Characteristics of an effective teacher of reading in an elementary school setting

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CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE TEACHER OF READING IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SETTING

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 Curriculum and Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Struggling readers have been the central focus of American politics for decades. Teachers of all ages and experiences across America deliver reading instruction in a variety of ways. The purpose of this study is to determine the characteristics of an effective teacher of reading in an elementary classroom setting. The study was conducted in a public and a private sector school in a capital city in the southern United States. Two principals, two second grade teachers, and two fourth grade teachers were participants in this study. A qualitative research focus provided the methodological basis for this study. The research design for this study emulated the work of James P. Spradley (1980), author of Participant Observation, and his Developmental Research Sequence Method. The researcher assumed the role of participant observer in the classroom. The participant role of the study involved becoming a member of the classroom. Field notes were used to record accurate data throughout the study. All six participants were interviewed, and a tape recorder was used to record each teacher’s verbal language communicative patterns. Observation data and interviews developed into cultural themes. The cultural themes applied in recurrent activities and were located in two or more domains. The themes were established as educational background experience, communication and self-efficacy, observation and modeling, assessment, environment, behavior management, free-choice, instructional time, writing, and technology. Results indicated that although different strategies and approaches were used among the principals and teachers, the same elements and philosophies were required to effectively teach reading in an elementary school classroom, whether it be a public or private sector school.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Struggling readers have been the central focus of American politics for decades. Former Presidents, educators, and researchers have provided America’s school system with numerous programs and methods to assist students in becoming better readers. Over the past two centuries, the United States has seen its fair share of strategies, approaches, and methods to conquer the trials of the struggling reader. Over time, educators and administrative staff began examining the needs of each individual child to ensure reading success for all students, regardless of school location or racial and ethnic origin.

In the early 1800s, the whole word method, which emphasized teaching children to memorize words in whole parts, was the primary choice of instruction. The latter half of the 1800s introduced children to the phonics approach, which stressed learning by using an individual sound-letter relationship. The phonics approach became unpopular in 1920 when the look and say method was considered conducive to all students’ needs. However, this approach did not survive through 1920 as the silent reading method was deemed more effective by classroom teachers and researchers. Soon after, the basal approach became the preferred method of choice as Strickland (1999) notes:

Research during this era gave rise to an extremely popular approach that followed- the basal reading program- which was launched throughout the United States in the early 1930s. The ‘Dick and Jane’ readers, as basal programs would come to be known, became the staple of reading instruction methodology in the United States for several decades. (p.9)
The basal approach is still widely used in providing reading instruction in the United States, and has been for approximately seventy years.

In the late 1980’s and early to mid 1990s, the whole language approach gained wide support. There is not one universal definition for the whole language approach that best suits all educators and researchers. Strickland (1999) defines whole language as, “the inclusion of authentic literature (such as trade books) in the students’ anthologies” (p.11). Cheek, Flippo, and Lindsey (1997) note that “the whole language perspective encompasses the view that an integrated reading and writing curriculum that uses authentic literature to empower students and teachers to learn together in a democratic learning community leads to successful reading experiences for students” (p. 442). The holistic view of whole language is clear. Authentic literacy, such as trade books, are used to identify with the students’ diverse experiences. Whole language is still used to provide reading instruction, but its impact has been significantly diminished.

The most widely accepted method in the late 1990’s has been the balanced approach. Educators are finding that all students learn differently, each with his/her own particular learning style. The balanced approach recognizes the need to use a variety of strategies that match each student’s learning style on an individual basis, such strategies might include use of basal, phonics, trade books, or all three combined. Collins and Cheek (2000) note that “Teachers have long recognized that there is no one best way to teaching reading. A combination of approaches to instruction is essential since students vary in their needs and learning styles” (p. 195).

Although reading programs, skills, and approaches have changed over the past century, the teacher’s role in the classroom has not. The teacher has the primary role of
accelerating the reading growth of elementary school struggling readers. Lesley Morrow (2002) notes that a “recent study of schools in 32 nations found the most critical element in building an effective reading program is the teacher” (Washington Post, p. A1).

America’s educational school system relies on efficient teachers to provide the most effective, successful reading instruction to improve students’ education. Yet the question remains…What are the characteristics of an effective teacher of reading in an elementary school setting?

**Statement of Problem**

Teachers of all ages and experiences across America deliver reading instruction in a variety of ways. Students require different characteristics and teaching styles from the classroom teacher to sufficiently meet individual learning style needs during reading instruction. Reading teachers must be able to link mastery of skills with the student’s comprehension process. Teaching requires educators to deliver effective reading instruction with specific characteristics that are critical in providing and implementing an effective reading program.

The statement of the problem becomes quite clear. What are the characteristics of an effective teacher of reading in an elementary classroom setting? There are obviously characteristics that are used in each independent reading program that overlap from teacher to teacher, but it is also crucial to observe characteristics that may or may not work with a partial number of students that require specific learning styles and individual needs; thus the problem lies with constructing a compilation of teacher characteristics that will accelerate reading growth in all students.
Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the characteristics of an effective teacher of reading in an elementary classroom setting. Positive characteristics that are used in the classroom setting to help struggling students gain both confidence and skill needed to excel as efficient readers were analyzed and described throughout the study. The study was conducted in a public and a private sector school. The reason for pursuing this study in a public and a private sector school is to observe teachers in radically different environments that may be managed by widely different policies. It is important to examine two different perspectives to determine if there is a difference in characteristics with limitations that may or may not include school funding and parental involvement. Since the public and private school sectors adhere to a somewhat different set of rules and regulations, it was revealing to explore the distinction that exists between the two sectors regarding effective characteristics among reading teachers.

Setting

The study took place in a capital city in the southern United States. The city is over 200 years old, and was incorporated in 1817. The Chamber of Commerce also states that the economic base of the city is education, followed by chemical industry, government, and health medicine. The city itself has a population of approximately 400,000 people that live and work within the vicinity of the community. The most recent census report took account for the median family income of the community, stating that the average person’s yearly income is $34,198.

The study was conducted in an elementary classroom setting within the city’s local school district. Observation took place in the classroom during the entire length of the
language arts block, which included phonics, basal, trade books, spelling, and/or English. The goal was to observe whole group instruction as a participant observer, being sure not to intrude on the students’ daily routine. The length of this study was approximately 10 weeks.

