Characteristics of four highly-regarded literacy teachers in rural and urban elementary schools

Evan Thomas Ortlieb
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, eortli2@lsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations
Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/253

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
CHARACTERISTICS OF FOUR
HIGHLY-REGARDED LITERACY TEACHERS
IN RURAL AND URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Practice

by

Evan Thomas Ortlieb
B.S., Louisiana State University, 2004
M.Ed., Louisiana State University, 2005
May 2007
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all of whom I have come in contact; each person has helped contribute to my success, including my family and friends. Thank you for assisting me to become stronger, more prophetic, and more accomplished. I could not have been so successful without you. In addition, I would like to dedicate my work to God and his children without whom I would not have such an everlasting desire.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Great praise should be given to those who deserve it. With that notion in mind, I must first thank the person who first gave me the thought of pursuing a doctorate: Dr. Kelly McFatter. Her guidance and timely support with every educational and personal matter was crucial to my success at every level. Through her leadership, I gained many insights on what characteristics are essential within teachers.

Others have also contributed by giving suggestions for study, like Dr. Earl Cheek Jr., Dr. Margaret Stewart, and Dr. Elizabeth Willis. With the guidance of these great mentors, I have learned so much that has contributed to the formulation of this dissertation. In addition, I would like to thank my other committee members: Dr. Pamela Blanchard, Dr. Joan Benedict, Dr. Robert Lafayette, and Dr. James Wandersee. Your patience and assistance was always appreciated, not to mention that your encouragement and excitement about my project made all the difference.

In addition, the entire Department of Curriculum & Instruction was always there to lend a hand or two, including Joyce Stevenson, Lois Stewart, Amber Salvadras, Ashley Daigle, Jaleesa Auzenne, and Corinne Bergeron—your support was expeditious and considerate.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ............................................................................................................. ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .......................................................................................... iii

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................ vi

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................. 1
   Rationale ................................................................................................................ 1
   Statement of the Problem ..................................................................................... 4
   Purpose of the Study ........................................................................................... 6
   Background of Urban Schools .......................................................................... 7
   Background of Rural Schools .......................................................................... 11
   Significance of the Present Study .................................................................... 15
   Research Questions ........................................................................................... 15
   Definitions and Acronyms ................................................................................. 16

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE ................................................................ 19
   Reading Ability: An Indicator of Academic Potential ...................................... 21
   Educational Difficulties in Urban Areas ............................................................ 22
   Rural EducationDifficulties .......................................................................... 25
   A Historical Perspective on Louisiana Rural Schools ...................................... 26
   Improvements in Rural Education .................................................................. 30
   Research on Literacy Instruction ...................................................................... 35
   Reading Programs ............................................................................................ 43

CHAPTER 3. METHODS .......................................................................................... 50
   Biases ................................................................................................................... 53
   The Developmental Research Sequence (D.R.S.) ............................................. 54
   Summary ............................................................................................................. 66

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION .......................................................... 69
   Interview with Woodston Principal ................................................................. 69
   Interview with Mrs. Creswell from Woodston ................................................. 74
   Mrs. Creswell’s Room ...................................................................................... 82
   Vignette: September 12, 2006 ............................................................................. 89
   Interview with Mrs. LeBlanc from Woodston ................................................ 92
   Mrs. LeBlanc’s Room ...................................................................................... 98
   Vignette: September 13, 2006 ............................................................................. 107
   Interview with Principal from Shaw ............................................................... 109
   Interview with Ms. Benson from Shaw ........................................................... 113
   Ms. Benson’s Room ...................................................................................... 119
   Vignette: October 17, 2006 ................................................................................. 126
   Interview with Mrs. Clark from Shaw ............................................................. 129
   Mrs. Clark’s Room ........................................................................................... 135
ABSTRACT

How does geography play a role in student learning and teacher instruction? Limited research efforts reveal that the needs of students in rural areas are quite distinct from other settings (Muijs & Reynolds, 2003; Rice, 2003). It is not until exclusive qualities are determined in both rural and urban environments that instructional plans can be geared to each student body. Addressing these sociocultural issues is crucial with an increasingly diverse population of students nationwide.

Spradley’s (1980) Developmental Research Sequence and ethnographic interviews of four classroom teachers within rural and urban schools are the primary methods utilized throughout this inquiry. The participants are selected based on their school-wide reputation for being highly regarded literacy teachers.

Several instructional techniques found are unique to rural and urban areas. Administrators, specialists, and classroom teachers should find the results of this investigation useful. Implications reach across grade levels as models of effective literacy instruction can be developed.
CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

Rationale

Education systems are by all means dynamical in nature, multivariate and ever-changing. Therefore, it is essential for research to be continuously conducted. Researchers must make determinations, find direct correlations, and postulate inferences, which can sometimes be difficult given the complexity of schools; nevertheless, pursuing educational research is extremely valuable considering that there is no greater responsibility than providing suitable educational opportunities to all students. Thus, didactic improvements must be regularly conjured; these should be founded chiefly with the interest of student learning in mind. These ambitions and aspirations held by educational institutions are easier to set than to implement and therefore, schools constantly struggle to find ways in which to better educate their youth.

In the last decade, significant changes to the goals and provisions of the Department of Education have had tremendous impacts on virtually every public school in America. Aimed at closing the achievement gap between economically challenged and minority students and their peers, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) established an educational reorganization, which has had more affect on schools than any other since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965. As one of President George W. Bush’s primary agendas, this educational reform has four key components: “stronger accountability for results, expanded flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been
proven to work” (NCLB, 2002). Raising the expectations of every public school in America is central to the foundation of NCLB.

In particular, NCLB is “changing the literacy climate of classrooms and schools … the impact of [the] law is being felt by school districts and schools receiving Reading First funds” (Stewart, 2004, p. 732). This act of legislation focuses on five components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. U.S. Secretary Rod Page explains that the intent of “this bipartisan act is to build upon and enhance accountability systems that States have been developing since, or prior to, the 1994 reauthorization of the ESEA Act” (2002, para. 1). No Child Left Behind also increased federal financial support for reading in particular from $300 million in the fiscal year 2001 to over $900 million in 2002; however, these funds could only be designated to methods of reading instruction that were scientifically proven. Within 12 years of its enactment, every public school in America is required to meet or exceed these standards. The federal government’s enactment of NCLB was intended to assist educators provide better instruction so students could improve academically; its overall impact is still up for debate today (2007).

Who is Accountable for Student Learning?

Within this era of high-stakes testing and accountability, less is often seen as more. No longer is learning valued as an instructional purpose, but only seen as a stepping stone for test scores and accountability (Campbell, 2002). Having students learn information only when it is somehow relevant to formalized testing seems arbitrary. Although the age of “teacher knows best” is currently out of favor with most funding sources, elementary teachers still have considerable control regarding what happens in
their classrooms. Students spend almost all of their time in the classroom, so it goes
without saying that teachers have the ability to greatly impact students’ lives both
techniques that are responsive to individual student capacities and needs” (p. 358). Many
times, educational matters such as setting and reaching goals, individualizing and
adapting lessons, as well as varying and combining instructional styles are solely at the
teacher’s discretion (Williams & Bauer, 2006). How these concepts and others like
modeling, assessment, verbal communication, and classroom management are
implemented is also controlled in large degree by the classroom instructor.

Although teachers have copious responsibilities, there are no authentic instruction
manuals for accomplishing these tasks (Collins & Cheek, 2000). This is why it is
commonly thought that the single most influential factor of effective literacy instruction
is “the alignment between actual instructional practices used in the classroom and the
depth of knowledge teachers have of the underlying concepts that support the use of
innovative practices” (Smith, Baker, & Oudeans, 2001, p. 9). Inevitably, there are great
disparities between effective teachers with successful practices and ineffective teachers
who fail with these responsibilities.

With that said, there are several other characters in the school setting who also
contribute to the effectiveness of a school’s functionality including the school board
members, administrators, specialists, office workers, et cetera. Ideally, these members
aim to ensure that every child be given the necessary appropriations and instruction to
become educated. Each of these factors contributes to a school’s overall effectiveness in
preparing its students for future education, careers, and life in general. However, for the
purposes of this study, classroom teachers and principals are the sole participants; this is
due to the fact that these two entities contribute most closely to how students are
instructed on a daily basis.

This inquiry details how effective reading instruction is similar and different
within rural and urban elementary schools. Since the terms rural and urban have varying
definitions within particular contexts, the constructs used in this study were those which
the U.S. Census Bureau (2005) utilizes—that cities or metropolitan areas are composed
of at least 50,000 people. Schools located in these districts are considered urban while
those districts with fewer residents are deemed rural. For the purpose of this inquiry, the
only categories featured were rural and urban, while subgroups like urban-fringe,
suburban, small town, and others have been excluded for analysis.

Statement of the Problem

Student populations within the United States are of various demographics,
geographic locations, ethnographic backgrounds, races, and classes. It is not a question of
whether or not these factors play a role in student learning, but to what extent they affect
one’s learning. Some schools are located in wealthy neighborhoods with children
predominantly of one race; still, most student populations are becoming increasingly
diverse. Thus, when studying how students learn, how teachers instruct them, and so on,
it does not seem appropriate to study and refer to students nationwide as a whole. Instead,
sub-populations should be viewed as distinct and thus, specific decisions regarding their
instruction can be made more suitably.

In particular, more in depth research is essential when considering schools in both
geographic settings continue to fail to meet the expectations set by the No Child Left
Behind Act. In 2002, the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) determined that two thirds of the nation’s fourth graders scored below the proficient level in reading (Grigg, Daane, Jin, & Campbell, 2003). Thus, a closer look into the types of reading instruction these children receive is essential, especially since reading serves as a foundation for most subject areas. Furthermore, those students who cannot read on grade level will likely perform at or below grade level in most other subject areas because frequently their comprehension skills are low. Nevertheless, if progress is to be made, effective characteristics of reading teachers need to be revealed so that all teachers can learn from those who have demonstrated successful practices.

For several reasons, however, limited research endeavors have been attempted in the rural areas of educational systems. Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005) proclaim that because rural schools are located in isolated areas, researchers are not always willing to spend sufficient time there. When combined with the fact that it is quite difficult to receive grants from state and federal agencies to investigate rural area schools, the outlook is bleak. The perspective of state and federal agencies has the appearance of suggesting that looking at a limited number of students in rural schools does not make as great of an impact on education as does looking at more densely populated school districts with larger student populations. A perspective that one may postulate is empirically logical. Still, if educational research is limited in the rural sector, equal access becomes almost impossible to obtain, which should not be an option.

Not only do the unique characteristics of rural reading teachers need to be revealed, but also how these modes of instruction differ from those in urban schools. Inner-city schools also have unique characteristics which set them apart from other areas;
additionally, many similarities likely exist between these separate populations. Part of the process in determining uniqueness is finding similarities; thus, differences can be noted and more clearly contrasted. More thorough analyses are needed in both areas because many times research is generalized across all geographic areas; thus, it is unknown whether certain research findings can be used for guiding instruction and other educational decisions in specific settings.

Purpose of the Study

Substantial amounts of research have revealed that many inner-city/urban elementary school students struggle in school, particularly in learning to read (Flint & Cooter Jr., 2005; Flood & Anders, 2005; Kagan, 2004; Mason & Schumm, 2003; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998); however, until effective characteristics of reading teachers in specific locations are discovered, academic growth cannot occur. In addition, the unique educational needs of rural communities have been largely ignored by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE),” (Arnold, 2005, p. 1). Rural schools are not as often subject to research, even though nearly one fifth of all students attend rural schools in the United States, according to Why Rural Matters 2005: The Continuing Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education. This study sought to reveal unique aspects of reading educators in both urban and rural geographic locations. The investigator observed particular aspects of instruction throughout the investigation (see Appendix A) in an effort to detail which characteristics are crucial for success. The findings of this study allowed educators to reflect on their own practices, utilize specific instructional techniques found to be effective, and adjust their overall instructional styles accordingly. Administrators, specialists, and classroom teachers should find the results of this inquiry
useful when conducting professional development activities in reading. Implications reach across grade levels as models of effective reading instruction can be developed.

Background of Urban Schools

Urban schools have traditionally been able to offer students a host of opportunities not matched in other geographic settings. Through recruiting highly qualified teachers, urban institutions have staffed their schools with the most knowledgeable persons to direct classroom instruction. In the 1960s and 1970s, urban classrooms were regarded as “intellectually stimulating and satisfying” to students (Randhawa & Michayluk, 1975). Teachers used a broad variety of curricular materials and resources available to them through funding not matched in smaller, more segmented school districts.

However, reports written during the last decade seem to suggest that urban schools have many novel difficulties to surmount. According to the Center for Technology in Education (CTE), some studies indicate that “students and teachers in urban settings have greater challenges to overcome than their suburban and rural counterparts” (Urban Education, para. 1). Lomotey and Swanson (1989) noted one problem is that urban schools tend to “lack purpose and coherence” (p. 440). It is likely that this discombobulation is due in part to teachers struggling to effectively instruct with increased levels of diversity present in urban classrooms. Moreover, Fuller (1994) states “changing demographics require changing teacher education strategies” (p. 270). Seemingly, in order for teachers to be effective in urban classrooms especially, they must be willing to negotiate and adapt their instruction continuously.
Instead of being the pinnacle of school environments, urban schools are now viewed as sub-par in terms of having excessive class size, disciplinary issues, and minimal extracurricular activities. With large class sizes comes a host of complications such as decreased levels of academic achievement, work environment, and pupil behavior. These hamper reading instruction in particular, hindering one’s ability to scaffold students’ reading levels. Educators are also adversely affected by large class sizes, as “many teachers who work in overcrowded classes have low morale and self-esteem” (Rios, 2005, para. 3). Furthermore, Bennett (1987) found broad agreement among teachers and researchers that in classrooms with smaller student populations, teachers had a more positive outlook and felt less-stressed than those who had more students in their classes. What was once ideal in terms of having individualized instruction for students is now virtually impossible for urban educational systems. The increased difficulties which these schools face are troubling; nonetheless, classroom teachers are many times held solely responsible for the success of their students. This notion has become exacerbated with the advent of increased accountability and its resulting repercussions.

The Specific Urban District Community

The mission of the Capitol City Parish School System (pseudonym), as stated in its student handbook, “is to provide quality education which will equip all students to function at their highest potential in a complex and changing society, thereby enabling them to lead full, productive, and rewarding lives” (Capitol City Parish School System, 2004, p. 1). The handbook also points out that this mission is to be shared with the local community, emphasizing the importance of the community in a child’s learning
experience. It is important to note the reference to the “changing society” in which we live; the district itself has gone through numerous changes as a result of the desegregation lawsuit that impacted the Capitol City until August of 2003, the longest-running desegregation lawsuit in the nation.

The desegregation lawsuit began in 1956 when a group of African-American parents filed suit against the public school system after their children were denied public education because of their race. Thereafter, a 46-year battle to desegregate the public schools in the Capitol City Parish School District ensued. Over those 46 years, the district has changed substantially, particularly in the demographics of the schools. Many Caucasians and middle class African-Americans have transferred from public to private and parochial schools. Though many attempts were made to integrate the schools through plans such as zoning, majority-to-minority transfers, and the creation of magnet schools, the public schools remain predominantly African American (Davis et al., 2003). The case of Davis, et. al. v. Capitol City Parish School Board finally came to a close when the Final Settlement Agreement was established on August 15, 2003. This agreement will continue to be in effect for the next two years, and all schools must abide by the rules and regulations stated in the Final Settlement Agreement (Davis et. al., 2003).

The Specific Urban School Community

As a part of the public school system, Shaw Elementary School must comply with all of the rules and regulations set forth by the national, state, and local governments. In compliance with national laws, Shaw participates in the standardized testing and accountability practices that have been set forth in No Child Left Behind. It does so through the state of Louisiana’s testing system, administering the Iowa Test of Basic
Skills (ITBS) and the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP 21) standardized tests to its students. In order to help students achieve high scores on these tests, the curriculum is based on the state’s content standards and grade level expectations.

Additionally, Shaw Elementary School is identified as a Title 1 school, with 90% of its students receiving free and reduced school meals. As part of the Capitol City School District, Shaw Elementary has been clearly impacted by the Davis, et. al. desegregation case. The effects of the desegregation lawsuit and the district’s attempts to achieve desegregation can be seen in the demographics of the school—it is a pre-K through fifth grade school located in a middle-class, predominantly Caucasian neighborhood; however, of the 346 enrolled students, African American students make up the majority (77%) of the student population. Caucasian students account for 18% of its student population, along with 3% Asian and 2% Hispanic. Its student-to-teacher ratio is 15:1. These issues, among others, illustrate the many ways in which multiple communities are at work within one smaller community, that of the school.

It is quite clear in the day-to-day routines and occurrences at Shaw Elementary School that the community plays an influential role in the function of the school. It is essential that students, teachers, parents, and administrators alike recognize the importance of community in the educational system. All the parts of a community work together to make a whole, and all the parts of the school community must work together so that the school may operate successfully and fulfill its mission of ensuring success to its students. Last year, its school performance score was 89.4, attaining two stars out of a five-star ranking.
Background of Rural Schools

Rural institutions face difficulties to a degree with which urban and other geographic regions do not encounter. For instance, rural schools have received a disproportionate amount of state and federal funding for decades; yet, little has been done to combat this long-lasting, unequal treatment. Not only do rural schools struggle to obtain necessary funding and resources for their students, but they also experience difficulty in hiring professional educators to provide the services which are crucial for teachers to continue to be well-informed, knowledgeable, and up-to-date on instructional matters to the extent many urban schools can.

Teacher recruitment and the hiring of classroom teachers are problematic as well. Mosenthal, Lipson, Mekkelsen, Russ, and Sortino (2003) state that rural teachers are paid very poorly and significantly less than in any other division of the field. “Furthermore, salaries in poor [Louisiana] school districts are stagnant. In our school they ranged from $23,515 for a beginner to $34,904 (top of the pay scale with a Ph.D. and 25-plus years of experience),” stated Johnson and Johnson (2002, p. 9). When teachers are offered thousands of dollars more to work elsewhere, the already difficult problem of recruiting quality teachers becomes exacerbated. In addition, those teachers who are interested in working in rural communities are not always well-educated, experienced, and knowledgeable. At the University of Maine, Professor Logue with expertise in early childhood education says that her teachers in training who come “from rural backgrounds know a lot but aren’t passing standardized tests. . . . they are coming from underfunded schools” (Dervarics, 2005, sect. 5). Furthermore, Logue found that very few new teachers were willing to relocate to rural areas and communities. Not being accustomed to that
style of living was one of the predominant factors in their hesitancy. Dervarics (2005) claimed there are valid reasons why “fewer than one-half of rural schools have a teacher certified in early-childhood education,” which is considerably less than compared to urban and suburban schools (sect. 3).

Manzo (2001) states that one study in particular brings forth the notion that “novice teachers who graduated from teacher-preparation programs with a strong focus on reading instruction tend to provide richer literacy experiences for their students than those who attended institutions without such an emphasis” (p. 5). Furthermore, many colleges add reading in the content areas to their curriculums so that their pre-service teachers will be knowledgeable about the reading process, methods of instruction, and more. Hoffman, the chairman of the IRA’s National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction adds “th[is] perpetuates the mentality that the delivery of content knowledge leads to good teaching” (Manzo, 2001, p. 5). However, an effective teacher education program goes beyond and gives students opportunities to practice, revamp, and reflect on their experiences. Not only is this important in teacher preparation during the undergraduate portion of one’s education, but it is also crucial in professional development classes. Many times, professional development includes the hiring of a specialist to give a brief lecture in regard to reading, math, or some other specific topic; a much more comprehensive approach to professional development needs to be given consideration if future success is sought.

Rural communities do not always appear as alluring to outsiders as do urban schools. One of the predominant reasons for this is the issue of school consolidation. Large elementary schools in rural areas are predominant today, since many schools have
been forced into consolidation in an effort to provide adequate services to their students. Still, elementary schools with student populations that exceed 1,000 children struggle to provide students with the individualized instruction that they require. Less likely to be well-known by faculty and staff, it is improbable that these students will be engaged and even more likely to skip school or drop out entirely (Sampson, 2005).

Yet another example of the hardships rural schools face is parental involvement. Dervarics (2005) states that “rural parents also are somewhat less likely to participate in school activities—a condition . . . attributed in part to the long distances between many families’ home and their child’s elementary school” (section 2). However, recent studies in rural schools also have yielded research saying that unlike in the 1960s and 1970s, some rural schools serve as a center point within rural communities, where parents and other citizens stay active in school functions (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Khatri et al.; Lomotey & Swanson, 1999).

The Specific Rural District Community

The particular rural district of interest resides along the banks of the Mississippi River. This southern community consists of approximately 30,000 residents, 4,000 of whom are educated in the public school system (Westside Parish School Board, para. 1). The parish consists of 600 square miles of land in which eight traditional schools and one alternative school operate. The Westside Parish School System proclaims its mission as the following:

We strive to develop life-long learners who are contributing members of the community by implementing programs to train school-based staff in assisting students in the development of decision-making skills and self-discipline;
providing on-going staff development and support for teachers in creating relevant, actively engaging learning activities; and engaging parents of the community in the support and activities of the school. (para. 1)

The Specific Rural School Community

Woodston Elementary is a pre-K through eighth grade school, serving a student population of 726 students of varying ethnicities: 51% are Caucasian, 48% are African American, and about 1% are Hispanic (Woodston Elementary, para. 1). As a whole, 76% of its student population (550 of 726) receives free or reduced lunch. The student-to-teacher ratio is 16:1 at Woodston. In 1990, Woodston Elementary and Junior High School consolidated in an effort to better provide their students with the necessary materials to excel in their academic endeavors. Last year, its school performance score was 89.0, giving the school a two-star rating out of a possible of five stars.

The school resides in a rural, minimally populated area where agriculture and fisheries are the predominant means of work for most of the community. Many of the students attending Woodston play crucial roles in their families’ economic success by assisting whenever necessary, including before and after school (Liter, personal communication, 2006). Wesley, the principal of the school, states that “many of our students come from simple families where many live in house boats without running water or electricity; others can barely afford to keep their children clothed to come to school.” In addition, a large number of students rely on boat transportation to arrive at school each day. When bridges malfunction or other difficulties arise, a substantial number of students come to school late (Harrow, 2006, personal communication). These
descriptions allow one to realize the uniqueness of this rural community when compared to more-urbanized areas.

Significance of the Present Study

Just how does a geographic setting affect student learning and teacher instruction? Based on the limited amount of research conducted in rural communities, their needs are quite distinct from other settings like in the suburbs or urban areas (Muijs & Reynolds, 2003; Rice, 2003; Stern, 1994; Taylor, Martin, & Fix, 1998). For example, students from rural settings likely have many unique characteristics when it comes to prior knowledge, subject familiarity, previous experiences, and lifestyles. All of these traits contribute to how students learn as well as how one should instruct his/her students; it is not until these exclusive qualities are determined that an effective teacher can prescribe and implement instructional plans geared to that faction of students, ensuring that they have an ideal educational experience. Thus, a closer look into the distinct fields of rural and urban elementary schools is necessary to make determinations about how effective reading teachers appropriate instruction for their students with inimitable educational needs.

Research Questions

Although there are countless queries that need to be addressed within rural and urban communities, the investigator chose a narrow focus for study so that an in-depth analysis could result and inferences could be made. The researcher’s refined focus centered around two questions while conducting this inquiry:

1) What characteristics of highly regarded teachers are vital to students’ success in both rural and urban schools?
2) How, if any, does effective reading instruction coincide and/or differ from rural to urban areas?

Definitions and Acronyms

CTE (Center for Technology in Education) - this organization is located at Johns Hopkins University; it is a partnership affiliated with the Maryland Department of Education. Its goals are to ensure that students have access to learning opportunities, to assist educators in transforming their curricular approaches to include technology, and to foster leadership so that progress can be made on all levels.

ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) - This 1965 provision established laudable goals including setting high standards and accountability for student achievement. It stressed the belief that all children can learn, regardless of ability or background.

ITBS (Iowa Test of Basic Skills) - This test measures year-to-year growth in academic skills, compares the student’s achievements with others in the same grade/level, and shows the student’s academic strengths and weaknesses.

LEAP 21 (Louisiana Educational Assessment Program) - This test measures how well a student has mastered the Louisiana state content standards.

NREA (National Rural Education Association) - This organization strives to serve as a national advocate and representative for rural education focusing on providing coordination, leadership as well as stimulating discussion, research, and policy development.
NCLB Act (The No Child Left Behind Act) - This federal act of legislation enacted in January 23, 2001 served to close the gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers.

NRP (National Reading Panel) - In 1997, this national panel served to assess the effectiveness of different approaches used to teach children to read.

Reading First - This focused nationwide effort aims to enable all students to become successful early readers. Funds are dedicated to help state and local school districts eliminate the reading deficit by establishing high quality, comprehensive reading instruction from kindergarten to third grade.

Rural schools - any incorporated place, Census-designated place (CDP), or non-place territory designated as rural by the U.S. Bureau of the Census; excludes places that are within a metropolitan statistical area (MSA).

Title 1 – part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (formerly known as ECIA, ESEA or Chapter 1) is the largest federally funded educational program. This program, authorized by Congress, provides supplemental funds to school districts to assist schools with the highest student concentrations of poverty to meet school educational goals. Schools qualify based on demonstrating that the K-12 membership has a sufficiently high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. In these districts, Title 1 funds go to schools showing that at least 56% of the enrolled students are eligible to receive a free or reduced price meal on the 140th day of school. Schools continuing to meet or exceed the stated poverty index qualify for funding for the following year.

