknowledged to be a difficult one, desperately needed more attention from researchers. They felt that the research then available provided evidence so vague, contradictory, and incomplete as to encourage conflicting interpretations. No serious research could state with any degree of certainty, on the basis of such evidence, that either one or another approach to beginning reading was indeed the best or the worst. (Chall, 1983, p. 4)

If one is willing to accept the standardized reading achievement test score as a criterion for effective instruction, then there is now sufficient evidence to say that some of the variables associated with successful instruction in reading at the elementary grades are known. (Berliner, 1981, p. 203)

No one could come away from reading this book without appreciating the enormous amount that has been learned in the past two decades about literacy development in the preschool and elementary years. (Pressley, 1998b, p. 274)

Audience

Morris, Shaw, and Perney (1990) assert that the struggle to ensure high levels of literacy achievement for all youngsters “will ultimately involve mobilizing societal and political support to change present educational policy” (p. 148). I concur, and I agree with Stanovich (2000) that “we have an obligation . . . to make sure that policies are informed by the best, most current, and most convergent knowledge we can provide” (p. 386). It is my aim, therefore, to influence political actions that shape the nature of literacy in our nation’s school districts, schools, and classrooms. Consequently, policymakers at the state (e.g., legislative staff, Department of Education personnel), district, and school levels form one audience for the insights ribboned throughout these chapters. At the same time, I am very much interested

in directing the behaviors of leaders at the district and school levels into channels that will result in high levels of literacy achievement for all students. While the prime audience here is the principal, the work is also designed to inform teacher leadership at the school level and administration at the district office.

A Comprehensive Framework for Action

We need evidence from many different levels of analysis. This is as true when trying to understand literacy as it is for any other complex behavior. (Stanovich, 2000, p. 158)

The great challenge for reading educators, therefore, is one of understanding the parts of the system and their interrelations. (Adams, 1990, p. 6)

In the pages that follow, I describe the significance of a comprehensive approach to strengthening literacy, an approach that provides the scaffolding for the material in Chapters 5 through 12. I then explore the four realms of knowledge that were harvested to form the comprehensive design.

The Framework

Indicators [of success] concern home conditions of each student, the community in which the school is located, the organizational features of each school, the resources in each school, the reading program initiative the school takes, the school principal's activities, the teaching experience of the reading teacher, and each teacher's activities and strategies in teaching reading, and his or her views about reading. (Postlethwaite & Ross, 1992, p. 13)

Having a significant effect on literacy achievement will require operating in several domains: effecting changes in homes and schools, encouraging communication between parents and teachers, working to reform curriculum and school management, and enlisting community, state, and federal support for education. (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991, p. 164)

The architecture I develop assumes that “the more elements of good parenting, good teaching, and good schooling that children experience, the greater the likelihood that they will achieve their potential as readers” (Anderson et al., 1985, p. 117). The design, therefore, attends to the multiple actors in the literacy script and to the multiple levels in the system. Throughout, coherence and integration across actors and levels is of critical concern. Finally, within this coherent pattern, the viability of strategies is highlighted. Underlying everything in the framework is the belief that knowledge should backward map from our best understanding of student learning. Center stage is occupied by “the learner and the ‘academic work’ the learner is engaging in” (Hoffman, 1991, p. 946).

The central idea here is that since “district policies, school level decisions, approaches used by individual teachers [and] other factors determine . . . reading achievement” (Armor, Conroy-Osequera, Cox, King, McDonnell, Pascal, et al., 1976, p. 20), what is critical is coordinated action on many fronts and across many levels of the educational system. Literacy interventions that appear as “isolated phenomena” (Gaffney & Paynter, 1994, p. 26) are rarely successful. In many places, state policies, district frameworks, school actions, and classroom work are only loosely aligned. “Practice[s] based on widely differing theoretical assumptions” (Pinnell, Lyons, DeFord, Bryk, & Seltzer, 1994, p. 10) are often thrown together. The power of coherence is absent. Teachers and pupils are often pulled by conflicting goals. There are often frequent shifts in programmatic direction. The benefits of action from multiple levels reinforcing common objectives are lost (Creemers, 1994; Murphy, 1992).

On the other hand, mastery of literacy skills is associated with comprehensive designs that weave levels of the schooling enterprise into a common tapestry (Slavin & Madden, 1989; State of New York, 1974). “The process of learning and development at every level of the education system” (Lyons & Pinnell, 1999, p. 197) is attended to. Each level (e.g., the school) is carefully nested within the next level (e.g., the district). Features do not exist in isolation. Rather, they can be viewed “as a set of interrelated components” (Samuels, 1981, p. 256). Influence moves in both directions through the levels (Samuels, 1981). The home and the school are linked and employ the same playbook to ensure that all children learn to read well (Snow et al., 1991). And this same systems ideology is applied within each of the levels as well. For example, there is a “comprehensive literacy framework in classrooms” (Williams, Scharer, & Pinnell, 2000, p. 27); teaching itself is a system. What is important is not so much the individual

elements but “how the features fit together to form a whole . . . individual features make sense only in terms of how they relate with others that surround them” (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999, p. 75).