**The Public School System**

The district’s school system has approximately 106 public schools with an estimated number of 54,000 students. Of the 106 public sector schools, 65 schools are elementary, 20 middle/junior high, 20 high schools, and one combination school. The majority of the students (72%) that live in the city attend a public sector school. The gender ratio of the school district is 50.9% males and 49.1% females. The demographics of the district’s school system are composed of 69.3% African American students, 28.0% White students, and 2.7% students are of other ethnic backgrounds. As for students with special needs, 12% of the students in the city are placed in special education while 1.1% of the students learn English as a second language. More than half of the district receives free lunches (56.6%), 35.7% of students pay for their lunch, and 7.7% receive reduced lunch.

School districts in the United States are held accountable by rating each district according to school performance. The ratings can be labeled as *excellent, very good, good, poor,* or *unsatisfactory.* The school district that will be involved with the study was deemed “very good.” The school report card also labeled the district’s improvement and the LEAP passing rate as “excellent”, while the district’s summer school program was noted as “good.” The only area that was found to be “unsatisfactory” was the certified teacher’s label.
Each individual school district has its own policies, procedures, and guidelines to ensure success among each student. The mission statement sets forth the standards for the school district’s achievements and accomplishments. The mission statement is stated by the district’s School Board as follows:

The mission of our school system, shared jointly with the community, 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.

Another procedure the district’s school system employs is the “Zero Tolerance Policy” which went into effect on February 24, 1997. The School Board defines this policy as an anti-violence policy that makes the school a safer place for learning. The School Board also notes that about 95% of the students in the school system do not use violence as a solution to solve problems. If a fight breaks out between students who are 14 years of age or older, law enforcement is called to handle the situation. Once law enforcement takes over, a student can be penalized by receiving a misdemeanor, having to appear in Juvenile Court, sent to Juvenile Detention, or even be arrested.

The public school that has been chosen to become part of the study will be referred to as River City. River City is an elementary school that offers the kindergarten program through fifth grade. River City has a total of 423 students. The demographics of the school are composed of 19% White students, 75% African American students, 4% Asian, and 2% Hispanic. The regular education program is composed of 384, while the other 39 students are involved with the special education program. The school’s attendance rate for the previous academic school year was 95.8%, averaging to 15.4 students absent on a
daily basis. River City has a total of 24 teachers. Over half (53%) of the teachers at the school have a master’s degree or higher. The school itself has been placed in the category of *corrective action*, a result of not meeting growth requirements set by the state of Louisiana. However, the performance level of the school has been labeled as *academically above the state average*, which is in the percentile range of 79.9-99.9.

**Private School Sector**

The private school sector within this southern metropolitan city involves 52 schools, with an estimated number of 20,000 students enrolled. The private school that has been chosen to become part of the study will be referred to as Spring Creek. Spring Creek was constructed in 1947, holding its first service in the month of November. The beginning of the kindergarten program was 1948. Between 1965 and 1985, the private sector group purchased more property which eventually developed into a complete private elementary school, offering grades Pre-Kindergarten through the fifth grade.

Spring Creek is one of the oldest private schools within the district. Each classroom is provided with fully certified teachers, with an average of at least ten years classroom experience. Each teacher participates in continuing in-service training, accompanied by a total of 14 teaching assistants and extra-curricular instructors who support all classroom teachers, which allows Spring Creek to offer a low student/teacher ratio.

Spring Creek offers a combination of traditional methods with progressive teaching techniques. Reading, creative writing, and math form the core of the curriculum, which complies with the Louisiana Department of Education. The curriculum also involves educational field trips and departmentalization for the upper grade classrooms. The school is equipped with a computer laboratory, which is accessible to students throughout
the day. Each classroom is also provided with two or three computers, many with multimedia and communication technology. Appropriate education software is available to enhance classroom teaching, as well as audio equipment for all classes.

The mission statement for Spring Creek School focuses on the development of the whole child…intellectually, socially, and physically. The mission statement for Spring Creek reads as “our school provides the foundation for academic excellence in an environment nurturing the whole child.” The school itself promotes a secure, child-centered environment along with a well-disciplined atmosphere. Students accepted to attend school at Spring Creek must meet specific admission requirements.

Spring Creek has a total of 247 students. The demographics of the school are composed of 96% White students and 4% African American students. The maximum number of students allowed per class for preschool is 14, whereas kindergarten through fifth grade are allotted a maximum number of 25 students. All preschool classes share a full-time aide, kindergarten and first grade classrooms have a half-day aid, and second through fifth grade share one full-time aide.

The students’ tuition and fees represent 90% of the total school profits accumulated throughout the school year. Expenses that the school incurs over the course of an academic year include salaries/benefits, curriculum expenses, technology, facilities, teacher development, and financial aid. Limited financial assistance may be available to families who demonstrate need and meet certain qualifications set by the School Board. The total amount of financial aid given to students during the 2001-2002 school year was $8,975.
The standardized test results from the 2001-2002 academic school year for third, fourth, and fifth grade students indicated above average performance in the areas of verbal ability, reading comprehension, quantitative ability, and mathematics. The two areas that were noted as “average” were vocabulary and writing mechanics.

Significance of Study

The significance of this study is to explore the characteristics of effective teachers of reading instruction in the elementary setting for both the public and private school sectors. While observing each school setting, an analysis of the similarities and differences of teacher characteristics evident in both the public and private sector schools was conducted using a framework based on those ten characteristics of effective teaching discussed in the review of the literature and Leu and Kinzer’s (2003) principles of effective teaching presented in Chapter Three.

Throughout this study, the teacher’s perspective regarding effective reading instruction was observed and analyzed. During the course of the study, teachers were interviewed regarding their philosophy of teaching reading. Four teachers were observed throughout the study, one second grade and one fourth grade teacher from each school.

Research Questions

1. What characteristics do administrators believe are essential to providing effective reading instruction in an elementary school setting?

2. What characteristics do teachers believe are essential to providing effective reading instruction in an elementary school setting?

3. What is the relationship between teachers’ beliefs about effective reading instruction and their practices in the elementary classroom setting?
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Effective reading teachers lead each and every student in the classroom to become proficient and successful readers. Effective teachers do not use only one specific method or technique, but implement many strategies and skills to accommodate the needs and learning styles for each individual student in the classroom. Slavin (2000) notes that, “effective instruction is not a simple matter of one person with more knowledge transmitting knowledge to another. Rather, effective instruction demands the use of many strategies” (p. 4). Successful reading teachers are cognizant of the fact that reading can be taught using a variety of methods.