Urban schools - any incorporated place, Census-designated place (CDP), or non-place territory within a consolidated metropolitan statistical area (CMSA) or metropolitan
statistical area (MSA) of a large city and defined as urban by the U.S. Bureau of the Census.
CHAPTER 2.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Children acquire literacy throughout their daily experiences in both formal and informal settings; thus, the reading abilities of many children are influenced by not only their classroom teachers, but also many of their acquaintances. According to Cornelia Flora (1992), literacy was traditionally defined “in functional terms that explored how well adults applied reading and writing skills to everyday situations” (p. 290). Although literacy definitions vary between societies, literacy is now typically understood as having abilities to read and write at a level adequate for written communication and functionality within society.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), it is imperative to investigate many contexts when studying a child’s development. Moreover, an analysis of such contexts as a child and his/her peers, familial members, and child care teachers suggests that these interactions indicate an environment’s developmental potential (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2005). To further relate Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory to school-age children, McNaughton (1995) found that positive and negative correlations of reading potential are based on the notion that “development is enhanced by the degree to which environments are well coordinated in terms of practices, activities, and systems of learning and development” (p. 12). Hence, reading abilities are influenced holistically.

Traditionally, research of literate home environments focused on the reading aloud of books to children, better known as shared reading time. This concept is important to a child’s acquisition of literacy; however, recent research including that of Burgess, Hecht, and Lonigan (2002) revealed that there are countless other factors that
contribute to a child’s literacy development, including the parents’ literacy levels, reading habits, and involvement in children’s literacy activities.

A parent’s low level of literacy can be a potential indicator for a student having a limited literacy environment, reading difficulties, and language development. Without having a parent who can read, a student is severely limited in regard to the time allotted and spent on reading within the house. According to Burgess et al. (2002), children with significant difficulties in reading have a greater likelihood that their parents are also below-average readers. This cyclic performance trend often reoccurs for several generations of familial lineage.

In addition to parents’ literacy levels, parental reading habits also contribute to the overall literacy environment. Parents, who do not own any books and spend very little if any time reading, set an example for their children. The ‘I never read’ model can be found all too often in households, especially with the rise in technological applications. According to a study conducted by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2003), children age zero to six spend triple the amount of time (118 minutes) with television, computers, and video games as they spend reading or being read to (39 minutes) per day. In return, children are less likely to allot their free time to engage in reading, frequently leading them to value reading as less important or intrinsically rewarding because it is not valued in the home setting. Instead, children will utilize their time engaging in other activities that are more suitable in their household.

On the other hand, those parents/caregivers who model reading and view the act of reading as rewarding and worthwhile often have children who hold those same beliefs. These parents prioritize securing reading materials/resources for their children’s use.
including library books, owned texts, newspaper subscriptions, children’s magazines, et
cetera. This exposure to print at an early age is a key factor in the overall success of a
student in elementary school. By the time students enter into primary school, those
students who have already been exposed to various forms of print within the home
environment can connect more easily with the forms of print found in schools. Together,
home and school environments can essentially work in unison to emphasize and reiterate
the importance and value of reading.

Burgess et al. (2002) state that parental activities can be classified as those
behaviors that “directly engage a child in activities designed to foster literacy or language
development” (p. 413). One such activity is joint book reading. In a study completed by
Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998), joint book reading and parental reading were found to
positively contribute to “preschool-age children’s receptive and expressive language
abilities” (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2005, p. 208). These students also outperformed
their peers during school reading exercises like shared reading and guided reading.

Reading Ability: An Indicator of Academic Potential

The difficulties that all students face in school are not limited to reading per se;
however, reading serves as a foundational skill to all subject areas, and thus is the focus
of this study. Of the nation’s fourth graders who attend schools in urban locations, 21%
have failed to reach the basic proficiency level in reading, according to a 2003 National
Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Report. Having the below-basic reading
level indicates that a student is not capable of reading for functional purposes at this
grade level. In addition to having many more students being below-average readers in
urban communities, these schools have traditionally failed to address the reading
problems of poor, minority students (Hettleman, 2003, p. 7). These are alarming developments when aligned with Good, Gruba, and Kaminski’s (2001) notion that students who read below average in elementary school remain poor readers throughout their schooling (Cartledge & Musti-Rao, 2005). “One of the most powerful indicators of later academic success is a child’s reading level at the end of third grade,” according to the Northern California Council for the Community (2003, para. 1). This premise is based on the idea that reading is a fundamental aspect of virtually every content area.

Educational Difficulties in Urban Areas

When looking at the status of urban schools within most of the country, there are plenty of obvious distress signals: an increasing number of students coming from single-parent households, students from families less financially capable of supporting themselves, and few teachers willing to cope with these student problems (Frady, 1985). The geographic locations of many urban schools lie “in crime infested neighborhoods and are surrounded by high chain link fences to shield their students from random and purposeless acts of violence” (Elam, 1993, p. 101). Students are expected to ignore that which surrounds them, and focus on acquiring knowledge to lead them to a life they have never seen before. Long-term guidance of teachers, parents, and other role models is necessary; for that reason, this goal is not always realistic. Golba (1998) debated whether the reason “50% of inner city students drop out is because they become victims of the streets or because they receive no encouragement and only end up meeting resistance when they try to further their education” (p. 3).

These tribulations just worsen the already difficult task urban educators have as they often work in dilapidated buildings without current texts. What student would want
to go to class in a room with a leaky roof and mold on the walls and in the air? As uninviting as it sounds, it is a reality for many schools nationwide. In particular, many of Louisiana’s schools have long been neglected with financial educational appropriations strangely being misdirected into other places.

The status of public school buildings is many times atrocious, forcing many teachers to seek employment elsewhere. In surrounding suburban areas, teachers often have the opportunity to receive more pay, newer classrooms, more updated and additional materials, and less crowded work environments. With these types of enticing offers, many teachers do not give it a second thought. However, this teacher flight leaves the urban schools to bear the burden of filling those teaching positions; thus, less qualified educators are frequently viewed as the only remaining option.

But who does this problem affect? Is it just urban dwellers who suffer from this neglect? Instead of education being the ticket out of poverty, it is often a trap to keep those individuals in the lower class. Though state officials determine the amount of sufficient funds that is directed to each school district, it becomes apparent that the expectations for urban students are extremely low. Although those richer districts may feel that they are getting one up on the field, everyone will bear the responsibility for students dropping out as they are more likely to become products of unemployment, welfare, and/or poverty (Golba, 1998). By not giving all students opportunities for equal education, serious problems will result and the ensuing consequences will only worsen.

What’s Being Done in Urban Areas?

Nevertheless, within the last decade, initiatives have been established in an attempt to halt any future decline in achievement and allow students more opportunities
to succeed. In 1998, the National Research Council (NRC) released a report arguing for better teacher preparation and stressed the importance of reading specialists (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In a Press Release of this report from March 19, 1998, Catherine Snow, a professor of education at Harvard Graduate School of Education, commented that, “We need the will to ensure that every child has access to excellent preschool environments and well-prepared teachers.” Although the need was obvious, in many cases, it was up to local educators and organizations to execute these tasks.

The University of Chicago Center for Urban School Improvement (USI), for example, works with a network of local, inner-city elementary schools striving to transform them into strong learning environments for not only students but also their parents/caregivers. In order to reach this goal, USI “engages in a continuing process of researching the problems specific to urban schools; building school-based programs; . . . and providing sustained professional development for teachers, full-time tutors, literacy coordinators, and school administrators” (About USI, para. 1). Part of its plan included the 2001 Reading Initiative, which began a professional development series for new reading specialists. These Reading Initiatives allow teachers to gain the skills needed to teacher-train fellow staff members at their own schools. In addition, teachers learned how to construct school-wide reading plans.

Today, the need for such programs has been finally recognized at all levels of government. As a result, early intervention programs have been enacted in schools which meet the low-income requirements. Based on the idea that prevention is a more appropriate strategy than fixing reading problems after they are neglected, programs like Head Start, High Scope, First Steps, and Reading First were created.
Head Start is a national program that assists preschoolers and kindergarteners from low-income families. High Scope, also known as the Perry Preschool Program, centers on the idea of language development and acquisition. It is based on Piaget’s theories of child development: a student can acquire certain abilities at particular ages. Meanwhile, the First Steps Program has a similar format as Reading Recovery: a one-on-one tutoring program based on a series of leveled books (Cartledge & Musti-Rao, 2005).

Reading First addresses “the needs of struggling and non-readers, thereby improving reading achievement and outcomes for students in Louisiana and reducing the illiteracy rate in the state . . . [and eventually creating] a Comprehensive PreK-12 State Reading Plan” (Louisiana Department of Education, 2003).

Some school districts have begun “Big Buddy Programs,” which allow older students from high school and college to mentor, tutor, and read with elementary school students on a bi-weekly basis. These programs have several benefits including: elementary school students have the opportunity to listen to someone model reading, the importance of reading is reinforced outside the classroom setting, and students get to practice reading. Although there are a number of positive factors in regard to Big Buddy Programs, tutoring does not always increase a student’s reading ability. According to the National Reading Council (NRC) Report (1998), volunteer tutors are beneficial by giving children opportunities to read for fluency, but are unlikely to assist those children with severe reading problems.

Rural Education Difficulties

It is essential that research be conducted in rural school environments because the difficulties that rural elementary school teachers face each day differ from those of urban
educators. Local research has yet to be facilitated on a widespread basis, even though the idea that variation exists in rural and urban reading problems dates back to the 19th century. In 1880, a visiting superintendent inspected one rural school, finding that it suffered because of its misuse of the school library. Instead of utilizing the library as a hall of records, Fargo (1931) states that libraries should be “filled with fresh looking books [that] displace the age–old archives; fresh paint, low bookcases, and well-filled magazine racks . . . and half a dozen tables with comfortable chairs tempted to loitering” (p. 6). However, individual rural schools did not have the funding to afford these materials. Fargo posited, “The answer to the rural school reading problem is consolidation. Alongside the consolidated school, the consolidated library [sic]” (p. 6). Essentially, struggling readers could focus on basic reading skills with close supervision. Meanwhile better readers “may be introduced to the varied picture books and primers provided by the school library with the assurance [of keeping] their own interest” (Fargo, p. 3). The theme of rural school consolidation is still popular today.

A Historical Perspective on Louisiana Rural Schools

Conventionally, students from rural areas have limited amounts of exposure to print compared to children of urban areas; in large part, this still holds true today. In the 1930s, rural citizens in Ouachita Parish had to walk an average of about six miles to receive their postal mail. In addition, they had no access to magazines, books, or other reading materials. Many children could only use materials that they found in the city; still, most had not been to a city (the nearest being 20 miles away) in years if ever. When children were exposed to literature in rural schools, the substance was completely isolated from that of their everyday life; farming and agriculture were not part of the
curriculum, even though over half of the students came from families where this was the predominant means of operation. In summation, there were significant downfalls to schooling children in rural areas throughout Louisiana.

Consolidation

Although consolidating rural institutions solves some defects in these areas, additional issues arise that may be more substantial than those problems corrected by this policy. In 1905, some of Louisiana’s parishes began consolidating their rural schools, predominantly so that their facilities could measure up to those of more urbanized parishes. In doing so, many students from one parish in particular (Ouachita Parish) were brought in by bus from substantial distances away from their homes; as a result, Smith (1938) found that:

Fewer than 10 per cent of the rural parents are members of the Parent-Teacher Association of the school, not more than 25 per cent attend school entertainments, and only a small per cent ever visit the school or know the teachers of their children. (p. 205)

In her article, Some Social Effects of the Consolidation of Schools in Louisiana (1938), Smith also summarized the major benefits and hardships of consolidating schools in rural areas:

1. That the physical plant, the school building and equipment, is better than could have been provided by the individual rural districts alone. 2. That the school enrollment has been increased so that there are enough children to provide social contact. 3. That the teachers are experienced in teaching and equipped with professional training. 4. That the schools provide an artificial atmosphere almost
entirely removed from the home life of the pupils and one with which the parents have little contact. 5. That the consolidated schools described can make no pretense of being community centers or of serving to improve the neighborhood life in the rural districts. Rather they serve as disintegrating agents and cause a weakening in the interests characteristic of rural neighborhood life. 6. That the school has little interest in the life of the community it serves or in the homes from which the children it teaches are brought. This is evident in the case of the rural consolidated schools located in the open country where most of the teachers are “commuters,” who go from their urban homes to conduct classes for the rural children. (pp. 310-311)

Other Factors

Jordan and Jordan (2004) state that “rural schools have been geographically and politically isolated to the extent that some might say that they have been the victims of . . . an unstated governmental policy of benign neglect” (p. 1). In the mid-1900s, rural areas could not provide students with the same quality of schools as those found in urban areas for lack of teacher training, community assistance, and monetary support. In accordance, governments formed policies, attempting to consolidate these rural schools into larger centralized institutions. As a result of diverting funds away from smaller rural academic establishments, rural schools continue to fall short of national expectations set by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The most persistent problems of illiteracy can be found in the regional areas of the South, Southwest, and Appalachia (Flora, 1992).

Although illiteracy awareness is crucial for progress, rural communities are often bound by other factors, which prevent them from addressing this significant issue. The
Federal and many state governments have allotted funding for programs to be directed at the substantial problem of illiteracy; however, these limited amounts of financial support do little to improve the already difficult task of confronting this issue in very diverse and sparsely populated regions. In 2004, Jordan and Jordan further proclaimed:

If education is a state responsibility, then in an era of state-mandated standards and assessments, the state has an inherent responsibility to ensure that students have access to the human and material resources required for them to meet standards and pass state proficiency examinations. (p. 1)

In general, it takes additional resources to reach the same number of people in rural locations when compared with people who live closer together like urban dwellers. “The resources readily available to metropolitan providers—libraries, material and equipment suppliers, training opportunities, the support of specialists and professional associations—require significant effort by rural providers who must travel great distances for similar opportunities” (Beach, 1995).

In addition to the limited financial assistance that rural communities receive, many community members are not always willing to consistently participate in literacy programs for extended amounts of time. Many agrarian workers in rural areas cannot appropriate time from their schedules, since they often work from dawn to dusk. Still, efforts have been made to reach out to these populations by establishing local educational programs. According to Flora (1992), “most rural literacy programs are extremely fragile—dependent on the stamina of one or two very dedicated individuals” (p. 292). Yet, with “more than 50 percent of rural fourth grade children read[ing] below grade level, as compared to the national average of 38 percent,” it is imperative that these types
of programs be continued (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004). According to the Save
the Children Foundation (2005), rural students who participate in these types of after-
school programs are two and a half times more likely to pursue higher education.
Unfortunately, many programs are at best moderately successful in reaching a substantial
number of residents in these segmented areas.

Improvements in Rural Education

Perceptions of rural schools and the quality of their educational instruction have
changed since the 1990s. Where once rural schools were considered to suffer from their
geographic isolation, lack of teacher specialization, and small enrollments, “they are
often praised for some of those same attributes,” states Gibbs (2000, p. 87). Located in
areas with small school populations, unlike many urban schools, rural institutions have
the capabilities to form connections and close ties with the local community in an effort
to foster educational support for their students. In addition, the relatively small student
enrollments in rural schools permit additional teacher-to-student interactions, allowing
students to feel more comfortable in the school environment.

Since little research has been conducted purely in rural areas, the lack of empirical
data disallowed rural schools to be compared with urban schools; however, recent
evidence reveals that rural students are on level with urban students. One of the key tools
for assessment, standardized test scores, reveals that rural students are similarly
performing as their urban counterparts (Gibbs, 2000).

Recently, two university professors decided to see exactly what it was like in rural
elementary schools in Louisiana. During the 2000-2001 school year, Dale and Bonnie
Johnson embarked their investigation by teaching in a rural elementary school for an the
entire school year, claiming “it had been too long since we had been in the trenches, and we thought that spending an entire year with all of the daily responsibilities of a classroom teacher would help give context to our university work” (Johnson & Johnson, 2002, p. 8). To their surprise, they noticed great travesties that the students and fellow teachers faced everyday. Some of the children came from homes without electricity or running water. The school had no library or playground equipment; in addition, it did not even have hot water for washing hands, an art teacher, or a counselor. It only had one toilet for its entire faculty of 72 people! These shortages were just some of the ones documented, not to mention the lack of curricular supplies like globes, maps, textbooks, and current dictionaries. However, the school did supply plenty of cockroaches and other pests as well as a malfunctioning heating/cooling system (Johnson & Johnson, 2002).

In teaching these elementary students, Johnson and Johnson (2002) found that they were “as bright as any with whom we have worked. . . . [still] our pupils were lacking in the kinds of prior knowledge required for adequate test performance” (p. 9). Many of the students had not traveled farther than the nearest grocery store and thus, when they came across words which were unfamiliar to them like “opera,” “harp,” or “waitress,” their lack of prior knowledge impeded their comprehension and learning of the material. In an era of high-stakes tests, the students and the schools that they attend are often labeled “Academically Below Average;” still, it is often not mentioned that the insufficient materials and their limited life experiences are major factors in their failing of state-wide tests. It is no revelation that schools in more wealthy communities, with every resource available, perform well on these tests and are sometimes given monetary rewards from the state for their success. In some ways it seems like this trend not only
consists of unequal treatment but also purposeful negligence on behalf of those lawmakers and other politicians in charge of creating such nonsensical and fascist decrees. How can students be held to the same standards as measured by standardized tests like other students from middle class and affluent families if they do not have the same in-school advantages?

How Do Rural Educators Progress from Here?

Rural communities have long been ignored when it comes to assistance programs; however, the federal government is currently appropriating financial contributions to schools that qualify for the Rural and Low-income School Initiative (RLIS). Nationally, schools have been granted $85,312,000 with just $5,337,158 being directed to local schools in Louisiana for the fiscal year of 2005-2006, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Rural school children are more likely to face failure because of crime, substance abuse, parental neglect or other factors than city or suburban kids” (Five Million Children, 1990). Organizations like the National Rural Education Association (NREA) have established programs like the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), the Rural School and Community Trust, and the E-Rate Program to expand services directed into the rural sector of educational institutions on a nationwide scale. Helge’s (1990) report surprised many people who envisioned rural life as being free from the many difficulties of urban life. He found that one in seven rural Americans is poor, stated Todd Post (2005), and at some point each year nearly a third of rural residents are food insecure (see Figure 1). According to the Organizations Concerned about Rural Education (OCRE) report entitled, *REAP, E-Rate Helps Rural Schools with NCLB*:
Congress created REAP in 2002 with an appropriation of $162.5 million. Although President Bush proposed ending REAP when he submitted his 2003 and 2004 budgets to Congress, bipartisan coalitions in the House and Senate saved the program. The REAP appropriation was $167.7 million in 2003 and $167.8 million in 2004. Of some 6,000 U.S. schools that are eligible to receive REAP funds, 4,026 applied for and received funding in 2003. (para. 7)

These programs continue to serve a vital function within rural schools across the nation; yet, they are also heavily dependent upon locals to carry out the workload. Thus, the success of these programs can sway from greatly benefiting rural students to not helping at all.

Establishing local reading-based programs frequently proves more effective than simply receiving monetary assistance through grants from the federal government. During the year, 2001, in Starkville, Mississippi, the Promising Readers Program was developed to provide students who were considered to be struggling between kindergarten and third grade from local, rural schools with after-school tutoring and
reading assistance (Boutwell, Brenner, & Jayroe, 2002). Funded by the Reading Excellence Act, “Promising Readers is a literature-based program that engages children in frequent reading . . . small group skill and strategy instruction, and one-on-one reading,” stated Boutwell et al. (2002, para. 3). The program began with an enrollment of 50 children; in addition, preservice teacher candidates, parents, and other family members were encouraged to assist in coordinating this reading program.

Four members of the staff conducted field research and documented details of the program during the first year. In addition, they conducted interviews, surveys, and kept journals, audiotapes, and videotapes. After a thorough analysis was conducted, several benefits were discovered. Parents were eager to work with the program, especially when offered a stipend to support their expenditures. Boutwell et al. (2002) stated that over time, parents and volunteers became skilled in the tutoring process. Parents transitioned from a subordinate role in the program to suggesting possible improvements and strategies for the children to use. Parents wanted to learn more and more strategies so they could take the lessons beyond the confines of the school and implement them at home with their children. Also, parents became further involved with other functions of the school, including the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA).

Although there was a wealth of positive experiences associated with the Promising Readers Program, there were also some challenges that surfaced. Sometimes, parents inconsistently attended the after-school sessions. Others stopped coming all together because of various reasons like work and transportation issues. “Cultural differences also presented challenges for a program striving to create a particular kind of literature-based learning environment,” according to Boutwell et al. (2002, para. 5). For
example, the teachers wanted parents to use school types of management when confronting their students like time-out or simply trying to redirect their behavior. However, parents sometimes resorted to yelling or even spanking the children to get them to obey.

Besides the Promising Readers Program, other reading programs designed for rural areas have been established on a larger scale. The America’s Reading Corps established local-based reading programs by organizing one million tutors, who give individualized after-school tutoring for three million children, ranging from pre-K to third grade. In this effort, 30,000 reading specialists and coordinators train one million other volunteers who work with teachers, principals, and librarians to improve students’ reading abilities (America Reads Challenge, 1996). In a rural school district in Kentucky, the AmeriCorps SLICE program was instituted to provide one-on-one tutoring services to students at-risk for reading failure. A total of 25 AmeriCorps trained volunteers provided assistance to 128 second graders four times a week for a duration of nine months. Based on scores from pre- and post-tests of an informal reading inventory, tutored students demonstrated an average improvement of 2.8 grade levels in reading comprehension. AmeriCorps members visited the students’ homes weekly to update their parents and give advice for further parent/guardian facilitation in reading. This project was funded by a portion of the 2.75 billion dollars allocated by the federal government’s America Reads Challenge program.

Research on Literacy Instruction

What constitutes an effective practice in literacy instruction? The answer to such a question has been an ongoing debate for most of the last century (Adams, 1990; Balmuth,
Because many children fail to acquire the necessary basic skills necessary to read, effective literacy instruction will always be sought by educators everywhere. This pursuit of superior methods, practices, and styles of instruction is necessary though, especially when it has been documented that the failure to develop basic reading abilities during the first few years of school portends a host of later academic, economic, and even social-emotional difficulties (i.e., Athey, 1976, 1982; Dunwant, 1982; Lloyd, 1978; Snider & Tarver, 1987).

Alongside this topic of discussion is another, “How do children learn to read?” Over the past 100 years, many models and theories have been proposed in an attempt to provide a clear understanding of this complex phenomenon. These styles to reading instruction lie on a continuum, ranging from scripted approaches (direct instruction) to a less-defined holistic approach (whole language). Following the Soviet Union’s space launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957, a push in the United States to more “skills-oriented methods” occurred. This was not only felt in the fields of science and mathematics education, but also in literacy instruction. During the 1970s, “when students filled in endless phonics work sheets and read inane basals, whole language exercised a strong attraction. By the 1980s, it had come to dominate the teacher’s colleges and was strongly influencing publishers” (Collins, 1997, para. 4). However, the tide turned again in 1990 with the publishing of Marilyn Adams’ Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print. After researching previous studies in the field of reading instruction, this cognitive psychologist concluded that reading programs which included systematic phonics instruction helped lead to students becoming better readers more than programs that did not (Adams, 1990). Moreover, she found that programs, which combined systematic
phonics instruction with a meaning emphasis worked best of all. These quasi-balanced approaches were popular through the 1990s. Since the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, reportedly scientifically proven, skills-based programs from publishers like Harcourt Trace and Open Court have been the predominant instructional scheme throughout the United States.

That which is popular in the field of reading seems to be cyclical in nature. Educators can be heard saying, “Well, this should be the approach we use because the quantitative research proves it works best.” After several years pass, another approach gains interest and a push towards that one ensues. Popularity seems to be one of the greatest determinants of which particular literacy approach is used in schools; popularity and whichever methods are approved by an over-zealous government for school-wide funding.

Effective Practices

Providing effective literacy instruction to students is essential; yet, its implementation is not always an easy task. Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Allington, Block, Morrow, Tracey, Baker, Brooks, Cronin, Nelson, and Woo (2001) proclaim that “effective literacy instruction is a complex interaction of components” (p. 49). This involvedness is widely known and thus, numerous research studies have been conducted to examine effective literacy educators and their successful practices. Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, and Hampston (1998) investigated nine first grade classrooms, using observations and interviews as the primary means of data collection. The observed teachers were nominated by language arts coordinators in these particular districts; they were considered to be either typical or outstanding, based on factors like teacher behavior
and enthusiasm, student enthusiasm for reading, student reading and writing
achievement, positive feedback from parents, teachers’ ability to teach students with a
wide range of abilities, teachers’ responsibility for his/her own professional growth, and
the supervisor’s desire to have his own child in this teacher’s classroom.

Most of the first grade teachers used direct skill instruction and authentic literacy
activities supplemented with trade books and writing activities. Although most teachers
instructed similarly in the basic reading program found in the schools; exemplary
teachers did more with their students, which added to the instructional density of their
lessons. Five characteristics were found to distinguish effective literacy teachers:
“extensive use of scaffolding, encouragement of self-regulation, higher teacher
expectations, expert classroom management, and awareness of purpose” (p. 122).
Alongside these important characteristics were also factors like the blending of reading
and writing activities and instructional balance. All of the effective teachers seemed to
expect self-regulation from their students; furthermore, these instructors encouraged
metacognitive thinking through questioning techniques. Raising the bar for what was
expected from students seemed to have an overall positive effect on student achievement.

Using mixed methods, Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (1999) led an
investigation to determine what school and classroom factors were related to reading
achievement in the primary grades. 11 of the 14 schools used were considered
experimental because they had recently adopted reform measures or had “unexpectedly
positive results with low-income populations” (Taylor, et al., 1999, p. 6). From the 14
schools, 104 teachers were observed. Researchers noted teachers’ interaction styles,
classroom environment, and materials used in instruction. In addition, principals were interviewed and given surveys.