So far, I have shown that my framework underscores (1) the influence of the actors at multiple levels of the educational enterprise, that is, “school-level change is as important as change within classrooms” (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999, p. 43) and (2) the importance of a comprehensive approach to action, with its essential requirement that each piece of the system perform in a coherent, coordinated, and consistent manner. My final point guides us to the road map needed to formulate an integrated design. Much of the literature on school improvement reads like the quest for the Holy Grail, the search for the single variable that will guarantee success. The position taken here is quite different. As Fraser (1989) reports:

The educational productivity research highlights that we should not expect any single factor to have an enormous impact on student learning; rather, the key to improving student learning and enhancing school effectiveness lies in simultaneously optimizing several different factors each of which bears a modest relationship to achievement. (p. 716)

Specifically, in the area of reading “a combination of factors, rather than one or two, makes the critical difference in raising the reading achievement level in a school” (Williams, Scharer, & Pinnell, 2000, p. 28; see also Fletcher & Lyon, 1998; Phi Delta Kappa, 1980; Sanacore, 1997).

There are so many important elements in a good reading program, that simple, “quick fix,” single element approaches usually cannot produce a significant impact on achievement. To produce a significant impact, a comprehensive approach operating on a student over time is required. (Samuels, 1981, p. 271)

Or, as Armor and his research team (1976) state, “the separate effects of the school inputs we found to be important for reading are small compared with their combined power” (p. 30).

A corollary of the combined variable story line is “that there is more than one route to successful reading performance” (Konold, Juel, McKinnon, 1999, p. i). Because the learning context matters a good deal (Au & Mason, 1981; Williams, Scharer, & Pinnell, 2000), because “children take varied routes to common outcomes”

(Askew & Gaffney, 1999, p. 79), because “different approaches are better to teach different goals” (Stahl, 1997, p. 21), and because effect variables can be mixed in many ways, “there is no single way to improve the teaching-learning process” (Clay, 1994, p. 139), “there are many different routes to literacy development” (Neuman, Caperelli, & Kee, 1998, p. 250), and “no one model explains school effectiveness” (Edmonds, 1979, p. 32). Not surprisingly, within the framework of high coordination and integration, “there are many different patterns that effective schools might assume” (Hoffman & Rutherford, 1984, p. 83) and “there are numerous models of effective reading programs” (Patty, Maschoff, & Ranson, 1996, p. 2).

The Four Knowledge Pillars

The answer . . . then seems to be that *both* individual schools *and* individual classrooms are affecting students’ reading achievement levels. (Armor et al., 1976, p. 21)

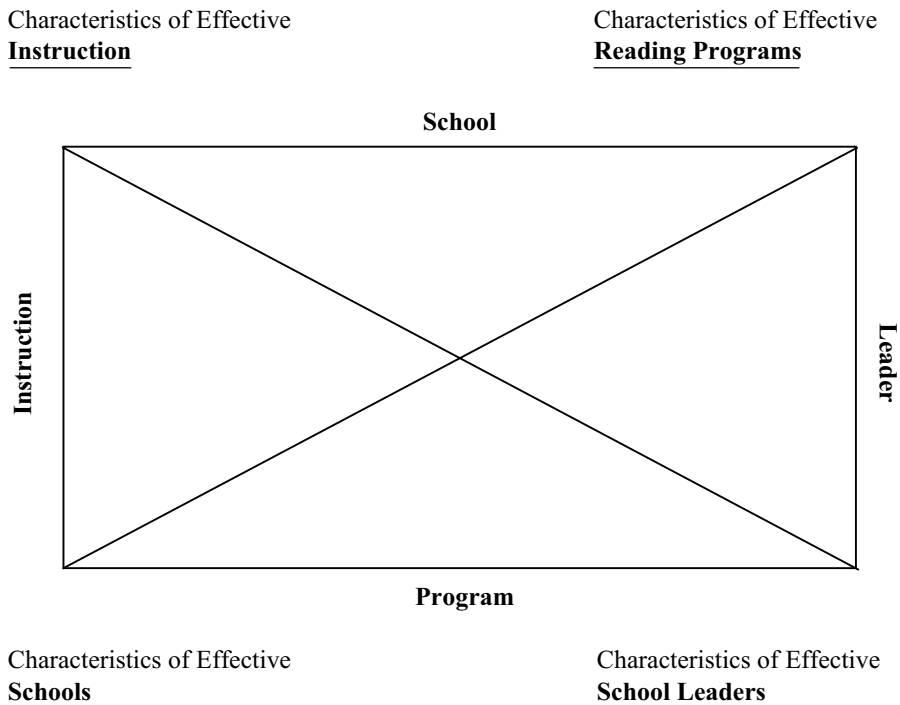
The implication is that to improve reading achievement, we must improve both programs and classroom delivery. Each seems to contribute separately and significantly to children’s progress. (Adams, 1990, p. 43)