Who are effective reading teachers? Richard Allington (2002) notes that “effective teachers manage to produce better achievement regardless of which curriculum materials, pedagogical approach, or reading program they use” (p.740). Walls, Nardi, von Minden, and Hoffman (2002) defined effective teachers as:

appearing to have better developed schemata for classroom teaching with strong links between subject matter and ways to teach it; to be more effective lesson planners and implementers, and yet be more flexible and reflective in meeting student needs and facilitating student social and academic growth. (p. 5).

Mohr (1998) adds that an effective teacher “establishes literacy communities and encourages students to participate as responsible, contributing citizens” (p.16). As there is not one universal definition that is accepted among researchers as to what constitutes effective teaching, there seems to be certain themes that are established throughout
research, such as encouragement, academic growth, and a variety of skills and strategies.

Is teaching considered a science or an art? Eisner (1979) notes that “most who teach—indeed, even those who study teaching scientifically—often regard their own teaching as an artistic activity” (p. 153). He further explains that teaching “is an art in the sense that teaching can be performed with such skill and grace that, for the student as well as for the teacher, the experience can be justifiably characterized as aesthetic” (Eisner, 1979, p. 153). Slavin, author of *Educational Psychology*, adds that good teaching can be taught and learned by observation and practice. “An outstanding teacher does nothing that any other teacher cannot also do—it is just a question of knowing the principles of effective teaching and how to apply them” (Slavin, 2002, p. 5).

Leu and Kinzer (2003) postulate that an effective teacher of reading must follow certain principles that have been identified as instrumental in effective teaching.

These are:

- **Teacher insights** – insightful teachers use appropriate materials, methods, and management to ensure literacy.

- **Teach decoding skills** – integrating a systematic program that includes phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonic knowledge, sight word knowledge, context use strategies, and fluency.

- **Use exceptional works of literature** – offers students a variety of text types that are linked to background knowledge and personal experience.

- **Integrate reading and writing** – reading and writing are taught together to develop the language process and support literacy.
• Vocabulary knowledge helps comprehension – vocabulary instruction builds background knowledge to increase reading achievement.

• Teach reading comprehension – Enhancing comprehension through instructional strategies as well as accessing background knowledge.

• Teach reading using different kinds of texts – Using different strategies to read different types of text.

• Good assessment strategies help teachers teach – monitoring students’ progress through use of portfolios, running records, and interest and attitude inventories.

• Meet individual needs – providing a literacy program that meets the needs and learning styles of all children.

• Organize your classroom to maximize learning – classroom organization and management are key principles to integrate within literacy instruction to enhance children’s learning.

• Integrate computer and Internet technologies in literacy instruction – technology prepares students for emerging communications.

The following discussion provides a glimpse into a few popular characteristics that effective reading teachers possess. However, these represent only a small portion of a limitless number of effective characteristics that are recognized in the field of reading.

**Communication**

Positive verbalizations administered by reading teachers in the classroom improve self-concepts among the students. Books, Byers, and Freeman (1983) reported that, “entering prospective teachers believed that improving student self concept was a more worthy goal than promoting students’ academic achievement or creating a good learning
environment” (p. 13). Although the novice and/or experienced teacher understand that academic achievement and a good learning environment are crucial aspects of literacy, the self concept of each student also becomes a contributing factor to a successful reading program.

Effective teachers select terminology that includes all students of the classroom to participate equally as active members. Kathleen Mohr (1998) conducted a study with four second-grade teachers, with an average experience of 15 years, to find common characteristics of an effective teacher. Mohr found the most common theme throughout her research to be the language of Community Building.

These teachers used a preponderance of collaborative terms, such as: we, together, friends, teams, partners, and neighbors. All teachers evidenced elements of Community Building verbiage at least 76 times. The word ‘we’, was used 480 times, an average of more than 100 times per hour. (Mohr, 1998, p. 18)

These four second grade teachers did not ask the students in their classrooms if they would like to become successful readers. Rather, the teachers used Community Building language to ensure that each and every student would become proficient literacy members of the classroom.

Teacher feedback is also of paramount importance in encouraging student achievement in the classroom. Parsley and Corcoran (2003) state that “in elementary school, the teacher might frequently give individual students specific, authentic praise, When teachers give this type of praise consistently and persistently, their students begin to believe they have the ability to succeed” (p. 86). Feedback offers open-
communication between the teacher and the student to help improve the reading growth of the elementary school reader.

**Self-Efficacy**

The classroom teacher’s verbal communicative patterns are essential in developing the student’s self-efficacy in the classroom. Self efficacy deals directly with how a student views his/her ability to successfully complete a particular task. Stahl (1998) theorizes that “part of teaching children with reading problems is convincing them that they can learn to read, in spite of their experience to the contrary” (p. 183). Struggling readers tend to have a low self-efficacy, due to pessimistic thoughts affecting motivation. McCabe and Margolis (2001) also agree with the philosophy of self-efficacy contributing to success by stating “negative beliefs adversely affect their motivation to read and often become the most powerful obstacle that teachers face in helping those students become better readers. To reverse these self-defeating beliefs, teachers must understand and directly address students’ self-efficacy doubts” (p. 45).

In order for students to have feelings of success and self-esteem in the content area of reading, teachers need to instill belief and confidence within each student. When a student develops self-efficacy from within, he/she will become more motivated and inspired to improve reading skills. Without self-efficacy involved within the reading program, students will only provide nominal efforts to advance and progress with the reading curriculum. McCabe and Margolis (2001) also note:

Changing other people’s beliefs, especially those of adolescents who have struggled for years to learn to read, is difficult. Fortunately, difficult does not mean impossible. It does require that teachers be knowledgeable about self-
efficacy and that they systematically stress self-efficacy whenever students read (p.45).

The teacher-student relationship that is established in the classroom directly affects students’ motivation and achievement in reading. An effective teacher provides an environment conducive to all students. This type of environment allows each student to feel comfortable engaging in the learning process, without the fear of embarrassment or ridicule. Ford and Grantham (1997) provided results from a study which indicated that “negative teacher-student relationships decrease teachers’ motivation and expectations, and consequently, students’ motivation and achievement” (p.213).