Some of the findings revealed that those schools “deemed most effective all had systemic assessment of student progress using classroom based assessment tools, reported collaboration between teachers, and cited the need for ongoing professional development” (Bergeron, 2004, p. 31). The study also showed that a collaborative model of instruction, one which allowed for additional small group instruction, was quite successful. Teachers in these classrooms had outstanding classroom management skills and consequently, a high rate of student engagement was witnessed. Students in the most effective schools were often seen participating in significant amounts of independent reading; meanwhile, teachers were acting as coaches, assisting whenever necessary. This study concluded that effective teachers emphasized to their students to use phonics skills when decoding unknown words while reading; these teachers also used higher level questioning to enhance student achievement. This varied approach seemed to work better than solely using one method as the less effective teachers demonstrated.

Effective Literacy Strategies

The search for the ultimate method of literacy instruction is perhaps as elusive as the everlasting exploration for the Holy Grail. Educators are always trying to find better methods; yet, this is sometimes pointless. Instead of looking for better methods, particular ways of instruction should be selected depending on the goal at hand. Walker (2004) states that “although techniques can be used during either guided contextual reading or strategy and skill instruction, the purpose and focus of instruction are different” (p. 175). During guided reading, students center their attention on reading
entire stories and understanding the content. Teachers generally select strategies to assist student understanding or enhance the meaningfulness of the story. On the other hand, teachers use strategy and skill instruction in activities based from engaging passages or stories. Within these periods of strategy deployment, “the diagnostic teacher encourages the use of unfamiliar strategies and skills showing the students how to use their strengths in combination with the weaknesses” (Walker, 2004, p. 175). No matter which type of instruction is implemented, literacy teachers must be aware that there are strengths and weaknesses to each approach to teaching reading.

Although there are many theories on how students learn to read, the truth is that every student learns in a unique, sometimes unorthodox way. Thus, teachers must continually adjust their instruction to the needs of each student. So how are these needs discovered? Data, such as a student’s interests, reading level as well as strengths and weaknesses, can be gathered through assessments. This information must be recorded for usable purposes rather than filing it and forgetting it—an all too often occurrence in elementary schools, where teachers are bogged down with excessive amounts of paperwork. For example, if a student is interested in animals, a teacher can relate characteristics of how animals function to the current story being read in class about plants. Using prior knowledge and interests to scaffold student learning not only increases opportunities for learning but also motivates, leading students to desire to read. With these strategies in place, students should improve their reading levels; however, these are not the only characteristics of successful literacy instruction. Furthermore, Collins and Cheek (2000) assert that there are some basic guidelines for effective literacy instruction including:
1. Effective teaching can be implemented in many ways; there is no one best way.

2. Varied approaches and techniques must be used in providing instruction for a specific reading problem.

3. Instruction should be consistent.

4. Instruction must be based on continuous assessment.

5. Instruction should be flexible.

6. Effective teaching requires that all school personnel work together as a team.

7. Effective teaching helps students to apply their knowledge of reading strategies to a wide range of printed materials.

8. Effective reading programs are designed to foster a positive self-image and enjoyment of reading as well as to develop the reading process. (pp. 176-178)

Indeed, teachers do have to juggle multiple tasks at all times, but who said a teacher’s job was easy?

Many approaches to literacy instruction have been proposed by various authors; yet, current research has yielded that there are roughly four major approaches: basal reader approach, language-based approach, multisensory approach, and the computer-assisted approach. When more than one of these approaches is used, it is referred to as an eclectic approach (see Figure 2). Today, most elementary and middle schools use basal readers; however, more and more schools are supplementing this approach with additional literature and language-based materials (Collins & Cheek, 2000).

The basal reader approach is a more-directed method as is the computer-assisted approach than are the multisensory and the language-based approaches. In addition to...
differentiating between particular styles of literacy instruction, it is also vital to establish which aspects of teachers are well suited to teaching literacy in elementary school.

Researchers like A. S. Barr and David Ryans have spent decades researching this one topic. In the 1930s through the 1950s, Barr documented hundreds of teacher characteristics and eventually narrowed them down to 12, including resourcefulness, emotional stability, objectivity, considerateness, and drive or energy. His findings are considered to be the most influential of the first half of the 20th century. On the other hand, Ryans conducted a six-year study that is considered the single most comprehensive study in 1960. Over 1,700 teachers responded to a survey issued to them, which asked respondents to identify the most important teacher traits for successful instruction.

Figure 2. Four major approaches to reading instruction

Researchers like A. S. Barr and David Ryans have spent decades researching this one topic. In the 1930s through the 1950s, Barr documented hundreds of teacher characteristics and eventually narrowed them down to 12, including resourcefulness, emotional stability, objectivity, considerateness, and drive or energy. His findings are considered to be the most influential of the first half of the 20th century. On the other hand, Ryans conducted a six-year study that is considered the single most comprehensive study in 1960. Over 1,700 teachers responded to a survey issued to them, which asked respondents to identify the most important teacher traits for successful instruction.
Ornstein & Sinatra (2005) noted three patterns for differentiating successful teachers from unsuccessful teachers through analyzing their collected data (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Patterns of teacher qualities**

**Reading Programs**

In addition to the many styles and approaches to literacy instruction that are implemented by classroom teachers, there are just as many reading programs which many times dictate how teachers can instruct. Hundreds of these programs have become developed with the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act because it requires federal funds to be directed at research-based instruction; thus, an opportunity arose for publishing companies to fight over this multi-million dollar avenue. With each claiming that its program is proven effective and better than the rest, it can become difficult for textbook adoption committees to select appropriate texts for their student population.
Nevertheless, particular reading programs become selected, many times because they fit the latest trend. For example, fluency and phonics are considered hot topics in the reading community and thus, they are the central focus of both programs found in the rural and the urban school in this investigation. A closer depiction of each seems necessary, so that the curriculums with which these four teachers of study use are candidly known.

**Harcourt Trophies Reading Program**

The *Harcourt Trophies Reading Program* was designed to meet the standards set by the No Child Left Behind Act. Its primary foci are the five areas of literacy deemed most significant by the National Reading Panel. With phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension at its core, Harcourt Trophies also goes beyond the basics to include several other areas thought to be pertinent in effective literacy instruction. Areas like assessment and classroom management are detailed throughout the curriculum to ensure that teachers have enough information to cover all aspects of instruction. Other areas of student learning like listening, speaking, reading aloud, and writing are infused into the curriculum through supplemental activities and exercises. A more thorough analysis of each topical area ensues to establish Harcourt’s basis for including them into its curriculum.

Aimed at reaching all learners, its lessons are carefully planned so that students of varying levels can progress in their learning. Re-teaching and slowing the pace of instruction are encouraged when students struggle with the intended lessons. Others who meet or exceed the grade level expectations can be given additional opportunities for enrichment like vocabulary extension studies and more sophisticated literature. Harcourt recommends that these students participate in carrying out investigations to further their
learning by “raising questions, researching, and organizing information” (Just for You, 2003, p. xx). In order for teachers to identify and address students of differing needs, diagnostic checks with brief activities are provided with each lesson.

Trophies includes activities designed for explicit phonemic awareness instruction throughout its program. Based on the notion that children learn to read in a sequence, phonemic awareness lessons teach children to notice, think about, and manipulate sounds. In addition, there are subsequent phonics lessons that are closely tied to the sounds, letters, and words used in the phonemic awareness lessons. Through using the cumulative blending method, which has students blend sounds successively as they are pronounced, students learn word building skills. Specific lessons explicitly provide students with the ability to recognize prefixes, suffixes, and root words so they can learn how to decode multisyllabic words.

Fluency allows readers to “recognize words automatically, group individual words into meaningful chunks, apply strategies rapidly to identify unknown words, determine where to place emphasis or pause to make sense of text, and read effortlessly and with expression,” according to the Harcourt Trophies Reading Program (2003, p. x). Since non-fluent readers devote most of their attention to decoding words, their comprehension will inevitably suffer. This is the predominant factor why fluency is stressed in this program. Its authors stress that fluency can be achieved through appropriate guidance, the use of independent-level texts, and substantial practice in repeated oral readings. The repeated readings can take the form of echo reading, choral reading, teacher modeled reading, or readers theatre.
Through exposing students to an array of texts and high-quality literature, students can increase their word knowledge. Big books, read-aloud anthologies, library book collections, and intervention readers provide children with these opportunities. Since the average child learns about 3,000 words per year, word learning strategies are crucial to a reading program. Trophies stresses that students should use multiple methods initially modeled by the teacher when encountering unfamiliar words like using context to determine the meanings of words, learning about relationships between words (synonyms, antonyms, and multiple-meaning words), and using word parts such as prefixes, suffixes, and root words to determine word meaning.

Text comprehension instruction involves several comprehension strategies, which are based on confirmed research. Each “Focus Strategy” is directly taught and modeled by the classroom teacher. Then, students are guided while practicing and applying it during their reading. Additional models can be used with struggling readers to assist in transferring a strategy to a new context. Children demonstrate these learned strategies through answering and generating questions, summarizing, recognizing story structure, and making and confirming predictions.

Without assessment and evaluation, implementing instruction in those five areas of reading could not prove beneficial. Collecting information to make instructional decisions about students can be completed using formal and informal methods. Diagnostic tools can first identify students’ instructional level; furthermore, differentiated instruction must remain flexible and continual monitoring of student progress must occur.

Great curriculums must also address the need for classroom management because it is so critical to student achievement. Grouping students in flexible arrangements helps
to ensure students meet their instructional goals, participate, and contribute to the overall classroom learning environment. Harcourt Trophies recommends that whole group instruction is best suited for sharing literature, developing concepts, providing modeling, and presenting new knowledge. On the other hand, small group instruction is encouraged for developing skills, practicing processes, collaborating on projects, and providing challenge activities.

*Open Court Reading Program*

Developed by Science Research Associates, Inc. (SRA), the *Open Court Reading Program* is purportedly a research-based, systematic, and comprehensive. It addresses all recommendations addressed in *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read* (2003). Through this sequential program, students “gain reading proficiency, then use that ability to focus on comprehension, gather information from text, forms ideas from the information, then clearly communicate their ideas” (Open Court Booklet, p. 3). It is designed with an explicit instructional plan that logically builds through a progression of skills: For example, in second grade, students will first learn phonics and word knowledge skills, then use those skills to build comprehension and fluency skills, followed by inquiry learning. Then, the students gain writing skills until they finally focus on language arts and vocabulary. According to Open Court, these topics are addressed in higher levels of skills.

The curriculum is also prescribed and already completed for the teachers in an effort to “reduce prep time and eliminate guesswork” (p. 10). Each lesson is designed so that students first build a strong foundation for reading and learning (i.e., phonics, phonemic awareness, sounds and letters, and word knowledge) and afterwards, put these
skills into application while teaching higher-order thinking strategies (i.e., authentic literature, comprehension, inquiry and investigation, and practical reading applications).

Furthermore, SRA developed this reading program, making no assumptions about students’ prior knowledge; thus, all students have equal access to literacy with solid phonics instruction. It proclaims that “systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in Kindergarten through Grade 6 and for children having difficulty learning how to read” (p. 12). In addition to the phonics instruction, teachers using Open Court purportedly expose their students to thought-provoking themes and genres. Each theme-based unit integrates comprehension skills and strategies with spelling, vocabulary, writing strategies, and English language conventions. The selections of texts included in this program include big books, anthologies, teacher read alouds, classroom libraries, first and second readers, and an online bibliography. Literature like novels, poems, plays, articles, short stories, and essays are all included so that students experience both fiction and non-fiction while learning about diverse people and places. Models are even provided for teachers to display, again so that teachers’ “guesswork” is eliminated.

Assessment is also an important aspect of the Open Court Reading Program. Through both formal and informal assessments, one can ensure that his/her students are on-track. Learning about students’ abilities, progress monitoring, continuous informal assessments, and gauging student progress with formal assessments are vital to its success. A pretest, midyear test, and posttest are all provided with the program; rubrics, logs, and records are available to the teacher. Additionally, the unit assessments gauge oral fluency, writing, spelling, vocabulary, listening, grammar, and comprehension.
The *Open Court Reading Program* is unique in a variety of ways, according to its publishers. It instills a passion for lifelong reading through providing literature-rich environments. The thematic instructional plan is built upon over 40 years of validated research, allowing every student’s needs to be reached through differentiated instruction. SRA suggests re-teaching lessons, using intervention lessons, or challenge activities to provide additional assistance to students who need extra practice or for those working above grade level. Regular professional development partnerships allegedly support teachers in their implementation of the program.
CHAPTER 3.

METHODS

For decades, there has been an on-going conversation about which methodology is superior: quantitative or qualitative. With prominent researchers weighing in on the debate, tensions elevated until finally pragmatists concluded: use what works in each particular situation. The paradigms of qualitative and quantitative research are often rigidly defined; however, there is an array of methodologies within these larger realms that crosses those boundaries. Mixed method approaches to research have taken on a third sector in this field; still, typologies exist throughout all overlapping frameworks for research.

Although other field researchers like sociologists and anthropologists have used qualitative research for over a century, educational researchers did not recognize this to be an applicable methodology for their purposes until the 1960s. While Patton initially described 12 separate themes of qualitative inquiry, Bogdan and Biklen (1982) set forth five major features of qualitative research, including: 1) naturalistic, 2) descriptive data, 3) concern with process, 4) inductive, and 5) meaning. Still, it should be clearly understood that every qualitative inquiry does not necessarily include all of these features; instead, each will range in varying degrees of inclusiveness.

Naturalistic inquiries rely upon purposeful sampling, also known as interactional sampling (Stake, 1975). Guba (1978) defined naturalistic inquiry as a “discovery-oriented” approach to research. It is predominantly recognized by its function to minimize researcher bias, since the outcomes and theories of the investigation are not previously known or manipulated. Inquirers understand that conditions change in real-
world queries, and they document these dynamic processes. These researchers utilize settings as sources of information, since recording information without considering its context is a fallacy in itself within the field of qualitative research. Geertz (1973) added that:

If anthropological interpretation is constructing a reading of what happens, then to divorce it from what happens—from what in this time or that place specific people say, what they do, what is done to them, from the whole vast business of the world—it is to divorce it from its application and render it vacant. A good interpretation of anything—a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society—takes us to the heart of that of which it is in the interpretation. (p. 18)

The settings are where researchers enter and investigate the subject(s) for substantial amounts of time, thus making them crucial to the emergent design of the investigation. Furthermore, continuous interaction and interpretation exemplify naturalistic inquiry and its flexibility. It is assumed that frequent and meaningful interaction between researcher and key informants allow for the design to be more precise as the study progresses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The insight gained through naturalistic inquiry is difficult to match from more objective, defined research methodologies.

Not only does the researcher use the setting as a key instrument, but also one’s own insight. Through participant observation, the investigator gains a unique perspective that could not have been matched by an outsider studying from a distance. Bogdan and Biklen’s (2003) Qualitative Research for Education captures this sentiment, “qualitative researchers assume that human behavior is significantly influenced by the settings in which it occurs, and whenever possible, [researchers] go to that location” (p. 5).
Descriptive data, the second feature of qualitative research, must be collected in the exact form that occurs. For example, collecting “interview transcripts, fieldnotes, photographs, videotapes, personal documents, memos, and other official records” allows the investigator to review the data at a later time without losing much, if any, richness from the actual occurrence (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 5). These fieldwork artifacts must be reviewed while keeping in mind that nothing is trivial; that way, no assumptions are made and all details are considered into drawn conclusions. Only then can an accurate holistic portrayal of that which is in study be clearly depicted.

As opposed to being largely concerned with outcomes like in quantitative experiments, qualitative researchers are more concerned with the process. Patton (2002) stresses that “looking at how something happens . . . the development process is an end in itself, not just a means to some more concrete end . . . the journey, not the destination, is what matters” (p. 159). Daily interactions of participants are often the aim of investigative queries in an attempt to understand the internal dynamics of the study, whether it be a classroom, an entire school, or a cross-cultural analysis. Further, Patton describes these developments:

Process data permit judgments about the extent to which the program or organization is operating the way it is supposed to be operating, revealing areas in which relationships can be improved as well as highlighting strengths of the program that should be preserved. (p. 160)

It is extremely beneficial when evaluating a program to study its processes because individual components can be determined as either contributing to its success or causing its failure.
Qualitative researchers also use inductive reasoning to analyze data. No predetermined hypotheses have to be proven or disproven; instead, “abstractions are built as the particulars that have been gathered are grouped together” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 6). Theory is thus developed from analyzing many interconnected pieces and discovering the relationships that exist between them. Emerging from the bottom up, the direction of the study cannot be fully determined a priori. More directed studies only surface after open-ended research data have been gathered.

The meaning of research is essential within qualitative studies. One can discover facets of human interaction by asking questions like: What are the participants experiencing?, What value do they place on this event?, and How does it relate to the social world with which they construct? Qualitative research is structured so that the investigator can experience from the participants’ perspectives. Being in their setting, doing what they do, and interplaying with them, a researcher can capture meaningful understandings of his/her subjects.

**Biases**

Although no research is free from bias, it is commonly thought that some forms of qualitative research contain high degrees of bias. As an investigator participates and becomes part of the cultural scene (the classroom environment in this case), the possibility for biases becomes heightened. Nevertheless, researchers who conduct inquiries in classrooms five days a week for several hours each day can gather vast amounts of data. These data are what the researcher attempts to decipher and subsequently draw conclusions; it is not the intention of the inquirer to draw opinions and then collect data to support these views. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) proclaim that three
notions should be considered when viewing qualitative studies:

1. Qualitative studies are not impressionistic essays made after a quick visit to a setting or after some conversations with a few subjects.

2. The researcher’s primary goal is to add to knowledge, not to pass judgment on the setting.

3. Qualitative researchers guard against their own biases by recording detailed footnotes that include reflections on their subjectivity. (pp. 33-34)

The Developmental Research Sequence (D.R.S.)

One particular qualitative research methodology was the central tenet utilized throughout this dissertation research endeavor. Since some research steps should occur before others, James Spradley (1980) brought forth the Developmental Research Sequence in his ethnographic text, *Participant Observation*. This ethnographic research cycle quintessentially involves a series of processes that must be completed in a particular order (see Figure 4). Spradley developed this method for two primary purposes: one, he could be more efficient in his ethnographic inquiries, and two, it would solve many fieldwork problems that he had already encountered from the work of his students and colleagues.

Social Situation

In selecting a social situation with which to study, the researcher used two public schools—one located in an urban area and the other in a rural area. These schools are located in separate school districts, which is necessary to establish the basis for the study. The central focus of this study involved observing and analyzing four classroom teachers in two school settings. Participants were selected based on their school-wide reputation
for being highly regarded reading teachers. The two principals asked several faculty members for input, but they made the final decisions on which teachers would be
observed during the investigation. In addition to observations conducted within classroom environments, ethnographic interviews were conducted with the teachers and principals of each school. The activities that were noted during the investigation included, but were not limited to, modeling, assessment, verbal communication, and classroom management (see Appendix A). The purpose of this study was to compare and contrast characteristics of effective reading teachers in various demographic settings.

The setting, as described by James Spradley, was a “single social situation” which is selected based on the following criteria: simplicity, accessibility, unobtrusiveness, permissibleness, and frequently recurring activities (p. 40). For this investigation, conducting participant observation of reading teachers in their classroom settings was the method of choice. Simplicity refers to the relative easiness with which one can narrowly focus on a single social situation and thus, make inferences and determinations. Without having such a specific focus, ethnographers can become overwhelmed with their abundance of observational notes and find great difficulty in deriving any conclusions from such data. The accessibility of the classrooms was quite conducive for the investigation. The investigator was granted the freedom to observe from various locations in the classroom while minimizing interference with the teachers’ instruction. Because the investigation took place near the first of the school year, the students were accustomed to having the investigator in the classroom. Thus, the degree of unobtrusiveness was relatively high. Both schools also had regular visitors and parents frequenting the premise, which also contributed to the normalcy of the investigator’s presence in those environments. According to Spradley, there are varying extents of permissibleness which can be sought depending on the nature of the study. This social
situation had limited-entry because it required permission from the principals and
teachers who were participants in the study. Frequently recurring activities are also
imperative to an investigation. Without having repeated events over and over again,
behavioral determinations cannot be effectively substantiated.

Participant Observation

The researcher conducted the study as a participant observer. This included both
engaging in the activities to a limited degree and observing the activities that occurred in
the classroom environment simultaneously. Spradley stressed that “the participant
observer . . . seeks to become explicitly aware of things usually blocked out to avoid
overload” (p. 55). In addition to paying close attention to particular activities, the
observer must learn to ignore and/or tune out many events which do not pertain to the
focus of investigation. Observations began with a wide-angle lens and over time,
gradually became more directed and narrow in focus. This enabled the investigator to
choose which activities were worth analyzing for the purpose of the study. Not only was
the researcher’s lens a crucial aspect of pursuit, but also the multi-perspective experience
contributed to the methodology. Alternating between the insider/outsider perspective,
while at particular times doing them simultaneously, was a core component of this
ethnographic inquiry.

Other characteristics that were central in this study included introspection and
various types of record keeping. Introspection or the looking to one’s own prior
experiences when analyzing collected data can be a useful tool in various qualitative
research endeavors. This research device enriches the researcher’s ability to interpret,
analyze, and synthesis data. Finally, a detailed record of ongoing events from the four
classrooms which participated in the study was kept for ongoing analysis. “Both objective observations and subjective feelings” were recorded on the spot or immediately following the observation sessions (Spradley, 1980, p. 58).

The extent of participation was determined by the type of investigation. Since teachers in school classrooms were the primary actors in this inquiry, passive participation was thought to be more suitable than other forms like active or complete participation. Thus, the passive participant contributed in the setting principally as a spectator so not to disrupt the instruction. Still, interviews and surveys were given outside of class time, especially before and after those days of observation.

Ethnographic Record

Written fieldnotes were the principal means by which observations were recorded for later analysis. Spradley states:

A description of a culture, an ethnography, is produced from an ethnographic record of the events of a society within a given period time, the ‘events of society’ including, of course, informants’ responses to the ethnographer, his queries, tests, and apparatus. (p. 63)

Using concrete language in describing observations led to a realistic portrayal of events that occurred, thus enabling future analysis to be accurate. The specificity with which these observations were recorded contributed to minimizing the generality of the determinations. The ethnographer used a simple system of keeping a field notebook during the course of 10 weeks while also staying up-to-date with a journal. “Like a diary, this journal . . . contain[s] a record of experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems that [arise] during fieldwork,” states Spradley (1980, p. 71).
After some time has passed, reviewing journal notes can always remind ethnographers of events that might have otherwise been forgotten.

Descriptive Observations

The ethnographic research cycle is formulated around the basic idea of the question-observation. In this study, questions were derived during the investigatory process, which ultimately led to detailed, descriptive observations. Only after general descriptions were recorded could more specific questions emerge. According to Spradley, there are nine components of every social situation:

In a most general sense, these dimensions can serve as guides for the participant observer: space: the physical place or places; actor: the person(s) involved; activity: a set of related acts people do; object: the physical things that are present; act: single actions that people do; event: a set of related activities that people carry out; time: the sequencing that takes place over time; goal: the things people are trying to accomplish; feeling: the emotions felt and expressed. (p. 78)

These nine themes served to specify the scope of this study to particular areas of observation (see Appendix A). Once detailed accounts were composed, a more comprehensive analysis yielded recurrent findings in regard to each classroom teacher of study.

Domain Analysis

The ethnographic research cycle requires an investigator to ask questions, collect data, and analyze it before repeating the process of asking more questions (Spradley, 1980, p. 86). In an effort to garner a better understanding of the culture being studied, the educational researcher explored what people know and how they behaved (Bogdan &
Biklen, 1982). Part of the analysis task was to search for patterns among the abundance of fieldnotes collected. Cultural patterns could only be derived when relationships were noticed between the place(s), actors, and activities. These interrelated relationships and patterns are many times embedded within fieldnotes, and require careful scanning/re-reading to become recognized. The overall process of domain analysis was recurrent and thus, repeated throughout the research project.

Focused Observations

Through finding patterns within fieldnotes, a focused observation can be established. Additionally, maintaining a balanced tension between a holistic viewpoint while also limiting its scope is the essence of the D.R.S. Method (Spradley, 1980). The focus of this observation was an in-depth investigation of what constitutes effective reading teachers, specifically in rural and urban areas. Spradley insists that “studying a single domain intensively [rather] than many domains superficially” is the premise behind choosing an in-depth investigation versus a surface investigation of several cultural domains (p. 101).

Focused observations are many times based on structural questions—those that constitute relationships within domains. The careful formulation of structural questions is imperative to the research project, since they are repeatable and need to be asked several times. Discovering many aspects of a cultural scene including both large and small cultural domains is possible when using focused observations. Throughout the inquiry, suggestions were considered when organizing characteristics of effective reading teachers.
Taxonomic Analysis

Carefully examining each characteristic within the domains, which were determined in the focused observations, was the following step in the ethnographic research cycle. Looking for similarities based on semantic relationships and finding smaller and larger domains were the steps to be completed individually within this portion of the D.R.S. Method. Spradley states that taxonomies can visually represent “a set of categories organized on the basis of a single semantic relationship” (p. 112). Their primary function is to show the interrelationships between topics within cultural domains. Various, different levels existed within taxonomies that clearly portrayed these relationships and the overall organization of all domains. Once taxonomies were constructed, focused observations followed to determine whether the taxonomies were sound or needed to be changed or even thrown out entirely. Researchers will inevitably discover exceptions to their defined taxonomies; these must be noted in the final description of the investigation.

Selected Observations

Observations during this stage include very specific, detailed accounts of focal points within the study. Participant observers can even answer questions that they themselves construct by reviewing fieldnotes and other observations to determine the answers. Essentially, the principal investigator has multiple roles including being an informant to the study.

Interviewing is commonly used to answer questions derived during step four (descriptive questions), step six (structural questions), and step eight (contrast questions). More specifically, there are two types of ethnographic interviews: informal and formal.
During participant observation, asking someone questions can be considered an informal interview. Sometimes, questions arise from observing particular events and can be jotted down to ask later. Carefully worded questions often lead to elongated conversations, which reveal more insight into the inquiry. Recording direct quotations allows for one to gain a sense of the informant’s perspective and previous experiences during the document review process.