A combination of school and teacher factors, many of which were intertwined, was found in the most effective schools. (Hiebert & Pearson, 1999, p. 10)

Effective Instruction

As can be seen in Figure 1.1, I conducted reviews in four broad domains of research to gather the raw material needed to construct my comprehensive portrait of leadership for literacy. Working from the classroom outward, the first domain is the research on effective instruction (see Table 1.1). I began with studies and research reviews in the general area of literacy. I also analyzed studies in specific areas of literacy such as tutoring, comprehension, family literacy, repeated reading, and so forth. Table 1.1 contains examples of work in two of these areas: studies and reviews on oral reading, and research in the field of silent reading. In building the knowledge base in the area of instruction, I also examined a number of studies that focused on literacy instruction for specific groups of learners, in particular for students at risk of school failure. Again, in Table 1.1 some examples of the type of work on which I relied are listed. To leaven the product,

Figure 1.1 Domains of Research Informing the Leadership for Literacy Platform



I also incorporated findings from general studies of effective instruction, that is, those that did not focus explicitly on literacy. The investigations here were of two types: general studies of instructional effectiveness; and research on effective instruction for children of color, pupils from low-income homes, and youngsters from culturally and linguistically diverse families. Finally, despite “a lack of systematic study of effective teachers, a lack of understanding of their practices and perspectives” (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998, p. 102), I unearthed a few studies of effective teaching in reading.

Effective Reading Programs

A second major set of readings was undertaken to determine what the literature on effective reading programs could contribute to the narrative on leadership for literacy. Studies and reviews in this domain were clustered into two lines of work. First, I grouped studies that answered the question, What are the characteristics of reading programs that are especially productive in promoting high levels of reading achievement? Six of these natural harvest types of studies can be seen

Table 1.1 Examples of Studies on Effective Instruction***General Area of Literacy***

- Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print.*
- Chall, J. S. (1983). *Learning to read: The great debate.*
- Knapp, M. S., & Needels, M. (1991). Review of research on curriculum and instruction in literacy.
- Morrow, L. M., et al. (1999). Characteristics of exemplary first-grade literacy instruction.
- Pflaum, S. W., et al. (1980). Reading instruction: A quantitative analysis.
- Pressley, M. (1998). *Reading instruction that works: The case for balanced teaching.*
- Snow, C. E., et al. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children.*

Specific Area of Literacy (e.g., Oral & Silent Reading)

- Allington, R. L. (1984). Oral reading.
- Collins, C. (1980). Sustained silent reading periods: Effects on teachers' behaviors and students' achievement.
- Hoffman, J. V. (1987). Rethinking the role of oral reading in basal instruction.
- Koskinen, P. S., & Blum, I. H. (1984). Repeated oral reading and the acquisition of fluency.
- Leinhardt, G., et al. (1981). Reading instruction and its effects.
- Moore, J. C., et al. (1980). What we know after a decade of sustained silent reading.
- Reutzell, D. R., Hollingsworth, P. M., & Eldredge, J. L. (1994). Oral reading instruction: The impact on student reading development.
- Wilkinson, I., et al. (1988). Silent reading reconsidered: Reinterpreting reading instruction and its effects.

Literacy Instruction for Specific Students (e.g., Students Placed at Risk)

- Allington, R. L. (1991). Effective literacy instruction for at-risk children.
- Foorman, B. R., et al. (1998). The role of instruction in learning to read: Preventing reading failure in at-risk children.
- Garcia, G. E., & Pearson, P. D. (1991). Modifying reading instruction to maximize its effectiveness for all students.
- Harris, A. J., & Serwer, B. L. (1966). The CRAFT project: Instructional time in reading research.
- Taylor, B. M., et al. (1999). Beating the odds in teaching all children to read.

Studies of Effective Teachers

- Haberman, M. (1995). *Star teachers of children in poverty.*
- Pressley, M., et al. (2000). A survey of instructional practices of primary teachers nominated as effective in promoting literacy.
- Ruddell, R. B. (1997). Researching the influential literacy teacher: Characteristics, beliefs, strategies, and new research directions.
- Wharton-McDonald, R., et al. (1998). Literacy instruction in nine first-grade classrooms: Teacher characteristics and student achievement.