**Self-Improvement**

Self-improvement is a strong quality that effective teachers must possess in order to successfully meet the needs of all individual learners. Collaboration and improving professional development are characteristics that directly relate to self-improvement in the classroom. By observation and inservice-type programs, collaboration and professional development can be effective for the students as well as the teacher. When implementing these two characteristics within the reading program, teachers will develop and increase the students’ literacy program.

Collaboration is an effective technique employed by reading teachers. Dorn, French, and Jones (1998) state that “the importance of teachers working together as a team of educators whose goal is to support the total child cannot be understated. Teams of teachers with a common goal can do much more than an individual teacher working alone” (p. 155). Collaboration offers the individual teacher the opportunity to expand his/her own instructional philosophy and/or implement change in theory and in practice.
Bean, Grumet, and Bulazo conducted a study in three different school districts to gather information about collaboration, grouping, and planning. “Overall, teachers who participated in the program recognized the benefits of collaborative teaching for students, i.e., they were better able to provide for the individual needs of those students who were experiencing difficulty with learning to read” (Bean, Grumet, Bulazo, 1999, p.285). Collaborative teaching can assist teachers with their professional growth and development, offering teachers opportunities to implement new strategies and techniques into reading instruction. Dorn, French, and Jones (1998) note “systematic change lies in our understanding how our children learn and in our ability to problem-solve with colleagues who work with our children, who share our common experiences, and who speak our language of literacy” (p. 160).

Another key characteristic of an effective teacher is to enhance teacher knowledge on a continuous basis. Effective teachers are constantly engaging in professional developments, ideological debates, and inservice programs. Banner and Cannon (1997) state, “true teachers always seek to learn more, to remain current with what is known about their subjects, to keep those subjects fresh and exciting enough to sustain the exhausting act of teaching day in and day out, year after year” (p. 8). The mastery of reading is filled with knowledge that is continuously changing. Banner and Cannon (1997) also add “thus to possess and master this knowledge, one must wrestle with it constantly…..the struggle to gain and sustain this knowledge is probably the most exacting work of any teacher, and it never ends” (p. 8-9).

A study conducted by Baumann, Ro, Duffy-Hester, and Hoffman revealed three major themes associated in reading instruction by prominent reading educators. One of the
three themes that emerged from this particular study was enhancing teacher knowledge. “It was not surprising, therefore, that when asked what kind of support would benefit elementary teachers, over two-thirds noted the need for enhanced professional development” (Baumann, Ro, Duffy-Hester, and Hoffman, 2000, p.248). Engaging in professional developments will not only increase the teacher’s confidence, but also the instruction that is taking place in the classroom. The acquisition of knowledge will give the teacher new perspectives which will meet the needs of all individual learners in the classroom as well as develop new ways of thinking.

**Observation and Assessment**

Effective teachers rely heavily on observation and assessment in implementing effective reading instruction. Observation and assessment are used not only to monitor the students’ progress throughout the school year, but also to provide important insights about one’s professional development as a teacher.

As a professional, teachers use observation to monitor their own development among the students in the classroom. Observing other teachers and administrative staff help broaden one’s instructional philosophy to implement new strategies and approaches in reading. Borich (2003) states that “focused observations help achieve empathy, establish cooperative relationships, become realistic, establish direction, attain confidence, express enthusiasm, become flexible, and become self-reliant” (p. 4). Observation also reminds educators that there is not “one right way” to teach; rather there are many characteristics one must have in order to be an effective reading teacher.

Observation is also used by effective teachers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of individual students in the classroom. Visser and Hanggi (1999) note that:
the teacher must be a careful observer of reading behavior. By listening to a child read aloud and analyzing the errors and corrections the child makes, the teacher has a window into what the child is doing in his or her head to solve reading problems. (p.12).

The process of observation is critical to analyzing students’ reading behaviors and struggles. In order to be an effective teacher in the classroom, the use of observation is essential as a personal goal for growth and development for the teacher as well as the student.

Assessment is used by effective teachers to examine each student’s reading progress. Many forms of assessment are available to analyze students’ attitudes and interest toward reading, as well as monitor students’ performance in reading. The primary purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning. Leu and Kizner (1999) note that:

- effective teachers of literacy use assessment tools for a variety of reasons: to find a child’s reading and writing capacity, to be able to infer strategies and processes used by a child during reading and writing, to see whether one book is more difficult than another, to identify motivational material for a student or class, to match a child with appropriate materials, to find out whether a child has mastered a desired goal, to see if a child is making progress over time. (p.479).

Once effective teachers identify the students’ strengths and weaknesses using a combination of assessment tools, they are then able to develop reading instruction based upon the students’ needs.
Modeling

One of the most influential characteristics that teachers can use to influence their students’ reading behavior is to provide an instructional model during reading. Morrison, Jacobs, and Swinyard (1999) state that the “modeling of reading is recommended because children can see that an adult values reading enough that s/he regularly spends time engaging in reading and appears to enjoy it” (p. 81). When students observe their teachers reading for enjoyment, then they are able to establish the important connection of becoming a lifelong learner. Effective teachers place literacy as an important priority to model the characteristics of a lifelong learner. Morrison, Jacobs, and Swinyard (1999) add that “teachers who see their role as literacy model for their students may purposely involve themselves in literacy behaviors for the benefit of their students” (p.97).

Effective teachers also verbally model instructional procedures as well. These teachers often talk aloud during problem solving and analytical thinking to demonstrate to students the sequential steps of the thinking process. Kathleen Mohr, who studied four second grade teachers, found modeling to be a positive characteristic of effective teachers. Mohr (1998) notes:

One specific positive aspect of task focusing was teacher modeling. All these teachers read aloud to their students. Teachers also took on the role of the learner and verbalized how to perform tasks so students were aware of the details or the sequence of the tasks. Using the first-person pronoun, these teachers verbalized think-alouds during tasks so students could adopt the learner self-talk and apply it to their own learning applications. (p. 21).
Richard Allington (2002) also agrees. Allington feels that it is teacher modeling that increases effectiveness among the low-achieving students. He notes “these teachers offered models of useful strategies as separate lessons to the whole class, to targeted small groups, and to individual students in side-by side instruction. In fact, it is this plethora of instructional activity that truly sets these teachers apart” (Allington, 2002, p. 742).