On the other hand, formal interviews usually occur at a predetermined time and place. They require prior consent from the participant; yet, they often yield substantial information since the investigator has adequate time to carefully construct the interview questions. It is recommended that a tape recorder be used to ensure that information not be lost in translation.

Differentiation is a key component when composing questions for selective observations. Once contrasts or differences are discovered; focused observations can further substantiate a larger list of differences. Then, a dimension of contrast between two or more areas in a domain should be determined and compared still with other topics within that same domain. These selective observations are pre-planned, so that the researcher can solely focus on that which is in question. Obviously, all differences will not be discovered, but conducting selective observations multiple times can lead to better domain analyses.

Within selective observations, there are specific types of questions including a *dyadic question*, which “takes two members of a domain and asks, ‘In what ways are these two things different’” (Spradley, 1980, p. 125)? Answers to these types of questions can be derived from the investigator’s memory, fieldnotes, or new observational
experiences. In addition to dyadic questions, Spradley says that researchers can utilize triadic questions “for uncovering tacit contrasts that are easily overlooked” (p. 126). Triadic questions ask, “Which two domains are most alike from the three in question?” Different triadic questions will have various outcomes to the same domains in question; thus, the interrelationships and the dimensions of contrast amongst the domains become evident.

Componential Analysis

Every domain recognized by the D.R.S. Method has both similar and different characteristics that separate it from others. According to Spradley, componential analysis is the “systematic search for attributes (components of meaning) associated with cultural categories” (p. 131). Within this search, the investigator attempts to discover meaning that is attributed to specific cultural categories. These attributes of cultural categories can be arranged through systematic means such as paradigms. Using paradigms eases the analysis process by allowing the investigator to organize, see relationships between sub-domains, and demonstrate the nature of the entire domain. The paradigm’s first column is the name of each domain. Meanwhile, the second, third, and fourth columns represent dimensions of contrast between cultural attributes of the domains. The significance of the domain relationships can be determined once the paradigm is constructed. Intensive analyses were conducted on several domains; however, the investigator inevitably refrained from completing a componential analysis of every domain established. The domains chosen were those thought to be most influential in determining characteristics of effective reading teachers, based on previous observations in these settings.
Discovering Cultural Themes

Embedded concepts which underlie cultures are considered themes, and the discovering of these is a crucial part of the ethnographic research process. These cultural themes consist to a large extent of generality; thus, they recur in numerous domains of investigation. Still, they do not necessarily apply to every domain or aspect of the culture. Themes connect not only larger aspects of the entire culture but also smaller sub-domains within the culture. Themes can emerge by comparing aspects of a cultural scene with characteristics of other cultures like the urban classroom environment to the rural school environment.

Instead of merely taking an inventory approach from observations, the investigator plowed forward to establish cultural themes in order to portray a holistic view of the culture being studied. Selecting specific domains for careful, scrutinized analysis allowed for themes to be discovered. Only through immersion or immersing oneself in the culture for hours on end and allowing that culture to pervade one’s own life could this be accomplished. Coined by Morris Opler, the idea of cultural theme is based on the premise that cultures are complex rather than isolated bits and pieces. Spradley furthers this notion by defining a cultural theme as “any principle recurrent in a number of domains, tacit or explicit, and serving as a relationship among subsystems of cultural meaning” (p. 141). Once themes were established and analyzed, summative overviews could be constructed to condense the plethora of gathered information down to just the bare necessities.
Cultural Inventory

In order to organize all of the notes, paradigms, and domain analyses for completion of the final paper, the investigator must look back to view the culture as a whole. Taking a cultural inventory allows for gaps in research to be recognized; thus complete, partial, and incomplete domains can be more thoroughly analyzed depending on the ethnographic focus. For example, the social situation in this study could have been deemed only partially complete and thus, sketched maps would have been created that depict the physical environment in which the investigation took place. In addition, stories were recorded about happenings during observation in these places. Besides creating a cultural inventory, an index should provide the reader and author with ease of finding information. A section for further study would give readers additional possibilities which could stem from the research findings of this study.

Ethnography

Translating the meaning of a culture is the purpose of pursuing an ethnographic research project; thus, the investigator must describe the culture of study with the assumption that it is completely alien to the reader. This prevents the writer from generalizing material, so that it becomes a highly descriptive account of the culture. The task of interpretation becomes easier with ethnographic experience. When writing the ethnography, the researcher must develop a target audience with whom to guide his/her communicative style. Spradley proclaims, “In a real sense, a truly effective translation requires an intimate knowledge of two cultures: the one described and the one tacitly held by the audience who will read the description” (p. 161).
Within ethnographic description and cultural translation, there are various levels with which to use in one’s writing, ranging from quite general to the extremely particular in nature. In an effort to describe the overall structure of the culture in study from the substantial amount of collected data, this dissertation was written primarily from the third (general statements about a society or cultural group) and fourth levels (general statements about a specific cultural scene) of Spradley’s six levels of ethnographic writing. Other levels were used, but the investigator did so to a limited degree to maintain a certain proportion compared to extent of description at levels three and four.

Summary

The qualitative methodology selected for this study can be somewhat daunting to fully comprehend for those who have not utilized it firsthand; though, it can be more easily understood through a brief summarization. Wolcott (1992) stated that most qualitative research studies can be identified by three main categories: watching, asking, and reviewing. Within the D.R.S. Method, these three actions recur over and over again, forcing questions to be posed and answered until a better understanding emerges.

In Michael Patton’s *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (2002), he discusses that qualitative inquiries “typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases. This increases the depth of understanding of the cases and situations studied but reduces generalizability” (p. 15). Yet, many critics are quick to judge qualitative research as not having any construct validity. However, validity within qualitative studies is derived and dependent upon the instrument(s) used in measurement. According to Patton (2002), the researcher becomes
the instrument and thus, the study’s credibility “hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork” (p. 14).

This study began with the research question, “What characteristics of highly regarded literacy teachers are vital to students’ success in both rural and urban schools?;” thus, the investigation was grounded in theory. Using Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) constant comparative analysis, data was continually analyzed, even during data collection. Essentially, data collection, note-taking, coding, and memoing constantly occurred from the commencement of the study. Thus, themes emerged from the data; this was in direct contrast to hypothesis testing in which themes are known ahead of time and tested.

Discovery-oriented approaches are central within ethnographic research. Guba (1978) says that naturalistic inquiry minimizes an investigator’s manipulation of the entire study. Because the outcomes of the research are unknown, there are no constraints placed on the inquiry.

Data triangulation is based on the ideology that “no single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival causal factors. Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of observations must be employed. . . . multiple methods should be used in every investigation” (Denzin, 1978, p. 28). Likewise, studies that solely use one method are much more likely to contain bias, error, and unsubstantiated accuracy of data.

Although viewpoints vary, the most commonly held belief is that there is no one best method of research: quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. The method(s) selected for implementation should be based on the subject and the achievement of the
goal at hand. If one wishes to poll a number of individuals to see how people feel about an issue, a quantitative sampling technique may lend itself best. In contrast, if an investigator wants to determine how changes within a school relate to the overall learning environment, qualitative studies would likely foster a better understanding. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) add, “People who think this way see choices of research approaches as pragmatic—pick the right one for the job” (p. 41).

The following chapter details critical information about teacher perspectives gathered from the initial ethnographic interviews as well as more specific data from the 10 weeks of observation. Discussing both grand tour and mini tour observations allows for one to gain a sense of what it is like in each of the teachers’ classrooms. Vignettes also provide concrete accounts of events that occurred on specific dates of observation.
CHAPTER 4.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interview with Woodston Principal

Background/Education

The first investigational interview was conducted with the head of the school, Cynthia Wesley. Mrs. Wesley has worked as principal of Woodston for the past five years; in addition, she served as an assistant principal for three years. After obtaining a bachelor’s degree in business in New York, she and her husband were forced to move to Louisiana due to the relocation of his job. Becoming interested in the school systems, Wesley began substitute teaching at various locations within a major southern Louisiana city. Soon afterwards, she went back to school to obtain a master’s degree and a specialist certification in reading education. Simultaneously, she worked in a private K-8 school for three years. Then, Wesley became interested in the development of teachers, so she led professional development series throughout the parish. Vying to always have more responsibility but never getting the chance in the major city, she opted to leave towards a smaller, more rural institution where she has remained for eight years.

As a leader at Woodston, Wesley’s educational philosophy is central to her leadership and known by all:

Teachers, principals, parents, and students must work in unison if success is to be obtained. This cannot occur if we don’t continue to push to reach higher goals and elevate our expectations. If we don’t do something different every year, the same results will inevitably occur.
Leading from within the community as opposed to directing from an ivory tower, Wesley believes that it is crucial that she participates in professional development, research study groups, and be one among many who collaborates and directs students towards high attainment.

Instructional Viewpoints

Wesley underlined the importance of meeting the needs of each student. She said there is a systematic approach that her teachers and interventionalists use to accomplish this feat. At the beginning of the school year, students in kindergarten through third grade are pulled out of their classrooms to be tested on their fluency rates via the DIBELS test. This is only conducted by qualified reading interventionalists to ensure validity. Based on those scores, students are grouped in each class according to one of four ability levels: top, second, intervention, and intensive. Depending on the level, students receive a specific amount of reading instruction as follows: top level (those students meeting or exceeding benchmark) receive 100 minutes of classroom reading teacher instruction; second level (those students almost reaching benchmark) receive 100 minutes of classroom teacher instruction plus 30 minutes of additional intervention in small groups of three to five students; the intervention level (students who demonstrate some skills but are not nearing benchmark status) get 100 minutes of classroom instruction, 30 minutes of small group intervention, and additional activities throughout the day directed towards advancing their reading abilities; the intensive or lowest achieving students receive 100 minutes of classroom reading instruction, 30 minutes of intervention in small groups by the classroom teacher, and 30 extra minutes of pull out time from the reading interventionalist at some point throughout the day.
Actively involving the parents of students is another crucial element in this school’s repertoire. The principal and teachers promote that parents are always welcome in their child’s classroom; this open door policy is especially evident on occasions like the first day of school, open house, grandparents’ day, and other celebrations. Woodston has huge turnouts on these days, much more so than other schools in the area. Why? According to Wesley, the teachers at Woodston have gained recognition for being top notch and parents often visit to thank those teachers for providing their children with outstanding instruction. However, this is a double-edged sword because although parent involvement at school is great, it sometimes diminishes at home. For example, Wesley says, “many parents think their children will learn everything they need to know at school, so those children play video games and do whatever they would like when they get home.” This is the reason why Wesley and the other teachers stay committed to informing parents about what their children are learning and how they can facilitate student learning. After all, home is merely an extension of what is taught in school.

In order for students to become enthusiastic about learning, they need motivation; thus, Wesley makes every effort to welcome students at school. Hoping that this will allow students to feel comfortable and even promote self-confidence, she greets students by saying, “Hello, it is so great to see you today . . . I missed you over the weekend.” She especially makes a concerted attempt to show kindness to those students who she knows come from abusive, abandoned, and other kinds of troublesome homes. These little things make a difference in how students experience Woodston Elementary.

The most difficult aspect of teaching today is continuing to improve every year. Wesley says that “at some point, it becomes exponentially more difficult to raise
students’ scores on standardized tests, but that doesn’t stop us from trying. Hopefully, this year we will see the results from last year’s implementations.” Alongside raising student achievement is the notion of teachers becoming more capable and learning more themselves. Through multitudes of professional development series, Wesley educates her faculty with the latest research-based instructional methods. In addition, she provides them with many resources at their fingertips like center kits, supplies, and fellow content leader guidance. The number one goal of the school is to raise student achievement, and that cannot be accomplished without teachers continuing to learn and keep up-to-date with research and development.

Reading Instruction

When asked about the *Harcourt Trophies Reading Program*, Wesley raved about the supposed research proven curriculum saying, “With this year being its third school year of implementation, students are really starting to show its benefits.” The instructional models are already formulated so that teachers do not have to come up with their own. “Everything has already been mapped out for them, so they have no excuse for not knowing what to teach, how to teach it, and when to teach it,” states Wesley. It is crucial for teachers to read to their students every day so learners see fluent reading on a regular basis. Modifications to the curriculum cannot be made because it has only been research-based on the implementation in its entirety; thus, she strongly advocates that teachers stick to the curriculum rather than deviating from it in any way.

Wesley also feels strongly that her second grade class struggles most with what is most important: reading with fluency. Although she acknowledges that fluency is just one of the five reading areas recognized to be most influential to students’ reading success,
she proclaims that, “Without reading fluently, the stage is set for students to not achieve at higher grade levels where more complex reading is involved.” Furthermore, it is necessary that teachers at Woodston guide students towards becoming fluent readers. Wesley feels that effective reading teachers have the following qualities: 1) demonstrate a love of reading through reading aloud daily and getting participation/feedback from the students; 2) being a role model in reading by utilizing the dictionary and thesaurus periodically to better their own written compositions; 3) demonstrate being well-prepared for their lessons, so they are not purely reading from the manual and looking around for needed supplies; and 4) capitalize on reading moments throughout the day.

Assessment

Student progress should be monitored continuously through observation, according to Wesley. Every nine weeks, students are also assessed on their rate of fluency (how many words they can read in one minute); ability groups are adjusted based on these scores within each classroom. Still, the ultimate judge of whether learning is taking place in the classroom is the LEAP and ILEAP scores. “Students’ scores on these tests prove whether or not their teachers did an adequate job in their instruction,” says Wesley. Although other assessments are given on a regular basis, they are merely indicators of how students should score on the standardized tests. Once the school receives the students’ scores, Wesley posts every teacher’s class scores so that nothing is hidden. She believes that a sense of competitiveness and fear of embarrassment should push teachers to try even harder. Just as her teachers are evaluated based on their students’ test scores, she takes responsibility for the entire school’s scores as a whole, trying to increase them from year to year. Her current goal is for 70% of her students to meet or exceed the
benchmark status; this is an increase of 10% from the previous year.

Interview with Mrs. Creswell from Woodston

Background/Education

The second interview involved Mrs. Beverly Creswell, one of the second grade teachers at Woodston. Creswell obtained her bachelor’s degree in elementary education from the nearest major university. Even before she graduated, she had already obtained the position she currently holds at Woodston. She stated that the principal knew she would have an opening and told her that it would be hers upon receiving the degree. Creswell was elated when given the position because she had loved Woodston Elementary throughout her childhood as she was a student at the school. This small town community is a place “where I could never leave . . . I love it here . . . my entire family lives here so why would I want to leave?” This year is her third year teaching, all of which have occurred at Woodston. Her educational history of working with children is rich. Since a young girl, Creswell has always wanted to be a teacher. This drive was strengthened because she saw how her mother, a pre-K teacher, was able to help so many children learn for many years. Also, her aunt is on the parish school board, so education holds a dear place within her family. In high school, Creswell enrolled in a twelfth grade teacher cadet program in the parish, which fostered support and opportunities for participants to practice and enrich their instructional techniques. Creswell knew after graduating high school that teaching was truly her calling. These experiences led her towards her current educational philosophy: “students should be doing as much as the teacher does through hands-on activities. It is a teacher’s job to scaffold that learning and provide a positive work environment that leads to success. Essentially, teaching should
not equate with preaching.” In an effort to continually develop as a teacher, Creswell studies and reflects on research articles with her fellow second grade teachers every other week. They meet to discuss the findings and debate how that research is or is not relevant to their instruction. She feels that these reflections are crucial to her development, because it is sometimes difficult to keep up with the latest research on one’s own.

Classroom Management

To ensure that her students stay on task throughout the day, Creswell employs a multi-faceted management system that includes many types of rewards and a few consequences. She feels that it is necessary for teachers to reward those students who behave properly so that the focus is on those actions and not those that disrupt the class. Tickets are given to students for good behavior. Those students with tickets may go to the treasure chest on Fridays to select a prize. Group points are given to groups that are on task. For example, when a group has everything out on its desks ready for the next part of a lesson, the teacher could tell the group leader for the day to get 10 points for his/her group. At the end of the week, the group with the most points wins a treat. Creswell states that giving group points minimizes many disruptions because not only does a student’s behavior affect his or her self, but the entire group. Thus, students are more prone to keep each other in-line when their points are in question. Lastly, marbles are allotted to the class jar when the entire class behaves well outside the confines of the classroom. Ranging from walking towards physical education class to returning from the lunch room, a small number of marbles are awarded and placed in a jar. If the jar ever becomes full, the students get to vote on what type of classroom pet they would like. These approaches are also used as motivational stimulants within her classroom. In fact, “Just a
tootsie roll at the end of a day can be a huge motivation for second graders to try really 
hard all day long,” says Mrs. Creswell.

The only discipline system needed in Creswell’s class is a sectional pole ranging 
from A to F. If reprimanded, students are required to pull their clip, meaning their 
behavior for the day drops a letter grade. With discipline not generally an issue, Creswell 
is rarely challenged by any of her students; however, on occasion, she speaks to a student, 
saying “I am the teacher and in order for me to do my job, I need you to follow the rules 
so everyone can learn and no one gets in trouble including me.” Many times, Creswell 
can avoid confrontations by merely giving students who are disruptive “evil looks.” 
Other times, she uses proximity to her favor so that students are aware she sees what is 
going on in class even without her commenting about it. There have been instances when 
Creswell uses guilt to her advantage, telling the students that she is quite upset with their 
behavior. Apparently, the students do not like this and want to live up to her standards so 
she can be proud of them.

In terms of noise, she remarks that she has mixed feelings. There are times when 
talking is fundamental to learning and thus, talking on topic is welcomed in her 
classroom. Additionally, communication is very important and must occur not only 
between the teacher and the students, but also between students. “Many times, students 
learn as much from their peers as they do from me,” explains Creswell. However, when 
she is teaching the whole class, she expects her students to remain quiet. This is so that 
all students have an environment conducive for learning.
Instructional Approaches

In order to meet the needs of children with differing intellectual abilities, Creswell implements a three-tiered system within her reading centers. Her centers closely resemble all five aspects of reading deemed most important in *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read* (2003): vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, phonics/phonemic awareness, and writing. Students are encouraged to complete as many tasks as they possibly can; however, she has varied expectations for students. For example, in her vocabulary center, there are generally three activities: 1) a matching game which is to be completed in partners, 2) selecting vocabulary words and writing specific sentences with them, and 3) writing sentences of one’s choice. Creswell believes that more advanced students will complete at least the first two parts within the allotted 30 minutes of center time. Accordingly, students below grade level will only complete one or two of the activities. Still, she feels that having too many activities available is better than not enough. She structures these activities in order of difficulty so that higher achieving students can be challenged, especially with the last activity in each center.

Not only do students have differing styles of learning, but they also come from very different households. “Knowing each family is crucial to my success as a teacher,” reports Creswell. She always encourages parents to take an active role in their child’s education, including reading the weekly story with them, reviewing comprehension questions with them, checking their homework, and assisting with projects. Parents are always welcome inside her classroom, especially at the end of the day to read aloud a story or help with holiday celebrations and field trips. Unfortunately, Creswell believes that getting parental involvement is the most difficult aspect of teaching today.
Purportedly, many parents rely on Creswell and her fellow teachers to handle all educational considerations. “Some parents are involved to some degree, but many others aren’t at all,” according to Creswell.

Reading Instruction

When using the *Harcourt Trophies Reading Program*, Creswell is supposed to follow a scripted curriculum that does not technically allow for adjustments to be made based on teacher discretion; still, in all actuality, she adjusts her instruction daily to suit the needs of her students. She was first introduced to this program when she was given the manual on the first day of her teaching career, picking up where another teacher left off. With no formal training, Creswell quickly learned firsthand the ins and outs of this Harcourt Trophies Series. Since parish-wide training in the reading program only occurs every August, she was not trained to use it until eight months after starting her job. It consisted of a three day workshop from Harcourt-Brace Publishers; in addition, the content leaders are supposed to deliver continual assistance and ongoing help for teachers new to the reading program.

Imperative to both her educational philosophy and the reading program’s foundation, models provide a clear picture of what Creswell expects from her students. She feels that this is especially necessary for new activities or skills so that she is sure students understand. Modeling how to read, says Creswell, is critical for students to see. “When they see me read every day, they try to copy the way I read when they read.” Unfortunately, the curriculum is structured so that there is not enough time to cover all that is required. Thus, modifications are made on a regular basis. “I look at what we are supposed to cover ahead of time, and select activities that are repetitive to leave out,”
claims Creswell. That way she ensures that students still learn all of the skills within the curriculum. Moreover, she feels that covering less material can actually be better, giving her students ample time to think and learn rather than be rushed through too much material in a short amount of time. Creswell believes that teaching students using in-depth lessons will prove more effective than covering a larger amount of material just briefly.

Students predominantly struggle with comprehension more than any other area of reading. To combat this issue, Creswell teaches visualization exercises to her students. Regularly, students are encouraged to close their eyes as she reads a passage or story to them, so they can put themselves in the reading. Other ways of enticing students include allowing them free choice in selecting literature to read during free time and free choice during center time as long as it is on their level. Established at the first of the year, Creswell has a policy that allows students to go to the classroom library, select a book, and return to their seats to read silently, once they finish classwork activities.

Furthermore, Creswell finds that supplying a purpose for reading is the single most important factor in having students comprehend what is read or heard. Every time she reads aloud to her students daily, she informs them specifically of the purpose ranging from what happens to a character to what is the moral of the story. Through supplying a purpose, students are interested and engaged. In those instances when Creswell forgets to issue a purpose, she notices that her students’ attention declines dramatically.

Within the Harcourt Trophy Reading Program, the defined, scripted lessons do not allow for teachers to meet the needs of all learners. “Special circumstances call for special measures,” says Creswell. Two years ago, she had a second grader who was three
grade levels behind in reading. The student desperately wanted to read like the other students in class, so he was encouraged to bring a book to recess, lunch, and after school if he wanted so that Creswell could read with him. She tried all sorts of strategies with the student. Her efforts were recognized by the parents, who wanted their son to repeat second grade with her as his teacher again. Creswell continued her facilitation and scaffolding throughout the next school year as well; in turn, the student made significant progress even though the student was still approaching the first grade reading level. Other students in Creswell’s class are required to finish their reading classwork every day no matter what the circumstance. She states, “They are well aware that reading takes precedence over everything else like physical education or recess. This is understood on a school-wide basis.”

Trying to establish a love for reading in her students, Creswell makes available every genre of literature for the students to read in her classroom library like fiction, nonfiction, fantasy, science fiction, drama, and horror. Going further, she adds technology within some of her lessons so students can visually learn even more. For instance, Eric Carle’s *The Mixed-Up Chameleon* was the story for one week. She researched some background information about chameleons and found various pictures that she thought would be pertinent for the students to view. She created a PowerPoint® presentation that visually depicted information that her students would find interesting. This sparked an interest in chameleons and in the story throughout the entire week!

Her modifications make her lessons unique and more suitable for her class; still, the majority of instruction is directed at developing students’ abilities to perform well on standardized tests. At Woodston, all topics of instruction covered throughout the year are
also found on the LEAP and/or ILEAP tests that students take at the end of the school
eyear. In addition, Creswell teaches her students test-taking skills so that they feel
comfortable taking tests and know the ins and outs of standardized tests in particular.

Creswell tries to act as a leader to her students by being a reader herself in hopes that her
personal enthusiasm towards reading will transfer to her students. “Understanding that all
students learn differently is what is so difficult about this curriculum,” says Creswell.

Since the program is so structured, she notices that sometimes she expects the students to
be robots—all learning the same way at the same speed. Yet, she knows that the
educational world is much different; “At first, some children will only know how to
pronounce words when I cover up half of the word—seeing two parts and then
pronouncing both parts together.” Superior reading teachers recognize this and remain
flexible in their instructional approaches; after all, there is no perfect by-the-book method
of reading instruction.

Assessment

In order to monitor her students’ progress throughout the year, there are several
methods of which Creswell utilizes. First, she groups her students into four categories
according to their achievement on the DIBELS test. These tests are given every nine
weeks to allow her groups to remain flexible. In addition, her students are progress
monitored by another second grade classroom teacher (for scoring to remain unbiased)
periodically in an effort to receive more information about students’ fluency rates. In her
own classroom, Creswell utilizes a host of informal and formal assessments to assure that
learning is taking place, including checking classwork and homework, conducting
observations while students are completing individual and small group classwork, and
reviewing weekly test scores. Together, these assessments determine how much assistance the teacher gives to each student, ranging from allowing the student to work primarily independently to standing by a student’s side reading the story and answering questions with him/her. Assessments are viewed as important when conducted not only on her students but also on Creswell. Outside assessors come to her class semi-annually to conduct assessments on her reading instruction to determine how she is implementing the program. Creswell feels that this process is crucial to improving as a teacher.

Mrs. Creswell’s Room

Grand Tour

Known for her organizational skills, Mrs. Creswell holds several school-wide responsibilities including managing the bus duty schedule, being the grade-level team leader, and mentoring another second grade teacher who is new to Woodston. Mrs. Creswell has a reputation for being “on the ball.” When other teachers are unaware of what is going on, they go directly to her.

At first glance, her classroom is not only attractive and colorful but also informative, which makes it easy for the students to find centers, classroom rules, and other posters on the walls of the room. A small classroom library containing a selection of trade books is located near the entrance to the classroom that is available during select free time for the students to peruse. Her classroom appearance appears to be in very clean condition; it has obviously been kept up well. Its dimensions are 26 feet by 30 feet, which gives her student population of 20 second graders plenty of room to work in groups of four with more than adequate room for her five centers around the sides of the classroom. The desk arrangement in the classroom favors small group participation; furthermore,
only having four students in each group can minimize off-task conversation.