Table 1.2 Examples of Studies on Effective Reading Programs***Natural Harvest Programs***

- Armor, D., et al. (1976). *Analysis of the school preferred reading program in selected Los Angeles minority schools.*
- Briggs, K. L., & Thomas, K. (1997). *Patterns of success: Successful pathways to elementary literacy in Texas Spotlight Schools.*
- Fisher, C., & Adler, M. A. (1999). *Early reading programs in high-poverty schools: Emerald Elementary beats the odds.*
- Hallinger, P., & Murphy, J. (1985). Characteristics of highly effective elementary school reading programs.
- Hoffman, J. V., & Rutherford, W. L. (1984). Effective reading programs: A critical review of outlier studies.
- Samuels, S. J. (1981). Characteristics of exemplary reading programs.
- Wilder, G. (1977). Five exemplary reading programs.

Specially Developed Reading Programs—Regular and Remedial

- Askew, B. J., et al. (2000). A review of Reading Recovery.
- Pikulski, J. J. (1994). Preventing reading failure: A review of five effective programs.
- Pinnell, G. S., et al. (1994). Comparing instructional models for the literacy education of high-risk first graders.
- Ross, S. M., et al. (1995). Increasing the academic success of disadvantaged children: An examination of alternative early intervention programs.
- Slavin, R. E., et al. (1994). Success for All: A comprehensive approach to prevention and early intervention.

in Table 1.2, including my own 1985 research report and recent work from the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement. A second cluster of work focuses on specially developed reading programs—both regular and remedial or preventative—that are effective in promoting student achievement in the area of literacy. Again, examples from this area, including research from Pinnell and her colleagues at The Ohio State University and Slavin and his collaborators at Johns Hopkins University, can be seen in Table 1.2.

Effective Schools

Over the last three decades, investigations of effective schools have grown into a robust area of research (see, e.g., Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). These studies sometimes connect conditions at the school level to reading achievement. Illustrative studies from this line of research, including classic studies from the 1970s, can be seen in

Table 1.3 Examples of Studies on Effective Schools**Reading Achievement**

- Ellis, A. B. (1975). *Success and failure: A summary of findings and recommendations for improving elementary reading in Massachusetts city schools.*
- Postlethwaite, T. N., & Ross, K. N. (1992). *Effective schools in reading: Implications for educational planners.*
- Rowe, K. J., (1995). Factors affecting students' progress in reading: Key findings from a longitudinal study.
- State of New York. (1974). *School factors influencing reading achievement: A case study of two inner city schools.*
- Venezky, R. L., & Winfield, L. F. (1979). *Schools that succeed beyond expectations in teaching reading.*
- Weber, G. (1971). *Inner-city children can be taught to read: Four successful schools.*

General Achievement

- Brookover, W., & Lezotte, L. W. (1979). *Changes in school characteristics coincident with changes in student achievement.*
- Fraser, B. J. (1989). Research syntheses on school and instructional effectiveness.
- Frederiksen, J., & Edmonds, R. (n.d.). *The identification of instructionally effective and ineffective schools.* Unpublished manuscript, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- Phi Delta Kappa. (1980). *Why do some urban schools succeed? The Phi Delta Kappa study of exceptional urban elementary schools.*
- Rutter, M. (1983). School effects on pupil progress: Research findings and policy implications.
- Wellisch, J. B., et al. (1978). School management and organization in successful schools.

Table 1.3. More often, studies of highly productive schools uncover organizational characteristics that are related to achievement in both reading and mathematics. Examples of work reviewed for this category can also be seen in Table 1.3, including examples of foundational work by Brookover and Lezotte and by Edmonds.

Instructional Leadership

Finally, I reviewed the growing body of research that links the activities of school leaders to student performance, the instructional leadership literature. Important examples from that body of work for

Table 1.4 Examples of Studies on Effective Educational Leadership

Hallinger, P., et al. (1996). Social context, principal leadership, and student reading achievement.
Murphy, J. (1990). Principal instructional leadership.
Murphy, J., & Hallinger, P. (1986). The superintendent as instructional leader: Findings from effective school districts.

the principalship and the superintendency can be seen in Table 1.4, although it is important to note that rather than being investigated directly, our knowledge of effective leadership tends to be culled primarily from studies of program and school effectiveness.

Summary

In this first of four introductory chapters, I laid some of the groundwork that helps the reader see into the chapters that follow. I also argued for the importance of a comprehensive framework for strengthening literacy in the primary grades (preK–3), one that acknowledges that success is a mixture of what unfolds at the classroom, reading program, and school levels—and one that is dependent on leadership and policy at the district and state levels as well. I suggested that consistency, coordination, and integration around a common vision are the hallmarks of that framework. In the next chapter, I examine the two concepts that define this volume, literacy and leadership.