**Environment**

Teachers that also provide students with a literacy rich environment produce better readers. Morrow, O’Connor, and Smith (1990) note that “teachers who place their students in environments where literacy is valued and who provide stimuli for children to engage in literacy activities, find that such children increase the amount and type of literacy activity” (p. 255). Effective teachers know that a literacy rich environment can stimulate motivation and enthusiasm among the students in the classroom. The environment of the classroom can promote positive attitudes towards books, as well as offer students the opportunity to practice as independent readers.

Providing students with a classroom library is critical to promoting learning and reading within the classroom environment. “Ideally, the classroom library should have a balance of easy-to- read materials and high quality literature” (Pearson, Raphael, 1999, p. 22). A wide range of print allows the student to choose reading material that matches the students varying reading abilities. The classroom library should be a safe, comfortable place in the classroom where students engage in good literature and feel confident.

Effective teachers introduce students to environmental print on a daily basis. Strickland and Morrow (1988) note that “studies have found that many preschoolers can
already read road signs, labels on food boxes, and logos. This suggests the importance of utilizing environmental print to encouraging reading with young children” (p. 156). Environmental print not only provides students with reading opportunities on a continuous basis, but also strengthens reading skills that the students have already learned. “Emergent readers learn these words through many clues for meaning in which they appear. Similarly, when their classrooms are rich in print that label objects, students can use the strategies they have already mastered to attach meaning to new words” (Block, 2003, p. 236).

The environment that the teacher produces can greatly affect the students reading ability. Teachers that provide a classroom library of easy-to-read and high quality literature gain accessibility and confidence within the classroom reading program. “Building an effective learning environment and collaborating with others to achieve a reading goal is an important part of being a teacher. The impact of an effective classroom environment on students and their learning is most important” (Morrison, 2003, p. 19).

**Classroom Management**

An important characteristic that an effective teacher must possess is classroom management. “Effective classroom management is key to teacher success” (Dyal, Sewell, 2002, p. 6). If teachers do not have the ability to manage their classrooms, then the ability to provide effective reading instruction becomes problematic. Walls, Nardi, von Minden, and Hoffman (2002) conducted a study with 90 teacher participants to find characteristics of effective and ineffective teachers. The study produced the following results:
The most effective teachers motivated their students and had little difficulty with classroom management. Their care about student accomplishment and advocacy for student success set the tone for fair rules and grading. Such teachers were frequently depicted as requiring and maintaining high standards of conduct and academic work. Ineffective teachers were faulted for unreasonable or unfair assignments, tests, and grades. Opposite poles in classroom management were expressed, in which the ineffective teacher either was a dominating ogre or had no control. (Walls, Nardi, von Minden, and Hoffman, 2002, p. 42).

Metsala (1997), a member of the National Reading Research Center, also conducted a similar study to find effective teachers of a balanced literacy program. The research involved conducting two surveys of the practices of United States teachers who are considered by their supervisors to be highly effective in developing primary-level literacy competencies in their students. The results indicated that “the most effective teachers were also masterful classroom managers- managing time, materials, student behavior, and most notably, resource personnel with such finesse that their control was hardly noticeable” (Metsala, 1997, p. 520). Metsala (1997) also noted that the behavior was managed by having high expectations for each and every student in the classroom, along with high expected levels of achievement.

Reading teachers have high expectations for all types of learners in the classroom. Effective classroom management involves students on task with all assignments, and constantly engaging in a wide variety of literacy activities. The reading teacher serves as the facilitator in a well-balanced literacy program. “If teachers have no command of their classroom, their students ignore their knowledge, and their compassion for their students’
efforts is pointless” (Banner, Cannon, 1997, p. 21). Thus, classroom management is essential to the reading teacher in order to produce an effective reading program.

**Choice and Purpose**

The struggling reader can also be affected when the teacher places limitations on the selection of literature. Effective reading teachers understand the importance of providing elementary students with many genres of reading material to broaden their experiences and background knowledge. If students are not provided with a variety of texts, then their ability to gain knowledge is impaired. Collins and Cheek (2000) note that “lack of experience increases the difficulty level of material and decreases the student’s chances for success in reading” (p. 266). Too often the classroom teacher does not provide ample instructional time to allow students to have free choice of reading. Students see more of the textbook than probably any other type of literature available to them. Ivey (1999) comments “despite numerous studies, I do believe that many students do not lose interest in reading as such but in the kinds of reading that they are typically required to do in school, such as textbooks and certain teacher-selected texts” (p.60). When students are given a choice to read any type of literature in the classroom, interest peaks among the students. The importance of promoting free choice in the classroom is to promote the concept that one must read to learn.

Students need a primary purpose to read when given a selected piece of literature. Ivey (1999) notes “struggling readers need real purposes for reading, not surprising given that motivation is highest when students engage in tasks for their own intrinsic reasons” (p.63). An effective teacher gives students a reason to engage in selections of literature, and provides expectations for students. Supplying students with a purpose for
reading is deemed crucial for the struggling learner. When given a purpose to read, students are able to make a connection with the text, as well as place meaning into their own personal lives.

**Expanding Available Instructional Time**

Effective reading teachers allot time for students to practice skills and strategies within the classroom literacy program. Expanding instructional time for struggling students has been suggested as a means for increasing student achievement. Richard Allington is an advocate for providing struggling students with more instructional time before, during, and/or after school. Allington (2001) comments “fundamentally, the argument is that some children simply need larger quantities of instruction and greater opportunities to practice reading. There is good research evidence that such added instruction can foster accelerated reading development” (p.123). Providing students with ample instruction time beyond the regular reading lesson can increase student’s knowledge of skills and fluency.

Allington (1994) also stated that “American students spend less than 10 percent of the school day engaged in actual text reading” (p.28). If teachers and educators want to improve student’s reading skills in the curriculum, then time must be allotted for students to practice. If students are never given time to practice the reading skills that they are taught in class, then teaching those skills to begin with will become a wasted effort. Students need to see specific skills embedded within selected texts to reinforce what they have already learned. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) state “we get better at reading by reading” (p.30).
Another characteristic of an effective reading teacher is one that associates the importance of teaching reading and writing as a collaborative effort. Mohr (1998) notes that an effective teacher’s discourse involves:

Fostering a positive and progressive attitude towards learning to read and write should be a prime objective for elementary students. Reading and writing are integrated processes; exemplary teachers talk a great deal about how these fit together and that they are not automatic or readily achieved. (p.6)

Writing has been perceived by numerous educators as part of effective reading instruction. Collins and Cheek (2000) note that “as literacy emerges, children express their developing language through writing and reading activities” (p.225). Writing can assist children in building their oral language and fluency development. Strickland and Morrow (2000) comment that:

During the early years, we integrate reading and writing instruction because we know that having children write makes it easier for them to learn to read. In short, making writing part of the primary grade curriculum is both an end in itself and means of supporting the development of other literacy skills” (p.11).