The reading centers: phonics/phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, writing, and comprehension are primarily based on the five aspects found to be most important within reading instruction according to the National Reading Panel (2000). In addition to these centers, there are two computers in the room, one of which the teacher uses with the television as a monitor to project PowerPoint® presentations deemed appropriate for instructional purposes. Except for the blackboard, the sidewalls are filled with charts, posters, and schedules for the students to view. The reading components include:

“Chunk” It Up!! Wall Chart, Blend It! Posters, Words-We-Know Chart, Punctuation Poster, Reading Vocabulary Pocket Chart, Alphabet Chart, Daily Spelling Work Poster, Independent Reading Chart, Objectives Poster, and a Help Wall. The extent to which Mrs. Creswell updates these charts varies; sometimes, the objectives for the day were not current. Once, the vocabulary and spelling words for the previous week were still on display the following Tuesday. Still, the hallway outside of the classroom was consistently used for displaying student work pertinent to the unit being covered in class.

Near the door, a behavior management system is in clear view for all students. It contains clothespins on five circular, different colored sections of a wooden pole. All clothespins begin at the top, however, students’ behavior may warrant consequences causing their clothespins to move downward. The five colored sections represent: A – Great Day, B – Warning, C – No Recess, D – Punishwork, and F – Call Parent. In addition to the clothespin system, Mrs. Creswell uses a variety of management protocols for gaining the attention of the class. Techniques like “roller coasters” and “fireworks” are implemented in which both the teacher and the students have to imitate the actions of
either a roller coaster or fireworks in unison. For example, the teacher might say, “Class let’s do a double roller coaster.” Then, the teacher makes a ticking sound as she raises her arms in the air as if she were a roller coaster on a wooden track about to reach the track’s peak, then makes two downward dip and rise motions, accompanied by a verbal “swoosh” for each. It seemed to get the students’ attention, so it was apparently effective. There were also specific signals that students learned for their needs to be quickly and quietly addressed during instruction, including needing a Kleenex, sharpening a pencil, needing a bathroom trip, and having an emergency.

Mini Tour

Classroom Management. Throughout the investigation, Creswell was viewed consistently giving her students praise, regardless of whether they were working individually, in small groups, or as an entire class. Students learned and implemented classroom signals properly most of the time, minimizing any disturbance during Mrs. Creswell’s instruction. Hand signals like raising one finger to ask a question, two fingers to get a Kleenex, three fingers for sharpening a pencil, and four fingers for an emergency, minimized verbal disturbances during instruction—a necessity with the already overloaded daily curriculum that she is required to teach. Mrs. Creswell only raised her voice once throughout the length of observation in her classroom. Students remained attentive during the majority of her instruction. They could be seen diligently completing their work during centers and other group exercises. Adding to the easiness with which she managed her students’ behavior were her near flawless transitions. Knowing the curricular sequence of each day, the teacher and students always knew what aspect of reading came next, whether it was phonics, spelling, independent activities, or centers.
Creswell remained time-oriented to ensure that her students achieved to the highest extent possible.

Instructional Style. Observations of Creswell matched that which was central to her belief on education: teachers should meet the needs of their student population. Within this class of students, there are several who have needs that have been previously addressed: one has a physical disability causing him to limp when he walks, one has been diagnosed with dyslexia and is in a pull-out program where he receives additional reading instruction, two are repeaters of second grade due to academic failure, and one has a history of temper issues. Moreover, those two students who are repeating this year were also in Mrs. Creswell’s class last year, as it is strongly encouraged at Woodston for students who repeat a grade to have the same classroom teacher. On a daily basis, Creswell gave these students extra individual attention in an effort to catch them up with the others. Another methodology that Creswell implemented was specialized grouping of her students. With each group consisting of four students at their desks, Creswell paired students from her highest level with her second lowest level as well as from her second highest level with her lowest level (#1 with #3 and #2 with #4). She felt that this was crucial to the notion of student-to-student scaffolding. Indeed, students did seem to learn from each other, as the higher level student essentially taught the lower achieving student. Still, learning also occurred from teaching the lower level student. Furthermore, Creswell scaffolded her students’ learning by asking questions that required students to critically think and not merely recall information.

Inevitably, students make off-topic or seemingly unrelated statements periodically throughout instructional time; however, many times, Creswell used those instances as
teaching moments. By giving credit to a student’s thoughts and not demeaning the student for his/her behavior, the teacher created an environment in which students felt comfortable participating. Other techniques used by Creswell to evoke a positive learning experience included visual and auditory stimulation. Not only through using everyday devices like a compact disc player and an overhead projector, but also by creating PowerPoint ® slideshows. When teaching students about a new topic or furthering their background knowledge, Creswell often used slideshows which were viewed on a television monitor connected to one of her classroom computers. For instance, Creswell thought that informing her students about fun animal facts would be motivational for multiple reasons. First, the stories of the week were all related to various animals. Also, most students, being from a rural area, could relate to the animals she was sharing with the students via the visual presentation like a pig, cow, horse, chicken, and a frog.

Creswell’s communication style served as a model to her class. She expected them to speak to her like she spoke to them: with respect, politeness, and consideration. Many of her daily mannerisms and comments indicated her care and sympathy for her students like: “What do you need, baby?” “Awh-right, give me five!” and “Is something the matter? You weren’t very talkative this morning.” It is known that teachers need to understand their students’ needs; however, Mrs. Creswell has a unique bond with her students that is truly special. Born and raised in the same location as her students, having gone to this elementary school when she was a child, and currently living in the same community as them, Mrs. Creswell has an insider’s perspective into her students’ lives. Creswell explained that knowing several of the students’ parents through mutual acquaintances even before this school year allows the parents and her to develop
relationships necessary for open communication. These familiarities set the stage for advising parents on how they can participate in their child’s education. Parent involvement is central not only to her philosophy but also her practice, keeping in constant contact with parents.

Reading Instruction. A balanced approach to the teaching of reading cannot always be easy to implement while using a curriculum that scripted; however, Creswell deviated from the curriculum in ways she thought were necessary to meet her students’ needs. One component not found in the curriculum but which played a large role in the success of her instruction was allotting free time for students to read books of their choice. This single factor led students from seeing phonics instruction as mundane (with their eyes rolled up) to thrilled about reading instantly. Giving her students 15 minutes per day to read seemed to spark curiosity and excitement towards the act of reading. Although the reading program aimed at appealing to student interest, the students preferred their free reading time each day.

During center time, Creswell called small groups of students to the table in the rear of the classroom to conduct reading intervention sessions. Better known as guided reading, Creswell only developed students’ reading skills to a minimal degree. Focusing just as much attention to her students in the centers as her intervention group, those students most needing help (the intervention group) did not actually receive the sufficient amount of attention that was already allotted to them.

Reading aloud was also a familiar occurrence in Creswell’s classroom. Taking two forms, the teacher reading stories to the entire class and students reading aloud in pairs, oral reading was used in an attempt to develop students’ abilities through both
visual and auditory stimulation. Multi-sensory learning can also be found in the choral reading which Creswell directs. When reading a story aloud, Creswell modeled to students how one who is fluent reads each page of text. Students followed by reading more fluently than if they had not heard their teacher read the page first. These techniques also seemed to be more enticing to students than merely reading silently and independently.

Although phonological development plays a major role in the Harcourt Trophies curriculum, Creswell treats these aspects of the curriculum as a means to get to the more pertinent comprehension-based activities. Phonics and phonemic awareness exercises were seen to be tedious work for the students to complete; after all, every student but one was already reading quite proficiently. When the teacher asked the students to say their spelling words for the week, they already knew how to pronounce the words and what they meant many times. More importantly, Creswell provided opportunities to read stories, poems, essays, and plays. Through reading, students became more proficient than by solely dissecting words. In these readings, Creswell made certain to define a purpose. Thus, the students and the teacher knew what to focus on or to be thinking about throughout the reading.

Assessment. Just as she possesses an array of instructional techniques, Creswell issues an assortment of assessments to monitor her students’ progress. Once students are given the DIBELS test at the first of the year, they are grouped in class according to fluency rate. However, Creswell feels that additional assessments can contribute to a better understanding of her students’ reading abilities. Before teaching most of her units, Creswell gives her class pretests in order to establish the level at which she needs to
begin her instruction. Not only do pretests indicate a student’s knowledge of subject matter, but so does one’s daily classwork. Creswell reviews students’ daily work to ensure that the current level of instruction is somewhere between the independent and frustrating fringes. Creswell understands that students who get every answer correct and never make mistakes in their work are not being challenged enough. Still, she also gives immediate feedback to students so they can learn from their mistakes. Having incorrect responses to questions in classwork is part of the learning process in Creswell’s class, as she sometimes reviews the correct answers with students immediately following the completion of the exercise. Creswell occasionally picks up students’ classwork if they are seen to have not paid attention to her directions, grade the assignment, and send it home for the parents to further discuss the importance of paying attention in class with their children. Essentially, the collection of assessments ranging from classwork checks to grading homework or formal tests creates a balanced approach in understanding her students’ abilities and levels of learning.

Vignette: September 12, 2006

Beginning her lesson, Mrs. Creswell reviews with the students what they have already learned about chameleons. In a loud voice, she reminds them that they learned that chameleons have long, sticky tongues, they eat flies, and they wrap their tails around branches for stability. Creswell asks them if they could imagine living on a branch, adding that she does not know about them, but she would definitely fall off a lot. The students laugh and giggle, amused by her comments. Furthermore, Creswell adds, “They also have fingers, but unlike our fingers, they have that thing like a web that helps them stay on the branches . . . kind of like a duck. How many of y’all have seen a duck’s
webbed feet?” Most students raise their hands in response to her question. Afterward, the teacher closes the review by saying that those characteristics of chameleons make them unique. Then, she asks her students to think about what makes each of them unique. Quickly going around the room, students take turns expressing a unique trait about themselves. Beginning with Crissie, she says, “uhhh . . . my hair.” Creswell says, “Alright, that is good. What about you David?” He says that he is good at baseball. Indeed, each student participated in the activity; meanwhile, every other student was listening to find out about one another. Finally, Creswell states that she is unique too. Her eyes change colors according to the color of clothing she is wearing.

Relating this to the story, *The Mixed-Up Chameleon*, she tells the class that what was wrong with the chameleon is that he thought he was not good at anything until the fly came and told him differently. Before re-reading another story, Creswell sets a purpose for the reading, “OK, I am going to read again the story, *Only a Toad*, and I want you to figure out why the toad wasn’t happy with himself?” Next, Creswell walks around the classroom as she reads aloud the story. Most students have their eyes on the teacher throughout the reading. Immediately after finishing the story, she asks her class, “Why did the toad want to change?” One student blurts out, “Cuz he didn’t know he was powerful.” The teacher asks two other students, “What else?” Chandler says, “Cuz he thought he was weak.” Justin adds, “He was small.” Then, the teacher says, “And he said he was not pretty, but?” The entire class loudly states in unison, “Ugly.” Creswell combines their answers to say, “That’s right, he was small, weak, and ugly. Those are the reasons why he wanted to change. Alright, good job.”
For the next part of the lesson, Creswell tells the students to put their eyes on her because they are about to talk about –id and –ide endings. She began writing some riddles on the overhead projector, one at a time to see if her students could determine the answers. The first riddle read: You take me off the top of a jar. I am a ______. Two students simultaneously yelled, “Lid.” Congratulating them for their correct response, Creswell began the second riddle: I am a woman who is getting married today. I am the __________. Her class stated all sorts of answers, including one student who said, “teacher.” After laughing momentarily, Creswell responded by saying that a woman getting married is a bride. She added, “Trust me; Mrs. Creswell isn’t getting married any time soon.” Her students giggled.

Creswell asked her students to get out their Reading and Language Arts books. Hearing the students mumbling, Creswell said, “Excuse me, I didn’t say to talk. I hear a few mouths and I shouldn’t hear any.” The students took her advice. Before beginning the next segment of the lesson, she asks for all eyes on her and counted down from three. She told them to read the sentence that she wrote on the board with her. Together, they said, “The cat went under the bed and hid.” Creswell stated that their job was to draw a square, write the sentence that they just read, and illustrate it. She asked if everyone understood the assignment and understood the word “illustrate.” Students said that they understood, and Creswell set the timer for five minutes (see Figure 5). Meanwhile, she roamed around the room asking children about their depictions. She noticed one student’s pencil broke, and without saying anything, she picked it up, sharpened it, and returned it to the student. Near the end of the allotted time, she told the students that visualizing or picturing what they read often helps to understand it.
Background/Education

As a former student at Woodston, Mrs. LeBlanc loved everything about school. In fact, she gained the desire to eventually become a teacher during her early years in elementary school. After finishing elementary and high school in the community, she attended a nearby state university to obtain her Bachelor’s of Science degree in
elementary education. All along, it was LeBlanc’s intention to come back to Woodston to teach where she felt so comfortable during much of her childhood. The community in which she lives is very special to her as it is also home to her entire family. LeBlanc states, “Once you grow up here, you pretty much live here for life.”

Over her career, she has learned what is crucial to student success—that learning must be fun for students. This notion is central to her educational philosophy. Furthermore, she claims to make a concerted effort to give every child an equal opportunity to learn. Keeping these educational fundamentals at the forefront of her mind is key to her success as a teacher. According to LeBlanc, she tries to focus more on her students’ needs rather than reading or studying the latest research articles as that would overburden her already hectic schedule. Although she is required to read an article every two weeks for professional development meetings, LeBlanc does not always exert much effort into meeting this mandate. “This year our professional development consists of more data analysis as opposed to last year’s reading strategy studies. I’m not exactly thrilled about it,” says LeBlanc.

Classroom Management

In order to ensure that her students remain on task, she implements a simple system involving a stop light. Each child begins on the green light, but if one gets warned a number of times, he/she is told to pull a clip, meaning that child has to move his/her name to the yellow light. This is an indication that the child is only one more warning away from the red light! “Hardly anyone ever gets to the red light, so I think the system works pretty good,” proclaims LeBlanc. Not only does she employ a discipline system, but also positive reinforcement via a weekly reward. Throughout the week, she “holds it
over their heads so they behave.” For example, she offers treats on Friday afternoons like popcorn, popsicles, cakes, and even candy to those who behave throughout the entire week; yet, there are no defined rules for how one qualifies or does not qualify to get the weekly prize. The reward system acts as a constant motivational factor for her students to remain on task in her opinion. Essentially, LeBlanc makes an effort to focus more on positive reinforcement than discipline because of the potential to “lose” students. She explains that children will feel anxiety and subsequently, their motivational level will drop if they are continually reprimanded; instead, “every little thing they do should be rewarded.”

If a discipline problem ever arises, meaning a student reaches the red light of her management system, LeBlanc sends a note home with the student as well as call the child’s home. This is just one of the many facets of being a teacher that she has learned over her 15 years at Woodston. LeBlanc explains that it takes a lot for a child to get to the red level on the stop light because she can handle noise quite well. “I feel that children have to learn to work with each other in order to be successful in life, and helping each other is all part of learning,” according to LeBlanc. Still, during her instructional time, she demands silence from her students. She says that her students know the difference between center time or art class and whole class instruction.

Instructional Approaches

In her best judgment, the rigid Harcourt Trophies curriculum does not allow much leeway in order to individualize instruction to meet her students’ needs. Thus, she is forced to do it in non-traditional ways. One of her students is in special education and is a non-reader. This student is approximately two grade levels behind in reading compared to
most of her other students, states LeBlanc. “I paired him up with one of my highest achieving students; many times, she writes his assignments down and helps him with his classwork.” It is Leblanc’s belief that “without her assistance, Leon would fall way behind.” Other than that, she simply expects her higher achievers to produce better work on the standard assignments she gives to her entire class.

Crucial to a student’s success is the educational support provided by the parents and family members. A teacher cannot do it alone. LeBlanc first recognized this idea when one of her students could not understand how to subtract. After a month of practice and daily lessons with the student, Allison could not differentiate between methods appropriate for addition and those for subtraction; however, that changed in an instant. While sitting in a doctor’s waiting room, her older brother showed her a different approach to subtraction, and she immediately picked up on the concept! This is why it is crucial that families not only be involved in children’s education, but also be aware of what is being taught in school. The only reason Allison’s brother knew to help her with subtraction is that LeBlanc stayed in communication with her family about the difficulties she was having in mathematics class. Indeed, she says that communication is vital to students reaching their ability levels; nowadays, LeBlanc tries to encourage parents to stop by. Other than on open houses, LeBlanc cannot find the time to regularly stay in contact with her students’ families. She feels that this is not necessary though because she always sees some of their parents or extended family members around town, including at grocery stores, department stores, and recreational outings. By being acquaintances with students’ families, children behave much better. “Just knowing that I can contact or run into someone in their family keeps them in-line,” says LeBlanc.
Reading Instruction

Receiving extensive training in the implementation of the Harcourt Trophy Reading Program, LeBlanc feels quite comfortable with the program in its third year of usage at Woodston. Although she finds some of the curriculum meaningful and properly suited to her student population, she is adamant that it must be adapted by the classroom teacher. LeBlanc stresses:

The hardest thing is fitting everything in the little time that is allotted in reading.
Sometimes, I have to either skip social studies or science to get it; other times, I don’t finish everything. I am forced to pick and choose. For example, the thinking maps we are supposed to do every week, time just does not permit.

By weeding out those activities that would either take up too much time or cause classroom management issues, LeBlanc customizes the lessons to fit her teaching style and her student body. For example, instead of having students search magazines, books, and other forms of text to look for –ed endings, she has the students look around the room together from their seats. Over the first two years of its implementation, she tinkered with the lessons so that now she claims to pretty much know what works and what does not.

Still, LeBlanc does recognize that her second graders this year are reading at an incredible level already. “They have been using this program since they were in kindergarten and it seems to have worked quite well.” Still, the single factor that prevents her students from higher success is that they do not practice reading at home to the extent she would like. LeBlanc says that some parents do not know how to read themselves, thus limiting the educational assistance they can give to their children.
In an effort to combat the lack of reading conducted at home, Woodston has a policy that every class of students visits the library once a week to check out a book. LeBlanc allows her students to select any book from any genre that they would like to read; in addition, she encourages them to read that book during “Fluency Fallout.” This is an end of the day exercise where students are required to silently read for 15 minutes. Within her classroom, she also tries to make available an assortment of genres and levels of books for the students to read during free time.

LeBlanc is also an advocate of using modeling whenever possible. Since modeling is extensively used in Harcourt Trophies, students are exposed to many different types. She firmly believes in “showing students exactly what you want from them.” Another method to spark interest in reading is setting a purpose for her reading. Every time she reads a story, she assigns a purpose for the reading. When she forgets, she easily recognizes a difference in the students’ comprehension of the story. Although LeBlanc recognizes the importance of technology, she feels that it is not always practical to use. For example, her monitor has never been properly connected to her computer, disallowing her from projecting any information to the entire class. Claiming to know the school board system, she exclaims that “it would take them forever before they got to my classroom to help me with it, so I don’t bother.”

Her reading instruction is geared towards fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, phonics, and phonemic awareness because she realizes that these are all crucial to the standardized tests that her students will take near the end of the school year. Once she can get them to read fluently, LeBlanc thinks that they should be able to perform fairly well on them. In her opinion, superior reading teachers must do more than focus on those five
areas of reading. They have to be excellent classroom managers, cannot be overly controlling of their students, and must encourage their students to be independent learners. “Teachers with students out of control won’t get anywhere,” says LeBlanc. Those who allow their students the freedom to learn in unique ways and supply those opportunities to their students will likely see their students succeed.

Assessment

Unlike other teachers at Woodston, LeBlanc does not grade classwork. She observes students while they are completing the activities; however, she feels that students would be intimidated if she were to grade each assignment. Nevertheless, she does closely look at their weekly tests to ensure that students are demonstrating that learning is taking place. Furthermore, she depends on the reading interventionalists to pass on DIBELS scores so she knows how to group her students based on their fluency performance. LeBlanc believes and uses more formal instruments to assess students than informal ones, saying “Doing so many informal assessments just creates too much data. I keep it simple and go from there.” She is also assessed semi-annually by school board members who oversee elementary teacher instruction.

Mrs. LeBlanc’s Room

Grand Tour

The 2006-2007 school year marks her fifteenth year of teaching, all of which have been at Woodston. Of all the five second grade teachers, LeBlanc has the most experience and is the most highly regarded by her fellow teachers and the principal as one of the best educators. Mrs. LeBlanc decorates the hallway outside her classroom so that all can see the thinking maps that her students create most weeks. Within the
classroom, measuring a spacious 26 by 30 feet, a significant portion of the walls are empty and not utilized. Still, several posters and charts hang including an alphabet train, class rules, spelling list, calendar, pocket chart, and motivational messages. The class rules are specifically placed on the blackboard so that every child can view them easily; meanwhile, the calendar is on a side wall, but still useful for students when completing their morning work. Posters that are geared to spark motivation towards reading are on display throughout the room saying, “Make New Friends . . . Read!” “Reading Opens a Whole New World!” and “What Should I Read Today? – Fiction, Non-fiction, Autobiography, Fantasy, Realistic Fiction, or a Poem.”

As the management system, LeBlanc has a large, wooden stop light. Each color (green, yellow, and red) are levels which clips hang on. Every student begins on the green level. Once a student is warned numerous times, he/she is told to move his/her clip to the yellow level. This indicates a formal warning, so that all students recognize that someone is one color away from “big trouble.” According to LeBlanc, the red light is rarely used; however, if a student reaches this level, he/she loses recess or physical education class, gets a note sent home, and LeBlanc also calls the student’s father. “Most of the time, dads nip it in the bud, while moms will make excuses for their child’s behavior, so when I call home, I try and talk to the father,” states LeBlanc. Although the investigator never observed a student reaching the red level on the stop sign, many students were given warnings countless times while on both the green and yellow levels.

In addition, a reward system is implemented within Mrs. LeBlanc’s second grade classroom. Those students who behave properly all week long receive one of a variety of treats on Friday afternoons, including popcorn, popsicles, cake, and ice cream.
Nevertheless, there is no systematic means by which a student earns or loses the right to the end of the week treat. The investigator’s perspective did not always align with LeBlanc’s notion of her class’s behavior.

All of LeBlanc’s 20 students are grouped in fours. These five groups are evenly spaced forming a pentagon in the center of the room. There is also a table on one side of the classroom used for reading intervention, which is also known as guided reading. On the adjacent side, there are two computers, one used extensively by the teacher and another that has not been properly hooked up.

Mini Tour

Classroom Management. Throughout the five weeks of observation, LeBlanc inconsistently implemented her management system. Disciplining students never occurred; in fact, only one time did a student ever move from the initial good behavior level, the green light. Many times, LeBlanc was observed ignoring the misbehavior in the classroom. Not that ignoring misbehavior is always problematic, but it often interfered with other students’ learning. The noise level documented was very high within LeBlanc’s classroom; yet, LeBlanc did not seem bothered by it most of the time. Still, LeBlanc’s mood would quickly change. This was apparent in her bouts of yelling at students: “Are you crazy?” “Hush, Brandon, do it!” and “Everyone has there book open but you! What is wrong with you?” Lashing out at the students seemed unnecessary especially since she was regularly loose in her implementation of behavior management. LeBlanc did praise her students; however, it was done so on an irregular basis. “Y’all did great” and “I really like how Aaron put his name at the top of his page” could be heard periodically. Verbal cues were another method which LeBlanc used to get her students
back on task. Nonetheless, LeBlanc’s temper and unstable emotions confused her students as they seemed not to know when to talk or participate and when to remain silent. Her apparent memory lapses also resulted in confusion within the entire classroom. Even though the curriculum is supposed to follow the same sequential order each day, LeBlanc seemed lost on multiple occasions.

Instructional Style. LeBlanc believes that students must talk during class to learn; thus, she allows students to speak to each other throughout her instruction, especially encouraging it during small group work. The students became accustomed to this style of engagement, but did not learn exactly when to stay quiet. Most activities and exercises completed in LeBlanc’s class were accompanied by directions. To ensure her students understood them, she always read them aloud. Sometimes, she even rephrased them in hopes that it would assist her students’ understanding of the assignment. For simple commands that she told the students like “Get out your homework,” she modeled the action by holding up one student’s work. Unfortunately, some directions that were given were not representative of what she wanted. For instance, she told the students, “I want you to read the vocabulary words on page 11, going up, down, up, down.” When the students did this, she reprimanded them for not listening. What she meant to say was for the students to read starting at the top and go down each column (down, up, down, up). She did not recognize this mistake, but did remember to yell at her class.

Careful to give everyone an equal chance to complete the classwork, she did not move on to the next topic until everyone had finished it. Still, her early finishers were not allowed to begin on any other work as they were encouraged to put their heads down so she knew who was already done. Allocating plenty of time for classwork to be completed
also gave one student enough time to complete her work and help her partner, a special education student who cannot yet read. This peer scaffolding was crucial to the young boy’s work completion, but whether or not he was learning anything remained in doubt. Although LeBlanc was adamant that students finish their classwork, she was relatively lenient on students who forgot to do their homework, allowing them to complete it at their nearest convenience. Focusing on classwork, LeBlanc failed to address teaching points that students presented during class time. For example, when the students were learning about dolphins, a boy asked, “Don’t dolphins kill sharks?” Another replied, “No, sharks kill dolphins.” Then, one girl agreed with the first student that dolphins kill sharks. Rather than addressing the confusion, LeBlanc chimed in saying, “Okay okay (making the ‘cut it out’ motion).” From there, they continued on with the rest of the dolphin story. It seemed like LeBlanc refrained from commenting and solving the mystery because she had little background knowledge about the topic.