Most struggling students that face a level of difficulty when learning to read, also a face a complicated challenge of learning to write. In fact, many researchers have found that reading and writing are inseparable. Strickland, Ganske, and Monroe (2002) note that “struggling readers and writers often find themselves caught in a cycle of failure. They have difficulty learning to read and write, so they avoid literacy activities” (p.13).
The mistake that is often made in the classroom is having children write just to write. If students do not have meaning or personal experience associated with the writing product, then they may experience frustration and view writing as pointless. Combs (2002) comments that “producing a written product should never become more important than the meaning it holds for the writer” (p.113). However, if students are encouraged to write and produce a product that is of substantial meaning on a personal level, then they will emerge as a successful writer.

Although some struggling writers are able to construct a writing sample of some consistency and value, this is not always an easy task. Teresa Christenson concludes that writing must be implemented by the teacher, because it helps students evolve into higher order learning. Christenson (2002) states:

The reason the teaching of writing is important to struggling students is that they do far more than learn to write. Students learn to make choices, carry out decisions, identify and solve problems, and view themselves as active and contributing members of its community. (p.2)

Writing activities are especially important to include in the classroom when developing an early intervention program for students. John Pikulski (1994), author of Preventing reading failure: A review of five effective programs, also comments “when children write words, they attend to the details of those words, which supports development of word identification skills. Students should write daily, and the instruction should ensure that students focus attention on features and details of letters and words” (p. 38).
Summary

An effective reading teacher is one that is not limited to a single specific method or strategy. Effective reading teachers utilize an assortment of techniques to implement reading instruction. An enriched reading program includes a variety of instructional methods that compensates for each students’ unique learning style in the classroom. Additionally, the environment in an effective teacher’s classroom promotes literacy and self-confidence.

Reading teachers should be receptive to the struggling students’ needs. Strickland (1998) states “don’t waste time debating whether or not to teach phonics, grammar, and other ‘skills’ of literacy. Do spend time discussing how to teach them in a way that contributes to the learners’ self improvement” (p.299). Struggling students will need additional instructional time, along with a high self-efficacy to motivate the learner. Choice and purpose improve the reading curriculum by allowing the reader to bring meaning to the text and relate to the characters of the story. Adams (1990) best defines what I believe constitutes an effective reading teacher by stating:

It is not just the presence of a variety of activities that makes a program of reading instruction effective or ineffective. It is the way in which its pieces are fitted together to complement and support one another, always with full consideration of the needs and progress of the young readers with whom it will be used (p.122).
CHAPTER 3
MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative research focus provided the methodological basis for this study designed to identify the characteristics of an effective reading teacher. Past researchers have found the method of qualitative research to be one of both substance and validity when concluding results to a study. Miles and Huberman (1984) note:

Qualitative data are attractive. They are a source of well-grounded, rich description and explanation of processes occurring in local contexts. With qualitative data, one can preserve chronological flow, assess local causality, and derive fruitful explanations. Serendipitous findings and new theoretical integrations can appear. Finally, qualitative findings have a certain undeniability that is often far more convincing to a reader than pages of numbers. (pp.21-22)

Qualitative data means different things to different people. This particular type of research allows the reader to bring his/her own experience to the page, thus allowing that person to give a “naturalistic generalization” to the study. Stake (1978) defines naturalistic generalization as “development within a person as a product of experience. They derive from the tactic knowledge of how things are, and how these things are likely to be later on in other places with which this person is familiar” (p.6).

This research study was implemented through the lens of the ethnographer, more specifically, through an ethnography of communication. Ethnographers of communication are those who “see culture as central to understanding human behavior. They assume that both verbal and nonverbal communication is culturally patterned even
though the persons communicating may not be aware of this patterning” (Jacobs, 1988, p.18). This ethnographic study relied heavily on participant observation data.

**Framework**

An analysis of the similarities and differences of teacher characteristics evident in both the public and private sector schools was conducted by using a framework based on those ten characteristics of effective teaching discussed in the review of the literature and Leu and Kinzer’s (2003) principles of effective teaching presented in Chapter Two. Those characteristics identified by the researcher include:

- Communication
- Self-Efficacy
- Self-Improvement
- Observation and Assessment
- Modeling
- Environment
- Classroom Management
- Choice and Purpose
- Expanding Available Instructional Time
- Writing
Principles of effective teaching identified by Leu and Kinzer (2003) are:

- Teacher insights
- Teach decoding skills.
- Use exceptional works of literature.
- Integrate reading and writing.
- Vocabulary knowledge helps comprehension.
- Teach reading comprehension.
- Teach reading using different kinds of texts.
- Good assessment strategies help teachers teach.
- Meet individual needs.
- Organize your classroom to maximize learning.
- Integrate computer and Internet technologies in literacy instruction.

Spradley Method

Developmental Research Sequence Method

The research design for this study emulated the work of James P. Spradley (1980), author of Participant Observation, and his Developmental Research Sequence Method. Spradley, a well-established ethnographer in the field of anthropology, developed his own system of approaches to guide ethnographers along their journey to produce an effective qualitative product. A well-respected community member of his field, Spradley compiled years of data for researchers to understand “participant observation” within the course of a study. There are twelve complete steps in Spradley’s Participation Observation, all of which were used throughout the course of the research.
Social Situation

The first step in the study involves locating the social situation. The study was conducted in one public and one private sector school located in a capital city in the Southern United States. The focus of the study centered on four classroom teachers selected from the two schools. An additional component included in-depth interviews with the principals of each school. The study design is intended to observe the characteristics of an effective reading teacher on a daily basis. Activities noted within the study consist of a variety of techniques and approaches that may include, but not be limited to verbal communication, modeling, assessment, and self-efficacy. The social situation is the school, primarily the classroom setting. The setting is defined by Spradley (1980) as a “single social situation” which involves numerous activities that fall under the general event of an effective reading teacher. The single social situation ensures the simplicity of the study, focusing on the trials and errors of an effective reading teacher. The involvement of a single social situation significantly narrows the scope of the study, in the interest of time, and conducts over a ten week period.

The purpose of the study is to identify the characteristics of an effective reading teacher. In doing this, it is important to become “part of the culture” of the classroom, remaining unobtrusive in the environmental setting. Although there are always some activities that may focus attention towards my presence, my overall goal is viewed as a member of the classroom. One of the most unobtrusive positions in a classroom setting involves sitting, recording, and observing from the back of the classroom, keeping students focused on the teacher at the front of the room.
One reason in choosing a school classroom setting as the single social situation is the importance of being granted unlimited access to conduct the study. Unlimited access also provides numerous opportunities to participate freely within the classroom with the other students. Spradley (1980) notes this research situation as a “limited-entry that requires permission from one or more persons before conducting research” (p.49). Permission was acquired through approval of the school board, both principals from the public/private sector schools, and each teacher from participating classrooms.

**Participant Observation**

The researcher assumed the role of participant observer in the classroom. As an observer, the primary goal is to keep a detailed record of every possible angle of the classroom that involves people, places, and activities. The participant role of the study involves becoming a member of the classroom. The study is approached from an insider/outsider perspective. As an insider, interviews are conducted to find the characteristics that teachers and principals believe are essential to provide effective reading instruction in an elementary school setting. As an outsider, the roles change. Observation takes place from an outside perspective, as the focal point views the students, teachers, and the classroom environment as objects. The responsibility of the researcher throughout this qualitative study is to alternate between an insider and an outsider, experiencing both worlds from two perspectives.

**Ethnographic Record**

The field notes reflect an ethnographic record for later observation. Spradley (1980) states “a description of a culture, an ethnography, is produced from an ethnographic record of the events of a society within a given period of time, the ‘events of society’
including, of course, informants’ response to the ethnographer, his queries, tests, and apparatus” (p.63). The language to be observed and recorded is *concrete language*, which focusing on the specific detail of the situation as much as possible. A tape recorder records each teacher’s verbal language communicative patterns. A video camera records and observes the characteristics that are displayed during reading instruction.

The type of fieldnotes to be included contains a variety of condensed notes, as well as an expanded account for the research study. With the condensed notes, participation occurs on a more equal level, not concentrating on specific details that involve people, activities, and places. This type of note system is intended to record key words and important phrases, without having to note a word for word account from each observation. The expanded account then allows the researcher to fill in the gaps of information immediately after leaving the field of research. This technique provides the researcher with more participant time during the observation. A fieldwork journal was of critical importance during this study. The journal contains data that associate with ideas, feelings, experiences, and problems that arose during the study. It is an important source of information that reveals trials and errors of certain research encounters.

**Descriptive Observation**

The basis of this study is the question-observation method, both of which rely on one another. During the process of the study, descriptive observation methods compile a list of questions that guides the research in the appropriate manner. There are nine dimensions that the *Developmental Research Sequence Method* utilizes when making conclusive descriptive observations within every social situation. Spradley (1980) states:
In a most general sense, these dimensions can serve as guides for the participant observer: *space*: the physical place or places; *actor*: the people involved; *activity*: a set of related acts people do; *object*: single actions that people do; *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)

Using these nine dimensions as the foundation for the study narrows the research into a more specific scope of detailed observations. During descriptive observations, recurrent activities were noted that are taking place on a daily basis, which helps evolve themes for later use.

**Analysis**

Over a period of time, fieldnotes and observations begin to accumulate. At this point, it is necessary to find cultural patterns within the ethnographic records. Within the cultural patterns it is important to establish relationships between the social situation and its perceived actors, places, and activities. Finding relationships and patterns during the analysis stage gives a general idea about possible areas for potential, future research.

**Focused Observations**

Establishing patterns among fieldnotes creates a focused observation within the study. Spradley (1980) defines a focus observation as “a single cultural domain or a few related domains and the relationships of such domains to the rest of the cultural scene” (p.101). The focus of the observation involves an in-depth investigation concentrating on one specific problem. The investigation includes details of what characteristics constitute an effective reading teacher in the public and private school sectors. During the
ethnographic focus, suggestions are taken from informants to characterize an effective reading teacher. After gathering a list of focused observations, each domain of reading characteristics is organized, highlighting each as a major subpoint throughout the paper.

**Taxonomic Analysis**

Once each characteristic of reading instruction has been organized, it is important to examine each sector more closely. A taxonomic analysis branches each reading domain into specific categories or subsets to represent different ways each is related to one another. The taxonomic analysis involves each reading characteristics that is used within the classroom to constitute an effective reading teacher. From each domain received (such as verbal communication or modeling), subsets are categorized about each domain to further deepen the study.

For example if one teacher employs positive verbal communication in the classroom, the communication domain categorizes into positive and negative feedback. Once a taxonomy is completed for each reading characteristic presented by the teacher, then patterns and relationships emerge across specific subsets. Spradley notes (1980) that “taxonomy, then differs in one respect: it shows the relationship among all the included terms in the domain. A taxonomy reveals subsets and the way they are related to the whole” (p.113).

**Selected Observations**

Selecting observations at this point involves choosing detailed, explicit focal points during the study. One popular method of choice is the interview process. The study consists of two different types of interview forms, formal and informal. The formal interviews are conducted as a “sit down” type of interview with a predetermined set of
.questions. This technique was implemented with the teachers and principals from each
school. The interview consisted of questions that deal with experiences, methods,
workshops, extra training, and overall ideologies of the reading curriculum. Again, a
tape recorder was used during the formal interview process. However, permission was
requested to use a tape recorder with key informants. If any of the informants are
uncomfortable with the tape recorder, the informants’ rights are protected and respected,
placing their interest first.

The informal interview consists of questions that occur during the course of
participant observation. These particular questions arise when involving informants in
casual conversation or during a specific lesson in the classroom. Informal interviews do
not require a tape recorder.

Another form of selected observation is to construct dyadic questions, which involve
contrasting between two members of the same domain. For example, when using the
domain of verbal communication, the two members or subsets under this category
involve terminology and the feedback. Subsets are analyzed by listing ways that the two
members contrast between one another. This, in turn, leads to the discovery of new data
to collect in the field. The dyadic question process also becomes quite useful when
comparing and contrasting the interview process with the actual teaching practice in the
classroom.