Reading Instruction. Using a multi-faceted approach to reading, LeBlanc allowed students to work independently and in groups. Centers were customarily arranged activities in which students practiced and enhanced the learned concepts from whole class instruction; however, LeBlanc did not exert much effort into creating her centers. Instead, “worksheets are easy to run off and I can get it done Monday morning.” Those activities account for one-third of the entire reading block and did not always challenge or spark creativity in her students. Students copied lines from the weekly story onto a worksheet to fulfill the requirements for the fluency center (see Figure 6). Meanwhile, students who were designated to go to the phonics center looked at words on a spin wheel and filled in the missing letters to complete the vocabulary exercise (see Figure 7). Within the
comprehension center, students regularly completed sequence charts that theoretically summarized the main events in the story (see Figure 8).

Without guidance, students did not always know how to differentiate between major events and minor occurrences.

LeBlanc encouraged even more non-facilitated learning when she told her students to practice reading, even reading with a partner if they wanted. However, she demanded that students read silently when working individually but orally if they read with a partner. While students were completing center activities, she called one group for reading intervention. Apparently, this was the same time that the special education teacher, Mrs. Jones, entered the room to give Jimmy extra individualized assistance. Instead, LeBlanc and Jones conversed about topics ranging from shopping this past
weekend to going to the tanning bed. Meanwhile, students were taking turns orally reading. No attention was given to those students who needed the most support and teacher facilitation; yet, each day, the investigator watched students misreading stories as it went unnoticed by LeBlanc. At other times, whole class instruction was the primary means of teaching. Questioning was the means by which LeBlanc pushed her students to think. Asking straight-forward comprehension questions was customary. Students could easily answer her questions about the characters and their actions. She attempted to relate the information being covered with her students’ previous experiences. Unfortunately, it was rarely done during the investigation. Sometimes, her questions initially went unanswered, but through coercion, students picked up on the answers that were
First
First she did not get up.

Next
Getjest and wash her
fuss and eat breakfast.

Then
Then she brush her teeth.

Last
Last she went to school.

Figure 8. Summary of major events in a weekly story
essentially given to them. When LeBlanc read aloud the story of the week, she surely set a purpose or reason for the reading. Students were seen to daydream on the one occasion she failed to define a purpose.

Assessment. Of course, her students were given the DIBELS test beginning in August by the reading interventionalist at Woodston. Moreover, LeBlanc kept track of student progress in several ways including class-wide reviews and formal open book tests. However, her methods were not as structured. Checking classwork aloud gave her students an opportunity to learn from their mistakes, according to LeBlanc. Some students paid attention during these reviews while others failed to correct their mistakes. Thus, she did not formally record their performance on classwork. She stated that it would make her students anxious while completing their assignments. Homework is checked to the extent of its presence; if the pages are in their homework folder with writing on them, students get a stamp for completion. Never is any homework graded for accuracy either. Finally, students took formal tests as part of their *Harcourt Trophies Reading Program*; however, LeBlanc allowed students to take them using an open book format. She stresses that it is important for them to learn re-reading skills and how/where to find information. Also, LeBlanc felt that the test questions were “open-ended.” However, 23 of the 25 questions were multiple choice or true/false. Additionally, the teacher picked up the students’ tests before accepting them and stated which questions they needed to review prior to turning in their tests. These were the only methods of assessment viewed during the investigation; no authentic or informal assessments were completed.
Beginning her daily reading instruction, LeBlanc opened by reading a brief poem entitled, *Hurry Hurry*. She told her students to listen to the reading to decide whether or not it sounds like something they do at their houses. After telling a student who wanted to read with her to wait until another story in the day, she asked if the class was ready before beginning the reading. She read the following poem aloud using intonation:

*Hurry, Hurry*

You say hurry, Jesse, hurry, Jesse - late, late, late

I say please mama, please mama – wait, wait, wait

You say hurry, Jesse, hurry, Jesse – go, go, go

I say can’t mama, can’t mama – no, no, no

You say what Jesse, what Jesse – why, why, why

I say trouble mama, trouble mama – try, try, try

You say right Jessie, right Jessie – time, time, time

I say thanks mama, thanks mama – fine, fine, fine

Following the poem, the teacher asked if any of its contents sounded familiar. A student commented that it rhymed. “Hmmm, now what do you do when you are late for something?” asked Mrs. LeBlanc. Mike responded, “You hurry up and go!” The teacher agreed that people rush when they are late for something. Another student added, “And you sometimes forget stuff.” Again, the teacher had similar sentiments saying that the student sounded just like her.

Transitioning to the next segment of instruction, LeBlanc told her students to look at the phonograms for the week: –ame and –ake. She asked how these two are alike.
Students responded with several different answers like “They both have an ‘E’ at the end” and “Both have an ‘A’.” LeBlanc added that those ‘A’ sounds are long vowel sounds. Then, she led them in a game in which students had to give three answers to each of her questions like, “What are three words the have –ame in them?” Students delivered the words ‘name,’ ‘game,’ and ‘fame.’ “Good job, girls and boys,” said LeBlanc. Then, students responded with several answers to a question about words containing the –ake inflectional ending.

Moving on from that exercise, LeBlanc told the class to take out their reading practice books. On page 12, there were some riddles that required students to write a word from the word box on each line. After reading the directions aloud, LeBlanc quieted one student by telling her to never mind page 11 and that they would be skipping it because of time restrictions. The teacher and students completed the first riddle together. It read: People play them. They are ________. LeBlanc asked one student, Adrian, “What do people play?” Adrian responded correctly with “game.” “Good girl,” said LeBlanc, congratulating her for her effort. She also reminded her students to circle the word at the top of the page to indicate that it was already used. The teacher followed by asking her students if they wanted to complete one more riddle together as a class. They merrily responded with a “Yeah!” Lastly, the students began working on the riddles individually; meanwhile, LeBlanc monitored from a distance, correcting one student, “Come on, Matthew . . . by your self.”
Interview with Principal from Shaw

Background/Education

Originally from Arkansas, Leslie Sweeney attended the Ridell University. There, she obtained a bachelor’s degree in elementary education as well as a master’s degree in special education. Moving to Louisiana shortly thereafter, Sweeney began teaching in the same public school system in which she currently works. Educating special education students for 19 years has given her insight into methods of meeting the special needs of students. Meanwhile, she attended another major university to earn her specialist certification in administration. In addition, Sweeney also worked as a fourth grade teacher for three years before receiving the promotion to be the principal of the school. Shaw has a history of promoting from within in order for their established educational frameworks and traditions to be continued even with changes in leadership. Even when she was in undergraduate school, she always longed to work as an administrator in an elementary school; she thought having that role would allow her to have the strongest effect on children’s education. Sweeney said that she is very grateful to have worked under several principals who allowed her to be part of the decision-making process at Shaw.

Sweeney stresses that having high expectations is the central tenet to having a successful school. Not only does this include students, but also teachers. “I really do try to impress this upon my teachers, so they do their work on time and be efficient with their documentation. Also, they should have high expectations of their students behaviorally, socially, how they dress, and academically,” says Sweeney. This school-wide theme is transparent to the faculty, students, parents, and visitors alike.
Instructional Approaches

Through small group instruction, Sweeney believes that teachers can adjust their instruction to meet learners of differing intellectual abilities. Unfortunately, the parish school board has mandated that second grade teachers use whole group instruction more than any other style. This is frustrating for Sweeney and many members of her staff who were accustomed to primarily using small groups during the reading block. The entire school philosophy to reading has been changed due to the new implementation of the *Open Court Reading Program*.

Although the DIBELS test was given to second grade students, teachers used their own informal assessments to structure reading groups in their classrooms. Since the DIBELS test was not given until six weeks into the school year, the principal and teachers assumed that it would not reveal much insight that they had not already known. This deviation from the comprehensive curriculum was a valid attempt to do what the faculty thought was best for their students. After all, Sweeney says, “We teach children first. The mandated curriculum is not nearly as important as doing what is necessary for students to learn best, even if it does mean changing things around.” In addition, she provides monthly professional development meetings for her entire staff to learn from each other. She also allows each grade level of teachers to attend workshops together twice a year so that they can collaborate with other teachers in the state of the same grade level. It builds camaraderie amongst her faculty, according to Sweeney.

Parental communication is conducted in a variety of ways. Foremost, weekly newsletters are sent home to parents informing them about upcoming school events, subject material being taught, and opportunities for them to educationally assist their
children at home. Also, progress reports are sent home every nine weeks. However if a teacher feels that a child’s behavior or academic achievement needs to be addressed, then parent interviews are mandatory at the mid-nine weeks mark.

“Keeping consistency is the most difficult aspect of being an administrator. For example, just yesterday, I had a fifth grade teacher quit,” stated Sweeney. Teachers who are pregnant, get sick, and have sick children combined with hiring substitutes and even keeping the same student population are some of the problems that are present at Shaw. The high student mobility rate is a constant negative factor in school performance scores. “We are lucky to have 50 percent of our student body from year to year,” says Sweeney. Although she feels hopeless when it comes to improving this tragedy, she feels that the best Shaw can do is its best and hope that other schools are doing the same.

Reading Instruction

Although the *Open Court Reading Program* is in its first year of implementation, Sweeney believes that her dedicated faculty is fully capable of providing a rich learning environment for their students. Seeing different styles of teaching through observing other teachers model specific ways to teach and guide learners is crucial for teachers at Shaw Elementary. She thinks that it is extremely important for teachers to observe each other, especially for new teachers. Sometimes, Sweeney teaches lessons in specific classrooms to model her expertise of an instructional topic. Learning from one another is continually stressed by Sweeney.

Teachers follow the guidelines established with the comprehensive curriculum, but they focus on meeting students’ needs first. Thus, if teachers feel that the sequential order of curricular topics is not sensible for their student population, Sweeney gives them
the authority to adapt the curriculum. Still, the Edusoft tests and other formal assessments have to be taken and thus, the range of adjustments from the defined order of topics is limited. Keeping in mind that all areas of reading overlap, vocabulary is the single category with which students struggle the most. Sweeney contends:

Well, vocabulary affects comprehension and also word attack skills, so if students can’t say the word, then they certainly can’t understand it. Our students have come to us with limited vocabulary, even when they can say the word, they don’t know what it means. Thus, teachers show students word attack skills when introducing vocabulary and also talk about vocabulary in other subject areas like social studies and science too.

Balanced reading instruction is what Sweeney stresses to her faculty, even though Shaw implements a mandated, skills-based curriculum. Each area of reading: vocabulary, phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension as well as writing are crucial to a successful reading program. Thus, Sweeney and her faculty gear their instruction more in-line with their beliefs on reading than on the parish-wide curriculum. After all, superior reading teachers must focus on all of the areas of reading. Through intensive questioning, teachers can also foster higher-order thinking skills within their class, allowing students to visually comprehend what they are reading.

Assessment

Academic achievement is measured using several methods including reading responses, formal tests, and computer-based tests. When students write responses to questions about stories they read, teachers can determine how much learning, if any, is occurring. The computer-based Edusoft tests are assessments that students must take after
each curricular unit is covered throughout the year. Teachers also conduct informal assessments at their discretion to learn more about the strengths and weaknesses of their students. End of the week tests are primarily taken from the Open Court materials; yet, some teachers still make their own tests when they feel it is more appropriate.

As an administrator, Sweeney has assessed her own effectiveness throughout the past three years as principal. She initially gave out surveys to her teachers to fill out in regard to her effectiveness; however, she quickly realized that they just gave her answers that they felt she wanted to see. Nowadays, she judges her effectiveness by how smoothly the school runs, including how well students are actively engaged in the classrooms and follow rules at the playground, and whether or not teachers are working collaboratively.

Student test scores would not be a fair evaluative tool, says Sweeney, because of all the factors that go into those numbers. Another goal of Sweeney’s is to keep her teachers motivated. She writes jokes and phrases of the week, which she puts in her teachers’ mailboxes. Sometimes, treats or snacks are handed out if she feels that a week has been extraordinarily difficult on her staff. She continually reminds her teachers that they are doing a great job and that just reaching a few can change their lives forever. Sometimes, she reminds her teachers that “being the bright light in a child’s life is what we must do.”

Interview with Ms. Benson from Shaw

Background/Education

As a native to the southern Louisiana city in which her school resides, Benson has lived her entire life within several miles of her workplace. Educated in a private school setting, Benson learned at an early age that she longed to become a teacher. In the third grade, she completed a class project in which she learned about the career aspects and
opportunities in the educational sector. However, when she started college, she thought that occupational therapy might be more meaningful to her. It was not until almost two years later that she changed her mind back to pursue her passion for teaching children. That desire has only increased throughout her three years of teaching at Shaw Elementary. As a second grade teacher, Benson feels that every child can learn, but it is crucial for teachers to get on their level. She states, “I find things that relate to the students’ lives so that they better understand the material and I can reach their needs.” Teaching must be fun for both the teacher and the students; otherwise, boredom will set in for all participants. This educational philosophy has evolved from her experiences as a second grade teacher and not so much from her collegiate education. Although she received her Bachelor’s of Science degree from a major university a few miles away, she proclaims that real world experience is the only way that teachers can learn intricacies of the profession. Set up by the principal, Benson attends monthly professional development meetings in which teachers discuss lesson plans, reading/writing strategies, grade level issues, technology utilization, and what works or does not work in the curriculum. Benson thinks that these sessions allow educators to learn from each other, an opportunity that most teachers cannot afford to miss.

Classroom Management

Benson explains that managing student behavior in the classroom is vital to her success as a teacher. She stresses that good behavior should be rewarded. Once students notice that those who behave receive the majority of her attention, others will follow their lead. Students who follow the rules and complete their work in an orderly fashion are rewarded in various ways. Both class-wide behavior and individual behavior are given
consideration. Having “Fun Fridays,” watching videos related to subject content, and completing art projects are activities allowed when the class as a whole behaves properly. Meanwhile, individual students can receive tickets redeemable for prizes like blankets sewn by Benson, “No Homework” passes, and even “No Shoes” passes. These rewards are the “single largest motivator for students to exert effort and stay focused throughout the long school day,” says Benson.

A daily behavior chart allows students to see where they currently stand in terms of a conduct grade. Each Friday, conduct cards are sent home for parents to be aware of their child’s behavior for the week. If several students are off task, Benson implements one of several tactics like pausing instruction until students stop talking, tapping the students on the shoulder, or calling their names. She tries to refrain from verbally reprimanding them because she thinks those instances take teaching time away from all students. Keeping in mind that communication within the class is necessary for learning to occur, Benson understands that students need to talk to one another; after all, significant amounts of learning occur from student-to-student discussions. Generally, Benson will pair students or put three students in a group, switching group members regularly, so they can assist one another with classwork activities. Additionally, she contemplates other factors like ensuring each group has members of different ability levels while also considering children’s attitudes so that each entire group can easily function.

Instructional Approaches

Cognizant that her student body is on various reading levels, Benson uses one-on-one facilitation to fulfill those varying needs. During class time when students are
individually working on tasks, Benson constantly circulates around the room. She tries to
help each student during each activity, but is certain to reach at least those who she feels
need extra attention. These students are also arranged in close proximity to the teacher (in
the front of the room) when she is instructing the whole class. Benson’s desk
arrangement is not typical in that she places seats near the front, others in a second row
grouped together, and then several in the back of the class spread out. The ideology
behind the arrangement is that some students need extra attention (low level or
inattentive), others work better in groups (friendly or cooperative), and some need to
work by themselves (aggressive or distracting). Her judgment determines each student’s
placement; these can change if she deems it necessary. Benson also uses websites and
computer programs to address students who need extra phonics instruction. Simplifying
worksheets for students who have difficulties understanding the content is also useful for
a few of her low achievers.

Always striving to keep parents abreast of their child’s progress is another of
Benson’s goals. She feels that those parents who are willing to assist with the education
of their children are always looking for guidance on how they can help. Benson’s open
doors policy is shared with the parents from the beginning of the year, as they are
welcome to join the class for field trips, the fairy tale ball, pajama night, and/or
conferences. She records several phone numbers of each parent/guardian to guarantee
that someone can easily be contacted if a situation arises.

Reading Instruction

In its first year of implementation, the Open Court Reading Program is heavily
based in phonics to ensure students learn the basic skills necessary to read. Benson and
her colleagues attended a three day workshop; yet only one day specifically addressed
Open Court. Although basics were reviewed on this day, school began one month later so
it was essentially up to the teachers to learn the curriculum and the specifics of its
implementation. As time passes, Benson says that she is becoming more familiar with the
curriculum.

As an advocate of modeling, she makes every attempt to demonstrate what she
expects of her students. Showing them examples of everything from constructing
timelines to writing paragraphs is central to the modeling process. Another aspect of
making the curriculum suitable to her students’ needs is changing the order of topics.
Through arranging content in a way that her students may more easily understand,
Benson veers from the scripted and sequential curriculum. For example, she thinks that it
is more logical to teach pronouns following the lesson on nouns rather than progressing
into lessons on verbs. Still, students take unit tests so her topical maneuverability is
somewhat limited. These efforts are attempts to increase student comprehension of not
only subject material, but also within stories they read in class. Comprehension of text is
viewed by Benson to be the most widespread area of reading with which students struggle.

Free choice in selecting books to read is perhaps the greatest way to motivate
students. Students have ample opportunities to read within Benson’s classroom.
Whenever they finish classwork early, students can read books selected from the
teacher’s library, the school library, or home. Benson provides books from numerous
genres and reading levels so that students can select books fitting their interests and
reading ability. Each week, students are eager to go to the school library so they can
select a book to read. Using this frame of mind, Benson cautiously supplies a purpose for readings conducted in class. During shared reading (whole class instruction), students are informed to listen for specifics of the story; however, when they read for enjoyment, Benson does not give a purpose for the reading in an attempt to further establish that reading can be just a fun activity and does not have to be an assignment.

By using the *Open Court Reading Program*, Benson rarely finds time to infuse technology into the curriculum. Students who need remedial work are generally the only ones allowed to use the computers for phonics extension activities. Focusing instead on the five areas of reading deemed most important by the National Reading Panel (2003), Benson directs her focus on providing activities in which students can increase their fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, phonics, and phonemic awareness. Writing activities also allow students to demonstrate their comprehension of books they read. Benson stresses fluency because she does not feel that students can comprehend text without also being fluent readers. Achieving high scores on standardized tests is not the ultimate goal of her instruction; instead, she teaches in hopes that students develop, learn, and become thinkers. Benson strives to become a better teacher each day; this is one characteristic she feels superior reading teachers must possess. Patience and organization are also key aspects because without both of these, teachers would not be as effective. Finding moments to incorporate reading into other subject areas is crucial so students develop an awareness of print and the importance of reading to life in general. Finally, Benson thinks that teachers must be willing to share their ideas with their fellow teachers; otherwise, teachers could not give their students continual opportunities to learn beyond that which is prescribed in the curriculum manuals.
Assessment

Student progress is constantly being monitored by Benson, as she collects student work samples each day. Moreover, she roams around the room continuously throughout independent exercises. Being aware of where students stand in terms of mastering the material, Benson can slow or increase the rate at which she instructs. Writing samples also serve as devices that inform her about the students’ demonstrated comprehension.

“Formal assessments mostly . . . are the bulk of assessments I use,” according to Benson. These provide the teacher with grades; still, Benson likes to use some informal assessments to monitor the students’ understanding of phonics. Evaluating her own instruction is another aspect of Benson’s philosophy on assessment practices. She feels that “the way the kids are learning, not just tests, but their responses to the teacher determine whether they get it and retain it. Also, their performance next year is a big indicator.”

Ms. Benson’s Room

Grand Tour

Approaching Ms. Benson’s classroom, the artwork in the hallway immediately draws one’s attention. Students from various grades have framed and hung their paintings, drawings, and collages in the hallways outside Benson’s room. In addition, the “Welcome to Second Grade” poster is noticeable to all visitors since it hangs directly beside the front door. Her students also completed a “Favorite Sports” chart with each ball (football, basketball, baseball, soccer ball) representing one child’s preferred sport.

Within Ms. Benson’s classroom, several posters, charts, and bulletin boards display pertinent information to the students. For example, the Pledge of Allegiance and
Star Spangled Banner are not merely for decoration, but serve meaningful purposes within the classroom environment. Each morning, students say the Pledge of Allegiance aloud with other students on the intercom; however, they look at the poster so they are aware of the words and their meaning within the oath. The months of the year and days of the week are also represented on posters for the students to always remain cognizant of high frequency words in their daily instruction.

Management posters are on the front wall of the classroom like “Stick to the Rules,” “Consequences,” and “Rewards.” Benson’s management system consists of a pocket chart with varying cards. These cards can be flipped when a student misbehaves. Each student begins on a smiley face. From there, a grade shows the current level of a student’s behavior in descending order from A to F. When students fail to follow her simple rules, they are first warned. If the misbehavior continues, five minutes of recess will be taken away. The third consequence equates to no recess; instead, students stay inside and write lines. If a student ever gets four cards pulled, he/she is sent to the time-out room and a note is sent home to the parent/guardian. On the other hand, students who are not warned each day and exhibit proper behavior throughout the day are sometimes rewarded with verbal praise, positive notes sent home, and coupons that can be redeemed for trips to the treasure chest.

In all, the classroom measures approximately 25 feet by 30 feet. Some of her 20 students are grouped and others are not. This unorthodox seating arrangement gives the students their own space, but does not allow for most students to easily work in groups. One wall of the room is not an actual wall; instead, it is a divider that separates two second grade classrooms. Noise can be heard from the rear of the room when Benson’s
classroom is quiet. The adjacent wall is covered by a white board that extends 15 feet in length. Atop the white board, a phonetic alphabet chart allows students to see which sounds can be made from each letter. However, some confusion may exist in that the pictures associated with the sounds and letters are sometimes duplicated on the chart. For instance, a picture of a camera lies above both the letter C and the letter K. Although both letters can make the “Kah” sound, the investigator found it strange in its visual appearance. Nearby, a homework chart rests on an easel so students can simply record their homework each day and be reminded of what books to take home at the end of the day. On another side of the classroom, there are five computers placed on a long table. Another chart which is placed on the wall above the computers demonstrates ways to determine whether a vowel is short or long. For example, when a word is spelled _ote, the O will always be pronounced with a long O sound, pronounced “Ot.” A television and VCR are stationed in the upper corner of the classroom, out of the way and clearly visible by all students. Students also constructed and hung a birthday timeline which hangs in the front of the room for all to see.

The classroom environment seems conducive to learning in that Ms. Benson seemed to always keep a smile on her face and speak to the children with respect; student attitudes were positive throughout the entirety of observations. Leaving her front classroom door open further demonstrates her welcoming attitude to students, teachers, and parents alike. Benson’s demeanor is comforting while still supporting student learning, never sitting down at her desk during instruction. By literally getting down on their level, Benson circulates throughout the room, constantly monitoring and scaffolding their work completion.
Mini Tour

Classroom Management. Foremost, Benson demands proper behavior from her students. This is in an effort to establish a classroom community where students can share their opinions and learn from each other. During one day of observation, one student poked fun at another by saying, “Kevin can’t answer it.” After Kevin correctly responded to the teacher’s question, Ms. Benson demanded that the student apologize to Kevin. The student wasted no time before apologizing. Sometimes, when students were off-task, Benson told them that she was frustrated because they were not focusing. She said, “You would know how to complete the activity if you were paying attention.” Nonetheless, she still gives those students step-by-step instructions on how to catch up on their assignments.

Rewarding students for good behavior was observed almost every day of observation. Benson’s use of handing out coupons towards a raffle drawing redeemed for prizes on Fridays seemed to be the student favorite. Other types of rewards included verbal praise and notes sent home. Statements such as, “I see Chelsey has started . . . so has Kevin . . . good job!” were often made by Benson to instill the notion that she will only give attention to students who are on task and behaving properly. Students were thrilled at getting to take home simple notes from the teacher that read, “Your child did an excellent job in reading today. You should be proud!” Consistently, Benson rewarded students for proper behavior compared to the limited number of times misbehavior was acknowledged. Generally, a simple warning accompanied by a “mean look” was enough of a deterrent to prevent further instances of misbehavior.
Time management was crucial to staying on track within the curriculum. Benson always set a timer so students would know exactly how much time they had for each activity. Holding them responsible for time management is another lesson she hoped her students would learn. Sometimes, Benson re-set the timer so that students could have some extra time if she deemed it necessary.

Instructional Style. For learning to occur, subject material must be presented in some sort of meaningful way. This is not only evident in Benson’s theoretical goals of instruction but also within her daily actions as a classroom teacher. Every single moment that she is not instructing the whole class, she is facilitating students either in a small group format or individually. Getting down on the ground and having a discussion with each student occurs several times throughout every day. Furthermore, she reaches the students on their level by relating the material to their lives. Benson makes statements like, “The author first got started by writing and drawing about things he and his friends did when they were young like playing ball, building club houses, and going to recess.” She also makes purposeful mistakes so that her class knows that she is human and can learn each day just like them.

Having fun in the learning process plays a role in her class’s enthusiasm. Her students have free choice in classwork assignments, like “You can copy the definition or use the word in your own sentence.” These opportunities allow students to feel like they are in joint control of what they learn. In addition, Benson keeps her reading block schedule flexible so that her students do not become bored during instruction. Switching the order between phonics and reading allows her to keep students on task to a high degree.
Reading Instruction. Benson utilizes an array of skill-oriented approaches within her reading instruction. Through conducting picture walks (flipping through the book and looking at the pictures to make predictions about the story) and word walks (looking for unfamiliar words throughout the book), students inform Benson of their prior knowledge about the contents of the story and their familiarity with its words. These factors guide how she approaches the adjoining lesson. When students have difficulty pronouncing words, she advocates using phonological approaches like sounding out words. Benson also uses a variety of approaches to teach the same concept. For example, to teach sequencing, Benson employed a story map, re-reading, multiple texts, writing activity, and student-to-student questioning. In addition, she also taught mini-lessons within lessons when the opportunity arose. For instance, her students found definitions to vocabulary words within the glossary of their reading book. She informed them about guiding words and how they can be used to find the vocabulary words.

Active participation allows students in Benson’s class to read orally and silently during class time. Benson also stresses that students should hear her read aloud each day. Through using multiple senses in reading, one can better comprehend what is being read. Benson feels that students learn through doing, so she often assigns writing activities that spark creative thought. Her prompts include asking how and why questions like “How would the old man have pulled up the turnip by himself if the old man had lived alone?” Students were able to write their own thoughts and have fun in the process (see Figure 9).

Assessment. Without keeping a record of student progress, Benson says, “I would never know how to teach my lessons.” Thus, she methodically takes a detailed record of how her students are performing on classwork, homework, and tests. She allows her
students to correct their own spelling tests, claiming it serves as an opportunity for them to learn from their peers. Still, sometimes students did not correct their tests properly.

This occasionally went unnoticed by Benson. Other times, students more carefully followed along during the checking process (see Figure 10). Besides constantly monitoring her students work throughout the day, Benson gives a weekly comprehension test on each story read. When students are assigned independent work, Benson follows those activities with review sessions. Either on the overhead or whiteboard, Benson reviews the correct answers to the classwork assignments so that students can check their answers. If those have a similar meaning, they are correct and students put a check. If a student wrote an incorrect response, he/she changes it to the right answer. This is an evaluation process that students must complete; its premise is to be a learning activity rather than an assessment process. Ms. Benson does not conduct authentic assessments; instead, she focuses on formal and informal instruments of assessment.
Each day, students begin their reading class by completing some exercises posted on the white board. These phonics-based activities aim to improve students’ grammar usage and phonemic awareness. On this day of investigation, there were six sentences written on the board. The directions stated that students should make these nouns possessive. For example, “I saw my ________ (brother) friend yesterday.” Meanwhile, the teacher took a small group to the carpet area to work more intensely, using direct instruction to instill the rules for making nouns possessive. Once the teacher saw that everyone was finishing their sentences, she reviewed the correct answers with them in a joint activity in which students were selected to write the answers on the white board. To reinforce the concept, Benson asked, “What if I had just added an ‘S’ without the
apostrophe to brother?” The students responded, “It would have been more than one.” She said that they did a great job, and they need to remember that apostrophes make nouns possessive.

After this activity was completed and erased from the board, Benson wrote another slew of sentences. Together, the teacher and students determined which words had short vowels sounds and which contained long vowel sounds. Students used the long vowel cards posted on the side wall for assistance. There were approximately 15 words with specific vowel combinations like -ee, -ea, -oi, and -ay on the other side of the white board. Benson began asking questions in which the answers could be found from these words: “Tuesday was ____________.” Students raised their hands in a frenzy competing to answer the question, so Benson employed a system in which the student who answers the question and erases that word from the board must select another student of the opposite sex to answer the following question. This activity allowed most students to have a chance to go to the board and answer a question.

Afterwards, Benson decided that it was time for the daily read, Dean’s Team. She passed paper copies of the book to the students and told them to do a “word walk.” Similar to a picture walk, word walks include going through a book, finding words which are unfamiliar or cannot be pronounced properly. The teacher carefully wrote these words on the board, pronounced them, but did not define them before the story was read. Next, Benson advised students to read the story silently; however, before all students finished the reading, she informed them to flip back to the first of the story (p. 3) and follow along. She read aloud the story and raised her voice when she neared words she wanted her students to assist in the reading. This technique forced students to pay attention since
they were listening, reading, following along, and pronouncing some of the words. Following this activity, students were told to read the story once more aloud and in unison. Once they finished the reading, Benson commented that something in the story threw her off a bit. “On page five, what does ‘sweet pitch’ mean?” She allowed several students to respond before thanking them for explaining it to her.

Using the paper books, Benson told the students to underline words in the story with long vowels; yet, she did not allot enough time for the majority of the students to finish. Nevertheless, she monitored students’ work completion but her desk arrangement did not allow her to walk around every area of the room easily. Thus, some students did not get monitored to the extent of other students who sat in the middle of the room. As the students flipped back to page three, the teacher asked various students to state the long vowels in each line of Dean’s Team. Once the students finished locating the words containing long vowels in the story, Benson said that they could take the book home if they returned it in their homework folder tomorrow. Immediately, the children cheered as if the story book was a prized possession. This was even after they have already read the story five times that day.

As the students put away their books, the teacher said, “I want to see your homework questions from last night.” Students took out their homework; those who did not complete it, forgot it, or left their work in their book sacks were required to write their name on the board. These students were held accountable by taking five minutes off their second recess of the day. The teacher selected students to answer each comprehension question from the weekly story, The Enormous Turnip. Benson told them that was it fine if their answers were not exactly the same. Benson addressed how the
story was fiction, but told her students that many events could have actually happened. The students and teacher decided on which events in the story were realistic and which were fictitious.

To further instill the skill of the week, sequencing, Benson gathered the students on the carpet to read another story, *The Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*. The children quickly sat and prepared to listen to the story. Still, when students knew the upcoming text, they felt the need to chime in; this behavior was not only allowed but encouraged. Some students hushed others up so they could hear the story. Once the students and teacher finished reading the story, the students began an activity in which they created an old lady by cutting out a face from a worksheet, colored it, pasted it to a piece of construction paper, and drew each animal/insect that the old lady ate (see Figure 11). This exercise forced students to actively think about the order in which the old lady ate each species. Benson set a timer for each aspect so that students would not spend too much time coloring the old lady’s head or drawing each animal/insect. Lastly, Benson assigned a flowchart handout for the students to complete for homework, further instilling the skill of sequential order within her class (see Figure 12).

Interview with Mrs. Clark from Shaw

Background/Education

Born and raised in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Clark attended public schools that she feels prepared her well for college. While at Crestburg University, she majored in animal science until she reached a course in which students were required to dissect a recently slaughtered horse. Opting out of that curriculum, Clark thought that elementary education would be a suitable field since riding horses would not pay her bills. By
Figure 11. Sequential depiction of consumed food
studying methods and instructional strategies, Clark became more knowledgeable about how to teach. This year will be her fifth year teaching; however, three of those years were spent in her hometown in Mississippi. Clark claims, “Education is much different here in Louisiana. As much as people say that Mississippi provides backwoods education and the like, Louisiana sure does have some problems in their educational system.”
Clarks sees education as instrumental to giving students a chance to succeed in life. Her educational philosophy is based on the notion that every child can learn. “No matter where they come from or what other people may say, I will have high expectations for every kid that steps foot in my classroom.” She believes that all students are capable of learning, but they must exert the effort to achieve this goal. She does not spend much time studying research or reading articles related to elementary education; instead, Clark strives to better understand her students’ unique needs.

Classroom Management

Using a behavior chart to manage student conduct is her primary course of action. Still, she says, “Many times, students get off-task and simple warnings work well. Sometimes, I have to go over to a student to show my frustration with him or her.” Respect is a large part of the overall classroom environment that Clark tries to develop. She thinks that students will respond better to asking and telling them politely versus yelling at students for misbehaving. “I realize that they seek attention, so I try to always have them participate in my lessons, so they get to voice their thoughts and opinions,” claims Clark. However, problems will inevitably occur periodically. To confront these issues, Clark sends notes home, calls parents, and also takes away school privileges that they have. For example, Clark warns misbehaving students that if they do not act appropriately, they will lose their recess. She sees recess as a privilege that can be used as leverage for behavior management.

Overall, Clark thinks that noise is not needed within the classroom; however, communication is extremely necessary. Students need ample opportunities to actively learn in class. Thus, she sees noise quite differently than academic discussion. To
encourage students to take part in her lessons, Clark praises those students who do “good work.” In addition, she allows those students who finish their work first to select from the various pieces of playground equipment. “This tends to work well, because recess is right after our reading block,” according to Clark.

Instructional Style

In order for Clark to provide adequate instruction to her students of differing intellectual abilities, she gives extra attention and strategically groups her students. Even though two students in her class are in a special education pull out program, she spends time with those students, trying to further instill those concepts covered in whole class instruction. Reaching those students is what is most difficult about teaching in her opinion. Mrs. Clark divides her class of 20 into four reading groups, differentiated by academic performance. Her guided reading groups of five students allow students to read with other students of approximately the same ability; thus, no students slow down the group or become bored with the reading because it is too easy. Contacting parents of students who are having trouble is another method Clark uses to foster further learning opportunities for their special needs. She comments, “If I don’t call parents, they will be the first ones up here complaining that their kid is failing in my class, so I contact them to prevent all that.” There is not much need to contact those parents whose children are behaving properly and doing well academically, according to Clark.

Reading Instruction

Clark was unfamiliar with the Open Court Reading Program prior to this school year. However, she has found over this year that there are many strengths and weaknesses to it. “It is just something I have to deal with, so I try not to worry about it, since I can’t
do anything about it,” states Clark. She did attend a formal training for the program; yet, like Ms. Benson, she found that it was not complete, so she learned the bulk of the program on her own. Essentially, the program does not allow Clark to individualize her instruction, as the majority of its lessons are whole class. Still, she says that circulating around the room to answer questions and check students’ work helps them along the way. “Students always seem to struggle with comprehension,” according to Clark. Therefore, she asks questions. Through questioning techniques, she believes that the students learn from hearing other students respond and critically compare those responses to their own thoughts.

Most of the time, Clark claims to stick to the curriculum, because it is already mapped out for her. Plus, if she ever gets side-tracked, all she has to do is look back in the curriculum manual to find her place. Overall, she finds that giving students free choice leads to management issues, so “I avoid doing that at all costs. Kids behave much better when you give them a simple worksheet to do . . . plus those are easier to grade.” This methodology also serves to establish the reasoning behind not having a classroom library. Moreover, the only available types of literature to which students have access are the basal reader and the *Time Magazine for Kids* that students receive every week. In addition, no technology is utilized towards student learning; the computers are only used for students to take assessment tests.

In all, Clark feels that the five most important aspects of reading are fluency, vocabulary, phonics, writing, and comprehension. These are the areas that she tries to stress within her instruction. Although “I hate to admit it, we have to teach students to do well on the standardized tests. That is a reality everyone must face,” claims Clark. This
further establishes why she follows the scripted curriculum exactly as it is arranged. Superior reading teachers must have patience. Clark asserts, “Kids these days come from homes where they are allowed to run rampant—they have no rules to live by. That’s why, when they get to school, it is a totally different world for them.”

Assessment

Although Clark tries to conduct some informal assessments, they are generally limited to checking over their work at the end of reading class. Since her students participate in whole class instruction most of the time, a small amount of student work is actually picked up by the teacher. Formal tests are issued each Friday for the students to demonstrate their vocabulary knowledge and comprehension of the weekly story. These also serve as practice opportunities for the ILEAP test that is given at the end of the school year. “I take their weekly test scores to determine their overall grades,” says Clark. Thus, the homework and classwork serve as practice for each week’s formal test. When students fail to complete homework, their recess is taken away; this serves as a motivating factor in Clark’s classroom.

Mrs. Clark’s Room

Grand Tour

Located in a temporary building in the rear of the school, Mrs. Clark’s classroom is newly constructed. It contains amenities like two bathrooms and a water fountain to allow students to easily fulfill their needs while not taking much time away from learning. Still, an easel leans on the water fountain, demonstrating how neither is used in the classroom. The room measures 30 feet by 35 feet. Two doors are located in opposite corners of the room; however, there are no windows at all. Since this is the first year Mrs.
Clark has taught in this building, a significant portion of her supplies and materials are stacked on tables rather than organized on the shelves within the room.

All walls are covered with posters, charts, boards, messages, cards, and art work. Posters disclose all sorts of pertinent information for students including classroom rules, positive characteristics, punctuation marks, and parts of speech. Not only do students know word meanings like honesty, respect, effort, and responsibility, but also have specific examples of each trait being carried out. For instance, there are several statements about honesty underneath its heading like: 1) Being truthful to others, 2) Being truthful to yourself, 3) Doing what’s right regardless of who’s around, and 4) Being someone others can trust. Clark comments that students use some of these characteristic words within their own speech just from having the posters in the classroom. There are also informational bulletin boards about the state of Louisiana, depicting historical landmarks, people, and cultural items. Motivational posters are spread out in the classroom reminding students, “You never know what you can do until you try,” “Have the courage to do your best,” and “Let your dreams run free.”

The calendar chart and the behavior management system also can be found in the back of the classroom. Clark’s management system includes a multi-colored flip chart with specific colors equating to letter grades: Green = A, Yellow = B, Orange = C, Blue = D, and Red = F. Each student has his/her own pocket; in addition, each colored card has information as to what should be expected based on that behavior level. Students who still have green cards at the end of the day get a reward, yellow cards are merely warnings, oranges mean the teacher sends a note home, blue means Mrs. Clark calls
home, and Red means a parent must come to school to discuss the issue with Clark and the principal at Shaw.

Students are accustomed to looking back at the phonetic alphabet chart and long vowel sounds cards. As part of their phonics instruction, students are encouraged to look at the charts and cards to determine how particular words should be pronounced. For example, when the teacher writes the word “wheelchair” on the board, she encourages the students to look at the –ee vowel combination which can be found on the back wall on the “long E” card. Once students find the card on which the letter combination is found, they know how to pronounce that part of a word. Besides these charts and cards hanging on the wall, there are a guided reading table and a large rug, both of which are used for reading groups. In the front of the room, the white board covers about 15 feet in length of wall space. The words that Mrs. Clark writes on the board show up very well when combined with the fluorescent lights on the ceiling. Each day’s homework assignments are written on the white board to ensure every student can easily read and copy those tasks. It also serves as a next day reminder to both the students and the teacher that Clark will check whether or not each student completed the exercises, activities, and/or readings.

Furthermore, a television and VCR are located in one corner of the classroom. These devices are mostly used by the physical education teacher on rainy days. An unused podium and five computers are also located along one entire side of the classroom. The only computer that was turned on was the one on the teacher’s desk; meanwhile, the remaining four were unplugged and some devices like mice and keyboards were still wrapped in packing bubbles for the entirety of the observations.
Students sat in desks placed in five columns and four rows, facing the front of the classroom. One desk was placed beside the teacher’s desk in hopes of managing that student’s behavioral outbursts.

Mini Tour

Classroom Management. Ensuring students are held accountable for their work plays a large role in the classroom environment. The first task every day on Clark’s list of duties is to check homework. Those students failing to present their completed assignments have at least a portion of their recess taken away. Although her students do not like this rule, Clark is adamant that this methodology promotes homework completion. In addition, other scare tactics are implemented for students to behave as Clark wishes. On each day of observation, it was noted that Clark made threats to her class so that they would “straighten up.” She often made comments like: “If you want to fidget now, I suppose we will just work through recess” and “Some of you must not want recess today.” Besides threatening to issue punishments, Clark did give her students verbal praise. Congratulating children on trying hard, getting the right answers, and staying focused were commonplace. Moreover, Clark realized that it was difficult for her second grade students to sit still in class all day; therefore, she had the students participate in stretching exercises. The children stretched high, low, and to each side; they also completed 10 jump-n-jacks before sitting back down in their chairs. This procedure seemed logical, but often yielded negative results as it excited the students instead of making them tired.

During periods of whole class instruction, students often participated by answering the teacher’s questions. Students continued raising their hands and making
comments about how they had previous experiences related to the subject material. Unfortunately, Clark often dismissed the importance of students’ thoughts by saying, “Save the stories.” Although it appeared like she would allow for student responses after those portions of instruction, she rarely carried out those discussions. One child in particular was deemed a behavior problem so he sat directly beside the teacher’s desk. Many times, he appeared frustrated that his desk placement was away from the rest of the class. This led to the student refraining from completing many assignments and classwork activities; furthermore, when he did attempt to participate, he was never called on by the teacher.

Instructional Style. For the majority of the reading block, Mrs. Clark taught her students in a whole class format. She claimed that this allowed her students to actively participate in the lesson as well as learn from each other’s responses. Requiring her students to raise their hands to be called, Clark raised countless numbers of questions each day. Students quickly realized their voice could be heard in class if they followed this rule. As a result, students often raised their hands to answer her questions even before critically thinking about the questions. Thus, it took considerable time for many students to determine answers to her questions once they were called upon. She alternated her questions between two types: leading and review. Leading questions took information that students already knew and built additional concepts on that data (e.g., “Since we know that -_e makes the ‘long e’ sound like in ‘he’ and ‘she,’ what do you think the -ee spelling sounds like?”). On the other hand, review questions were just a way to ensure students understood subject material that was previously taught (e.g., “Remember when we talked about the -ea spelling, what sound did that make?”).
Mrs. Clark’s voice projected incredibly well in her classroom. Not only was she loud, but also the room seemed to amplify her voice because of its low ceiling. In addition to being heard, Clark ensured that her students understood her instructional style. She asked her students questions like, “Why do you think Mrs. Clark doesn’t go in order every time she points to words on the board?” Allowing students to analyze her own methods of instruction helped students understand their teacher’s reasoning.

Still, there were times when Clark appeared lost in the curricular track of the reading program. She made comments like, “What I am going to do is . . .” Meanwhile, she hurriedly looked to find her place in the manual so she knew what to teach next. One time, she even asked the investigator for assistance because she could not find the manual for two days in a row. The only other time the investigator actively participated in the classroom was when Clark asked if she had spelled the word “vacuum” correctly. Indeed, she had spelled it “vaccum,” but was corrected by the investigator of this inquiry for the sake of the student body.

Reading Instruction. Clark used direct instruction to teach crucial information to her students. There was much confusion within her class about how to determine the number of syllables in words, so Clark simplified it for them. She said:

You determine how many syllables are in a word by counting the vowel sounds.

Like in ‘pencil,’ count them: one, two. Keep in mind that some vowel sounds will have more than one vowel in them like -ea, -oo, and -ai.

Once students practiced using this rule a few times, they understood the concept much better. Reviewing classwork that students completed individually also occurred in Clark’s
classroom. She went over the correct answers to these activities so that students could use those worksheets as study guides for upcoming tests.

To increase students’ comprehension of stories, Clark allowed students to take picture walks each Monday so they could predict what they thought would occur in the stories before actually reading them. This served an additional purpose of increasing student interest in the upcoming teacher read aloud. Clark always read the weekly story to the class, having them closely follow with their fingers in their own basal readers. She felt that modeling fluency was crucial in an elementary classroom, adding, “I always stop and ask questions every couple of pages to be sure they are following along.” Just writing questions and answers on the white board served to model proper penmanship to the students.

Once she completed the phonics portion of the reading block and read the weekly story, she took small groups for guided reading. Meanwhile, the rest of class completed worksheets, answering vocabulary and comprehension questions. During her guided reading sessions, Clark told students to take turns reading, also known as round-robin reading. She supplied words that students did not know, but never probed students to apply reading strategies like using context, pictures, or sounding out words. Instead, she primarily listened to the students read, followed along, and told them to return to their seats. She conducted no running records nor kept track of students’ strengths and weaknesses during their oral reading.

Assessment. Clark implemented a minimal number of assessments during the five weeks of observations. She claimed that multiple assessments just bogged her down; additionally, she thought that formal tests supplied with the *Open Court Reading*
Program were adequate from which to derive student grades. Those tests given on Fridays seemed to resemble many of the worksheets that she supplied her students throughout the week. Thus, her instruction and assessment practices almost directly resembled one another. Teaching to the test seemed quite transparent in Clark’s room; yet, she thought that it was a great idea because her students were not failing.

Although she did check homework, the only factor it played in her classroom was to determine whether or not a student could attend recess. Homework was physically recorded in her grade book, but it had no influence on a student’s overall grade. Clark also observed student progress as they worked on independent work after she finished her guided reading groups. She was able to conduct a small number of informal assessments through the monitoring of her struggling students especially.

Vignette: October 18, 2006

Each day, students received spelling words aimed at teaching certain phonics skills. On this day of investigation, the words were: playing, sleeping, raining, sailed, peeked, and cleaned. While Mrs. Clark was writing the words on the white board, she told her class to pronounce each word as she pointed at it. Students read aloud the words without any major problems except for the word “sailed.” Clark said to them, “I want to hear the “duh” sound in the last three words, so let’s try it.” Covering up the inflectional ending -ed with her hand, students said “sail,” followed by “duh” once she switched to covering up “sail.” “Good, again,” said Clark. Students responded, “sail-duh.” In all, Clark had her students repeat the words ending in -ed five times.

Moving to the next activity, Clark erased the spelling words and wrote several sentences on the board. These were intended to review sounds that the students already
knew. Clark chose the first sentence, “The lady’s son ate the peach with cream.” She asked her students to pick out the letter combinations that they remembered working with in class. Students identified the -th, -ch, and -ea letter combinations with the sounds they made. In a similar fashion to the spelling word exercise, Clark told her students to read aloud the sentence several times. Using this review as a springboard to possessive nouns, Clark moved into the next segment of the lesson.

She informed her class that apostrophes indicate possession, “so when you see an apostrophe followed by a ‘s,’ you know that the object which it refers to belongs to that person, place, or thing.” Using the sentence that was previously discussed, “The lady’s son ate the peach with cream,” Mrs. Clark explained that the son was the object who belonged to the lady. “Just as if it were Jimmy’s ball or Rhonda’s purse.” The students kept telling Clark that they understood; still, she supplied a few more examples. Then, she passed out a worksheet for the students to practice making nouns possessive (see Figure 13). Clark took this time to check the upcoming lessons in the curriculum guide of various subjects during the rest of the day to ensure she was in-line with the curricular track. In addition, she assisted a few students who raised their hands with questions pertaining to the activity. Once most students were finished with the assignment, Clark reviewed the correct answers to the questions. She made the class pronounce each answer together after the answer was known. Calling on student volunteers was the predominant method for gathering answers to the questions; still, Clark supplied several answers near the bottom of the handout when she felt rushed for time.

Once the class finished working with words, the teacher read aloud the story, *Helping Out.* Clark reminded her students that they should use their fingers to follow
Write the possessive form of each noun in parenthesis. ( )

1. Would Dad's idea for a baseball field work? (Dad)
2. One day, the boy's parents came to school. (boy)
3. Teddy's dad asked him to get some water. (Teddy)
4. At first, the field's dirt was dry and cracked. (field)
5. At home, the player's nickname for the boy was Shorty. (player)
6. The soldier's eyes were watching me play ball. (soldier)
7. The camp's baseball field needed to be cleaned up. (camp)
8. The fielder's glove was brown. (fielder)
9. The girl's bat was lying on the ground. (girl)
10. In school, the teacher's language was English. (teacher)
11. One group of people start to speak another language's language. (group)
12. Many of the world's languages could disappear. (world)
13. LeRoy Sealy's goal is to keep Choctaw from disappearing. (Sealy)
14. This Native American's home is in Oklahoma. (American)
15. Today, the man's niece is learning Choctaw. (man)
16. A turtle's name in Choctaw is loki. (turtle)
17. One word's meaning is friend. (word)
along as she read. Reading the story quite speedily, she spent more time focusing on the “About the Author” page. Trying to spark interest about the author, Clark explained where the author was born and what significance his childhood had on his writing of the story. The students were quiet and listened; still, their comprehension of the author’s characteristics and background information was questionable. Finally, the teacher and students answered the first two comprehension questions together. Once Clark was assured they understood the contents of the story, she assigned them to complete the remaining three questions individually. Many students began discussing the story with each other, yet Clark insisted they complete the questions solo.

A short time later, Clark handed out another worksheet containing two questions for the students to respond (see Figure 14). These “writing prompts,” as she referred to them, were handed out before students finished the comprehension questions from the story. Clark said, “This allows them to conjure what they will be writing about.” However, the handout was based on the previous week’s story, and not the one for which they were answering comprehension questions. Although students did not appear disturbed by the assignments from different stories, the organizational plan behind her instruction seemed unclear to the investigator.

Even after the students completed these writing prompts and the possessive noun worksheet near the first of class, Clark passed out an assessment for the students to take later during the reading block (see Figure 15). This test measured both vocabulary knowledge and comprehension of the story, *The Enormous Turnip*. Apparently, this test was given because Clark failed to cover the required material during the previous week. “As long as I get it done, we’re good,” she said. Playing catch up throughout the day
1. Is this story real or make-believe? Tell why.

- Make believe because mice's do not help cats
- Dog do not help cats

2. List the people and animals who try to pull up the turnip. Name them in the order that they begin pulling.

- The old man
- The old woman
- The granddaughter
- The black dog
- The cat
- The mouse

Figure 14. Writing prompts about *The Enormous Turnip*

seemed to take away from the meaningfulness of her instruction and extension activities. Instead of providing students with opportunities, it seemed to be an attempt to cover the required curricular concepts in less than an adequate amount of time.
Match each definition to the correct vocabulary word.

D. planted  A. got bigger
E. strong  B. the daughter of a person’s son or daughter
B. Granddaughter  C. very, very big
F. turnip  D. put something into the ground so that it would grow
C. grew  E. full of power, not weak
A. enormous  F. a round vegetable that grows under the ground and may be white or yellow

Fill in each blank with the correct vocabulary word.

1. The grandparents took care of their little granddaughter while her parents worked.
2. Mother cooked the turnip so we could eat it with our dinner.
3. The little tree grew to be very tall.
4. The fish was so enormous that it wouldn’t fit in the boat!
5. These flowers grew from the seeds we had planted.
6. The wind was so strong that it blew down some big trees.

Figure 15. Assessment for *The Enormous Turnip*
CHAPTER 5.

FINDINGS, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings-Cultural Themes

After carefully reviewing the data from interviews and observations, some cultural themes were present within both social situations: both rural and urban elementary school classrooms. Before summarizing any findings from this investigation, one must look back to those two initial questions which guided this inquiry: 1) What characteristics of highly regarded literacy teachers are vital to students’ success in both rural and urban schools? and 2) How, if any, does effective reading instruction coincide and/or differ from rural to urban areas?

While keeping in mind the questions which initially served as guides for observation, the investigation progressed from its commencement. Indeed, there were unique factors to effective reading instruction found in each geographic setting. There were also specific characteristics of effective literacy teachers identified in both of the study’s settings; these were sorted into three major categories: mindsets/attitudes, critical reading instruction, and supplemental procedures. The following sections more thoroughly describe these findings.

Rural Versus Urban

Many approaches used in teaching reading varied between the two school settings. In both the rural and urban schools, unique characteristics of reading teachers were revealed. These highlights represent determinations that were made based on the entirety of this observational investigation.
Community. Within all schools it is crucial for teachers to establish rapport with their students. Yet, the rural setting was found to have allowed teachers to more closely establish familial connections. At this particular school, 70% of classroom teachers have lived in the same community their entire lives. They also attended Woodston Elementary, the school at which they currently teach. Weigel, Martin, and Bennett (2005) stressed that an analysis of teacher-family relationships was crucial to investigate when studying school-related issues. In this case, it was apparent that having already developed relationships with familial members of their students allowed the rural reading teachers certain privileges within the classroom. For example, Mrs. Creswell made it known to her students that she taught their brothers or sisters, knows their uncles/aunts, and even attended school with their parents. Creswell postulated that having a tight-knit community has several benefits including: 1) students behave more appropriately when they realize that the teacher knows and frequently speaks to their family members, and 2) students desire praise so they will more likely exert effort in hopes that the teacher will have positive things to say about them to their families. According to Henderson and Berla (1994), partnerships between families and teachers increase student achievement and cooperative learning skills. The relationships that rural teachers established with their students were determined to be more humanistic in nature.

In addition, students who regularly saw their teachers outside of class felt more comfortable within the classroom setting. Mrs. LeBlanc often visited with her students at the local grocery store, department store, or recreational outing. Rural reading teachers who established open communication outside of class had students who were more likely to communicate, participate, and discuss curricular topics in class. Cappellini (2005)
reiterates the critical need to make children feel welcome in today’s classrooms. Still, urban teachers were not as likely to see their students outside the confines of Shaw Elementary. Ms. Benson and Mrs. Clark lived within the same city, but in different areas as did the student population. Thus, little if any outside communication was possible, besides phone calls, notes, and conferences with which both schools could complete. Indeed, this factor does shape reading instruction because in the urban elementary school, both teachers had their students complete a family history project. This project was not completed in the rural school because the teachers knew most of their students’ histories already.

The rural school’s “small community living” has its intricacies which can be positive and negative in nature. “Everyone knows everyone,” claims the principal, Wesley. There are minor complications in regard to incidents that occur in class and get blown out of proportion as they are spread throughout the town. For instance, Wesley stated:

Early this school year, a student from a second grade class was acting disruptive and was sent to my office, where he disrespected me. I called his mother to pick him up from school. It was not necessary for the entire community to gossip about how the student’s parents must not be raising their child properly. It was an isolated disruption that was resolved by other means.

Thus, classroom management issues that arise in this rural school are now dealt with in a direct manner. Both Mrs. Creswell and Mrs. LeBlanc claim to deal with their student behavior problems by going directly to the parents. Instead of making a scene within class or sending students to the office, they take the parental approach. These teachers
claim to have great results because their parents view their children to be representative of themselves in the community. Unfortunately, those students who misbehave, struggle academically, or miss school regularly are looked down upon in the community. Therefore, both positive and negative correlations are made in regard to a family, based upon a student’s actions and accomplishments or lack thereof in class.

On the other hand, Shaw Elementary reading teachers confronted issues directly with students. They held their students accountable for displaying proper behavior and completing their assignments. Instead of saying, “Well, I guess mom forgot to pack your reading book this morning,” like Mrs. LeBlanc from Woodston, both teachers in the urban school viewed their students as being totally responsible for school matters. Granted these confrontations often had slight bouts of backlash, Ms. Benson knew that her students could do everything that was required. Making a point to tell her students this belief, they acted in a manner that represented her certainty.

Instructional Style. Specifically, students in the urban school were given many more opportunities to complete individual assignments than those students in rural schools. Following most teacher read-alouds, which occurred in all four classrooms of study, urban reading teachers generally gave their students individual assignments to be completed in class. On the other hand, both rural teachers either suggested or told their students to work in small groups. According to Freeman (2006), students should be given many cooperative learning opportunities in their curricular tasks. Through completing classwork in pairs or groups of four, children at Woodston assisted one another in the reading and learning of content. Moreover, basic tenants of social constructivism suggest that through conversation and discussion, children can ultimately attain higher levels of
thinking (Lehr, 1991). When solving comprehension-based questions, they compared thoughts before establishing an overall answer. Meanwhile, urban students had to read and answer questions as well as complete other activities individually. Still, urban students were also given more one-on-one assistance by their teachers. Facilitating their students was a primary instructional method found at Shaw Elementary, especially in Ms. Benson’s classroom.

Another contrast observed between the urban and rural elementary school was that urban teachers had their students complete rereading exercises to a much greater degree than did rural teachers. After reviewing both reading programs, the only suggestions for rereading were to be completed by struggling students. Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996) asserted that teacher expectations set the foundation for student success or failure in reading. Still, the urban teachers asked their students to reread the weekly story whenever they finished their classwork early. Perhaps, this contrast signifies a low confidence level that these urban teachers had in their students’ abilities to attain high scores on weekly curricular tests. Rereading the same story over and over again would potentially increase their scores; yet, it would also minimize the total number of skills, strategies, and concepts learned in reading class. Students in the urban schools were well-prepared for the prefabricated curricular tests; however, whether or not they could perform on more meaningful, thought provoking assessments was uncertain. In contrast, Mrs. Creswell, one of the second grade teachers at Woodston, suggested that her students read books of their choice brought from home, the school library, or her class library. Each week, rural students read several more books than did urban students, giving them additional avenues for learning.
Urban teachers were seen to have another reason to encourage rereading and reviewing exercises. Student transiency in this urban school measured approximately 50%. In other words, 50% of the students who attended Shaw Elementary will not remain there during the following school year. When such a high number of students move in and out of the school throughout the year, the reading performance of the entire class can suffer dramatically (Garman et al, 2000). Thus, the teachers of study chose two methods to combat this problem: review concepts to assure that their students understood information and have students reread familiar stories. Their intention was to catch up students who had difficulty with the concepts and reading material as well as assist those students who had never been introduced to the curricular topics from switching schools. Transiency within Woodston, the rural school, was not an issue at all. Most students attended Woodston beginning in kindergarten and continued their education there through the eighth grade. Some students even became teachers at Woodston, like the two participatory teachers.

Mindsets/Attitudes

First and foremost, reading teachers must realize their importance in the educational development of their students. Although all teachers who participated in the observational study admitted that they understood their crucial role to a student’s success in reading, sometimes they lost track of this frame of mind during daily instruction. For example, Mrs. Clark criticized a student for not knowing how to pronounce the -ee vowel combination; afterwards, she stated, “I don’t know that we are getting anywhere with you.” Instead of losing control, teachers must refrain from losing sight of their main goal: to provide meaningful opportunities for their students to learn. When students do not
understand something that is being taught, it is often up to the teacher to present the
information in an alternate way. Nevertheless, understanding one’s worth as a teacher
serves as a basis from which countless other positive characteristics can emanate.

Too many times, teachers view test scores as an end. Viewing students’
achievement against letter grades is sometimes limiting, rather teachers should recognize
the amount of progress made and judge that for what it is worth. At Woodston, one of
Mrs. Creswell's students was two grade levels behind; however, considerable amount of
progress was made during the period of investigation. Thus, instead of labeling this
student as being approximately 1.5 grade levels behind, the boy’s tremendous growth
should be recognized. If Creswell had not documented and kept records that the child had
improved during those months, his parents and the school’s administration would only be
aware of the fact that the boy is a “failure.” All levels of progress within reading must be
acknowledged as significant achievements in the elementary classroom. At Shaw
Elementary, Mrs. Clark moved a child’s seat next to her desk for assistance with behavior
management; using the teacher’s proximity to deter misbehavior is a reasonable method
to implement in any classroom. However, Mrs. Clark also isolated the student by rarely
allowing the student to participate in class discussions and answer questions. Clark
claimed that the student had already been in second grade once before, so she did not
think he had the ability to learn much in her class. This misbehavior of the teacher is
appalling because she took learning opportunities away from that student.

Simply having high expectations of one’s students is not enough; setting goals
and providing the means for students to reach those objectives is imperative to success
within all classrooms. Without being goal-oriented towards meaningful learning, teachers
like Mrs. Clark can focus their day-to-day instruction on merely teaching the curriculum; meanwhile, her students suffered for not having directionality. Instead, teachers should view the curriculum in advance, determine how to best provide opportunities for their students to learn that content, and set individual goals for their students to achieve. A teacher who has high morale often times believes in one’s students too. This reflexive attitude was noted within two of the four classrooms of study.

Critical Reading Instruction

    Assessment. Although there are no instruction manuals for reading teachers to accomplish their countless tasks, exhibiting characteristics of effective reading teachers is essential for students to achieve and develop as learners (Collins & Cheek, 2000). Determining information about students should be the first step in any style of reading instruction. Informal diagnostic instruments are useful in gathering these data. Based on the notion that a child’s interest in reading plays a major role in his/her reading success, attitude and interest inventories can be given to one’s class. Although no surveys were given to students during this study, informal interviews were conducted in three of the four classrooms that served a similar purpose. With the advent of scripted curriculums, teachers may see less of a purpose conducting these assessments because the entire curriculum is already mapped out for them; however, teachers also use discretion and can control the speed at which they progress through those curriculums based on student information. Too many times, teachers make assumptions about their student population that limits educational opportunities (Mason & Schumm, 2003). For example, both Mrs. Clark and Mrs. LeBlanc made outrageous assertions about the home lives of their students based primarily on assumptions about parental educational attainment and
economic status. Instead, pretests should be used to establish the depth of prior knowledge that students have in relation to topics of instruction. Once these levels are determined, instructional strategies can be geared to better meet students’ needs.

Model. Students learn from their teachers in a variety of ways. Thus, they can be viewed as apprentices, learning the ins and outs of school as well as intricacies needed to master the process of reading. Based on the observations, it is vastly apparent that teachers extensively used modeling procedures in all four second grade classrooms. New activities presented to the children were always accompanied by models provided by the teacher. Rasinski (2003) noted that modeling can assist in the construction of word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. Some of the modeling techniques observed were derived from the curricular manual; however, others were used because teachers deemed them necessary.

Skills and strategies can also be taught within any curriculum, allowing students to mimic a learned behavior. Giving students visual and auditory models is crucial to their development of these skills, because not every student can learn to the same extent purely on one’s own effort. In other words, modeling is at the center of what it means to be a teacher. For example, all four teachers being observed read aloud to their classes daily. They commented that students would read more fluently when they heard the teacher read the passage fluently. Indeed, students regularly emulate teacher behavior.

Scaffold. Through tutoring, facilitating, and scaffolding a student’s learning, teachers gave their students ample opportunities to reach their potential. It does not matter whether it is small group or individual work; a teacher can observe his/her students working and further their learning when the opportunity arises (Stewart, 2004).
Mrs. Creswell continuously monitored her students as they worked; however, it was not with the intention to grade their assignments. Rather, she facilitated each student’s learning several times a day. Getting down on the ground with them, she scaffolded their learning by asking relevant questions that provoked higher order thinking. Asking “how” and “why” questions increased the level of thought required to complete the assigned work; students also participated to a greater extent when the teacher provided one-on-one, small group, and guided reading instruction.

Another scaffolding approach is to make the curriculum relevant to the learner. Constantino and Hurtando (2005) proclaim that student achievement and motivation emerge from curriculums that are both meaningful and enticing. Comparing unfamiliar events and historical occurrences with day-to-day events that students experience allowed Mrs. Clark’s second graders to better understand the weekly texts. Once students understood topical information, they were more likely to be engaged and excited about future lessons. Thus, teachers should relate text material to students’ lives first before most instruction occurs, serving as a springboard.

Evaluate. Implementing procedures to estimate what learning occurred by reviewing posttests is critical for classroom reading teachers. Teachers must note all levels of progress made from each child; although this is sometimes a cumbersome task, it is an essential prerequisite for future instructional plans to be developed. “What did the students learn?” and “When did the students struggle?” are some questions that guide teachers through the evaluation process. A teacher must also reflect on a daily basis so that he/she can determine how to adjust his/her instructional style, pace, or sequence to
suit the needs of the student body. Furthermore, teachers must evaluate both their students and selves regularly to give outstanding learning opportunities for their class.

Supplemental Procedures

Regardless of instructional methodology and reading curriculum, students will not reach their potential without also having an environment which is conducive to learning. Classrooms should be welcoming to students with completed works hanging from the walls and print readily available to students. There was an obvious association between student interest in reading and the amount of trade books available in classroom libraries. Mrs. Creswell and Ms. Benson had libraries full of books on different reading levels and of various genres; meanwhile, Mrs. LeBlanc and Mrs. Clark failed to utilize their designated classroom libraries to the extent of the other teachers. Mrs. Clark did not even have books on the shelves, because she never even allotted time for students to read material of their interest.

Knowing the curriculum is one aspect of reading instruction that is important, but it is the transitions between parts of a lesson that must be mastered for students to stay on-task. Reed (2006) furthers that transitions shape one’s instruction. Countless examples of poor transitions can be found in Mrs. LeBlanc’s classroom. In comparison, Mrs. Creswell eased into her transition periods by bridging the gap. For example, she told her class the order of her lessons, so the students knew that they would be completing group work after listening to Creswell read the story. Thus, there was no uneasiness or uproar from the students between parts of the lesson.

Discipline should always take a minimal role when compared to verbal praise. Through giving oral recognition of a student’s work or behavior, the entire class is more
likely to work diligently and remain on-task to a greater degree (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). Students who were observed longed to participate in class; that effort should not go unrewarded. Praise and other rewards remind students to keep up the good work; everyone could use these reminders periodically. Being motivated to read is vital to one’s success.

Still, praise would eventually become less effective if teachers did not also make learning experiences fun. Challenging students in new ways with non-monotonous activities and assignments allows them to think rather than memorize (Ortlieb, 2005). Actively constructing knowledge occurs when a student is interested in the material, so a teacher must remember: 1) link instruction with interests, prior knowledge, and previous experiences, and 2) the teacher’s interest in subject matter heavily influences his/her students’ attitudes towards those topics.

Developing a relationship with one’s class is also helpful in the teaching process. Establishing rapport with students can influence how they act in class and view its importance, according to Cotton (2000). Once students realize that the teacher really cares about assisting them in any way possible, like in Ms. Benson’s classroom, they are not afraid of participating in class. In addition, students will sometimes make irrational comments in class; a significant amount of these should be taken and utilized as teaching moments. When a student asks a question about something he/she is unsure, it is likely that other students have the same concerns. Thus, teachers should welcome students’ questions at various times throughout their instruction to assure that they understand.
Summary

Through interviews and observations conducted within both the rural and urban schools, the investigator gained insight that would otherwise not have been possible to attain. The four participatory teachers of study had characteristics that affected their students’ performance, sometimes beneficial and at other times detrimental. Nevertheless, characteristics of effective reading teachers were able to be drawn from all participants. No teacher is perfect; however, possessing effective reading teacher characteristics allows an educator to excel and his/her students to develop in their abilities.

In review, it is essential that a classroom reading teacher have a positive mindset, provide critical reading instruction, and go beyond by implementing additional procedures to ensure students get the most out of their learning experiences at school. There is no defined step-by-step process through which a reading teacher must walk; yet, implementing many of the positive characteristics already mentioned allows for one’s class to become and remain engaged as well as actively construct knowledge during instructional time. Still, there are several critical areas to reading instruction. Assessing students’ needs, interests, and reading levels is the first step in a successful plan. This allows teachers to set their expectations for their class. Then, a teacher should model what is expected. This includes new concepts as well as the use of reading strategies and skills. During the modeling process, a teacher should also commit to his/her instructional plan. Students can easily recognize an indecisive teacher; this practice should be avoided at all costs. Next, teachers should scaffold their students’ learning by facilitating students’ use of strategies and concepts as well as assist when students are working individually or in a small group format. At this point of instruction, the teacher must persist. It will not
always be an easy task to help students understand and read better, especially when it seems like a lost cause. Afterwards, a teacher can evaluate his/her teaching strategies as well as determine to what extent the students have learned the information. “What can be changed to make it better?” is an example of such a reflective question. Finally, after reflecting on the entire instructional sequence, teachers must remain positive, and relax. As difficult as it is with the mandates, deadlines, and out-of-school time spent on their students’ education, teachers should maintain a positive attitude because this is a continuous process that is constantly changing. If teachers do not learn to relax or fail at doing so, they will eventually burn out, quit, and/or stop exerting 100% effort. Refueling the body and mind is crucial for all teachers (see Figure 16).

Students in the rural school were given opportunities to learn together, as opposed to the urban students who completed their work and learned individually. These allowances mark not only a difference in those teachers’ attitudes and views towards reading instruction, but also towards their student body and their potential. Should teachers instruct with the intention of preparing students to perform well on weekly tests or should teachers assign multitudes of activities geared towards learning in a more holistic fashion? Whatever the goal of instruction, teachers should not restrict their students from every educational opportunity possible; the excessive repeated instruction and rereading of stories seemed to limit urban students from gaining diverse experiences to add to their existing knowledge. This limitation within the two reading classes at Shaw Elementary seemed to prevent and restrict those students from reaching their potential. In addition, students at Shaw were thrilled to have reading opportunities in class; this mindset will unlikely continue if students are not given ample time to read from multiple
texts and genres as well as of their own interest.

Implications for Future Research

Continued inquiry into the rural and urban reading teachers could offer additional insight into their effectiveness. In turn, other teachers can gain valuable teaching strategies with which they can implement in their own classrooms, especially teachers who work in rural and urban areas. The two original guiding questions can be expanded or narrowed in an effort to portray beyond the overall reading instruction of second grade teachers.

Further research opportunities exist in regard to looking at how cultural aspects of students affect their behavior and performance in reading class. Students come to school
with varying knowledge; research into its effect on student achievement and teacher-directed instruction could emanate. Many intricacies were also revealed during observation that could not be accounted for by solely looking at how teachers effectively educate their students in reading.

Limitations

The use of two separate reading programs within the rural and urban school of study could have altered the methodological approaches pursued within the reading instruction of teachers within the study. Although both programs were similar in that they were skills-based and contained basal readers, there were differences in the suggested activities and stories included in the basals. A comparative analysis of rural and urban schools using the same curricular materials could allow findings to be deemed appropriate for schools using that particular curriculum.

This study’s narrow scope of focus, four second grade reading teachers in two geographic settings, could be viewed as a limitation. Thus, a study emphasizing a broader scope to include more grade levels (e.g., first, second, and third grade) could more effectively reveal characteristics of reading teachers that allow them to teach children to read. Increasing the number of observed teachers would provide the investigator with a broader spectrum of experiences. Additionally, the number of administrators interviewed could be considered a limitation. Administrators do have considerable influence on how their faculty teaches reading. Therefore, this study could be further enhanced by including not only the head principal of the school, but also assistant principals from each school. Their perspectives related to reading could be used to compare their ideologies to their classroom teachers’ philosophies for effective reading instruction.
REFERENCES


National Center for Education Statistics (2004). *Student Ethnicity*. Retrieved March 17, 2006, from http://nces.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/school_detail.asp?Search-1&InstName=audubon+&City=baton+rouge&State=22&Zip=70815&Miles=10&County=east+baton+rouge+&SchoolType=1&SchoolType=2&SchoolType=3&SchoolType=4&SpecificSchlTypes=all&IncGrade=-1&LoGrade=-1&HiGrade=-1&ID=220054000341

reading instruction (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). Washington, DC: U.S.
Government Printing Office.

No Child Left Behind: A Desktop Reference (2002). Washington, DC: Office of the
reference.html

Northern California Council for the Community. (2003). School readiness and academic
ncccsf.org/report/school-readiness.htm

Organizations Concerned about Rural Education (OCRE). (2005). REAP, E-Rate helps
schools.org/news/letter.html

State University.


Page, R. (2002, July 22). Key policy letters signed by the education secretary or deputy
Secletter/020724.html

CA: Sage.


primary teachers nominated as effective in promoting literacy. The Elementary


# APPENDIX A

## OBSERVATIONAL TABLE OF THE NINE COMPONENTS
OF EVERY SOCIAL SITUATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:_____________</th>
<th>School:_______________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time:_____________</td>
<td>Investigator:___________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Space</strong> (the physical place or places)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actor</strong> (the people involved)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity</strong> (a set of related acts people do)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Object</strong> (the physical things that are present)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Act</strong> (single actions that people do)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Event</strong> (a set of related activities that people carry out)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time</strong> (the sequencing that takes place over time)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal</strong> (the things people are trying to accomplish)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feeling</strong> (the emotions felt and expressed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Additional Notes:**

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

173
APPENDIX B

SEMANTIC RELATIONSHIP CHART

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Included Terms</th>
<th>Semantic Relationship</th>
<th>Cover Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural Questions: ____________________________</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Included Terms</th>
<th>Semantic Relationship</th>
<th>Cover Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural questions: ____________________________</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

CLASSROOM TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background/Education
1. Where were you born and raised?
2. What collegiate institution did you attend? What degree(s) do you hold?
3. When did you decide to become a teacher? How many years of experience?
4. What is your educational philosophy?
5. What was the last educational article you read?

Classroom Management
6. What techniques or models do you utilize to ensure good classroom management?
7. How do you establish authority/discipline?
8. What do you do when a discipline problem arises?
9. How do you feel about noise in the classroom? How do you handle it?
10. How important is communication in the classroom?
11. What principles do you use to motivate students?

Instructional Approaches
12. How do you teach a classroom of children with differing intellectual abilities?
13. Do you contact parents? How often?
14. How do you include parents in their child's education?
15. What is the most difficult aspect of teaching today?

Reading Instruction
16. What type of reading program do you use? How long has this system been in place?
17. Were you formally trained to use this program? How?
18. Do you feel instructional models are necessary? If so, explain.
19. How do you individualize your teaching?
20. Do you modify your curriculum from year to year? How?
21. What do you find students struggle with most in reading?
22. Do students have free choice in selecting literature?
23. Is it important to supply a purpose when reading?
24. Do you expand instructional time?
25. What types of reading literature are available to your students in the classroom?
26. Do you integrate technology into the reading curriculum?
27. What are the top five reading skills that are most beneficial to students?
28. Describe how much of your teaching relates to standardized testing?
29. What important qualities make a "superior" reading teacher?

Assessment
30. How do you monitor students’ progress?
31. What do you look for to evaluate that learning is taking place in your classroom?
32. What type of assessment(s) do you use? Is it primarily informal, formal, or authentic?
33. How do you evaluate your own teaching performance?
APPENDIX D

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background/Education
1. Where were you born and raised?
2. What collegiate institution did you attend? What degree(s) do you hold?
3. When did you decide to become a principal? How many years of experience?
4. What is your educational philosophy?
5. What was the last educational article you read?

Instructional Viewpoints
6. Do you recommend that teachers instruct to differing intellectual abilities?
7. How do you include parents in their child's education?
8. How do you motivate students to learn?
9. What is the most difficult aspect of teaching today?
10. In what ways do you provide for professional development?

Reading Instruction
11. What type of reading program do you use? How long has this system been in place?
12. Do you feel instructional models are necessary? If so, explain.
13. How can teachers individualize their teaching to meet students’ needs?
14. Do you modify your curriculums from year to year? How?
15. What do you find students struggle with most in reading?
16. Do you expand instructional time?
17. Do you integrate technology into the reading curriculum?
18. What are the top five reading skills that are most beneficial to students?
19. Describe how much instruction relates to standardized testing?
20. What important qualities make a "superior" reading teacher?

Assessment
21. How do you monitor students’ progress?
22. What do you look for to evaluate that learning is taking place in classrooms?
23. What type of assessment(s) do your teachers use?
24. How do you evaluate your own leadership performance?
### APPENDIX E

#### TEACHER RATING SCALE

Classroom Teacher: _________________________________  Date: ________________

Rating Scale: 1 – 5

1. never exhibits  
2. rarely exhibits  
3. occasionally exhibits  
4. mostly exhibits  
5. always exhibits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>bases instruction on data gathered through prior and ongoing reading assessments.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>models reading approaches to students.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>scaffolds learners to increase their skill ability and reading level.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>uses verbal communication to enhance the learning environment.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>implements consistent classroom management skills.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>utilizes small group instruction during the reading block.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>designates time for students to independently read.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>allows students opportunities for higher order thinking.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>individualizes instruction according to needs of students.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX F

TEACHER CONSENT FORM

Principal Investigator: Evan Ortlieb
225-291-7803
Available: Tuesday – Friday
1:00 pm – 5:00 pm

I understand that the title of the project in which I am participating is Characteristics of Four Highly Regarded Literacy Teachers in Rural and Urban Elementary Schools. Part of the investigation will be conducted in my elementary school setting. The purpose of the study is to determine which methods, approaches, and styles of instruction are successful in particular geographic environments. I was selected for this study by the principal of the school based on my reputation as a reading teacher.

I understand that for a period of five weeks, the investigator will observe within my classroom. These visits will last for the entire reading block (90-100 minutes), and on occasion, brief interviews will be conducted before or after class. Sometimes, field notes will be recorded, while audiotapes will record conversations to be transcribed later.

I understand that the benefit of this study is to help provide a more in-depth understanding in the scholarly area of literacy instruction. My participation in the study is voluntary. I may change my mind and withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which I may otherwise be entitled. I understand that my identity will not be disclosed in the study; instead, pseudonyms will be used.

The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the researcher’s obligation to provide me with a copy of this consent form if signed by me.

______________________________    ______________
Subject Signature                  Date
VITA

The author of this paper is currently a graduate assistant at Louisiana State University. His responsibilities include both teaching the course, EDCI: 3137 Classroom Reading Instruction, and researching various topics in reading, especially in the area of diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties. He will be obtaining the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in May 2007.