**Componental Analysis**

Each domain within the *Developmental Research Sequence Method* has attributes that
set each member apart. Spradley (1980) states “whenever an ethnographer discovers
contrast among the members of a domain, these contrasts are best thought as attributes or
components of meaning” (p. 131). Each attribute is represented through a paradigm chart, explicitly demonstrating the categories in a systematic manner. The first column of the chart contains the domain being studied (such as assessment). The second, third, and fourth column all represent the attributes’ distinguished characteristics that set each other apart from each category (categories may include portfolios, running records, and informal inventories, etc.). This chart defines and contrasts the differences between each category of the domain, helping to decipher which domains are of utmost importance to use within the study.

**Cultural Themes**

The concept of theme is embedded within each culture’s roots. The basis of cultural theme is to discover that every culture is made up of their own members, values, symbols, and language. Cultural themes usually apply in recurrent activities and can be located in two or more domains. Themes can be discovered through contrasting among domains, recurrent expressions, or even through similar relationships that connect with other domains. Themes establish during the research study through research immersion to expose new relationships among domains. Spradley (1980) also notes that to find universal themes within a study, one can study certain scenes such as “social conflict, cultural contradictions, informal techniques of social control, managing impersonal social relationships, acquiring and maintaining status, and solving problems” (p.152-153).

**Cultural Inventory**

The last step of the *Developmental Research Sequence Method* is to take cultural inventory. The first process of taking cultural inventory is to constantly and consistently read and review fieldnotes, ethnographic records, journals, and interviews on a daily
basis. A final list of the all the cultural domains is of assistance when developing an outline for the study. The most recurrent domains are focal points for the research, and the ethnographic records provide details to enhance each domain. Within the cultural inventory, the reader is provided with sketch maps, illustrating detailed physical features and spacing of each school setting. Finally, miscellaneous data gathered through the course of research (pictures, articles, lesson plans, student’s work) is organized to display the overall cultural scene to the audience members.

**Biases**

Qualitative researchers have struggled for many years with the problem of bias in studies. This is especially true when the researcher has become part of the cultural scene. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) suggest three aspects for the audience to consider as the ethnographer is immersed within a specific study. First, “qualitative studies are not impressionistic essays made after a quick visit to a setting or after some conversations with a few subjects” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, pp. 33-34). One must realize that the ethnographer is participating in the field for five days a week for several hours. If any prejudices or biases occur, the ethnographer is constantly challenged by the data alone. Second, “the researcher’s primary goal is to add to knowledge, not to pass judgment on the setting” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p. 33). The purpose of research is not to assume the knowledge of a social situation, but to become part of the cultural community by learning from other members. Finally, “qualitative researchers guard against their own biases by recording detailed footnotes that include reflections on their own subjectivity” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p.33). Fieldnotes and ethnographic records serve as
documentation giving an exact account of what happens within the study, and to clear up any prejudices or biases the researcher might have.

**Trustworthiness**

Establishing trustworthiness throughout the study is crucial for the researcher/investigator and the informant. To ensure credibility in a naturalistic setting, the techniques of Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry* is adhered to closely. The first technique used throughout the study includes activities that “increase the probability that credible findings will be produced” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). Activities include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation.

Prolonged engagement allows the researcher to spend an adequate amount of time during the study to identify characteristics of an effective reading teacher in an elementary school setting, as well as build a sense of trust between the researcher and the informant.

The second activity that is included within the study is persistent observation. As certain themes emerge throughout the study, persistent observation “identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304). The last activity, triangulation, utilizes to establish credibility among the four informants. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) define triangulation as many sources of data were better in a study than a single source because multiple sources lead to a fuller understanding of the phenomena you were studying” (p. 104). Webb (1966) characterizes triangulation as:

> Once a proposition has been confirmed by two or more measurement processes, the uncertainty of its interpretation is greatly reduced. The most persuasive evidence comes through a triangulation of measurement processes. If a
proposition can survive the onslaught of a series of imperfect measures, with all their irrelevant error, confidence should be place in it. (p. 3).

Although there is not one universal definition for triangulation, the purpose is quite clear. The process of triangulation verifies the facts for the researcher. Triangulation is established through means of different sources (the interview respondents), different methods (observation), and different theories (characteristics that constitute an effective reading teacher).

**Summary**

“Qualitative research has been characterized as emphasizing the importance of conducting research in a natural setting” (Jacob, 1998, p.16). The importance of this study is to provide the reader with collected data and research in order to discover what characteristics constitute an effective reading teacher in elementary schools. The qualitative approach to this study examines each public/private school sector within a natural setting that will minimize obtrusiveness in the classroom. The *Developmental Research Sequence Method* aids in minimizing bias in the data that emerges from each school.

As an ethnographer, the goal is to find the balance as between an insider and outsider within each school setting. The researcher must become part of the cultural scene within the social situation, and be viewed as a trusted member of their community. It is crucial that the rights of all the informants be respected, always placing their interests first. A primary axiom in conducting ethnographic research is to study with people, not study people; and how to work with people, not work on people.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was conducted at a private school, referred to as Spring Creek, and a public school, referred to as River City. The study was conducted for ten consecutive weeks, five weeks at each school. Throughout the study, interviews were conducted with the assistant principal/principal, two second grade teachers, and two fourth grade teachers. A more in-depth list of questions is presented in Appendix A. Observations were made during the language arts curriculum, which included reading, English, and writing. Field notes, a journal, and a tape recorder were used to obtain data during the study.

The private school that was chosen to become part of the study is referred to as Spring Creek. Spring Creek is one of the oldest private schools within the districts. Each classroom is provided with fully certified teachers, with an average of at least ten years classroom experience. Each teacher participates in continuing in-service training, accompanied by a total of 14 teaching assistants and extra-curricular instructors who support all classroom teachers. This allows Spring Creek to offer a low student/teacher ratio.

The mission statement for Spring Creek School focuses on the development of the whole child…intellectually, socially, and physically. Spring Creek has a total of 247 students. The demographics of the school are composed of 96% White students and 4% African American students. The maximum number of students allowed per class for preschool is 14, whereas kindergarten through fifth grade are allotted a maximum number of 25 students. The students’ tuition and fees represent 90% of the total school profits accumulated throughout the school year.
The public school that was chosen to become part of the study is referred to as River City. River City is an elementary school that offers the kindergarten program through fifth grade. River City has a total of 423 students. The demographics of the school are composed of 19% White students, 75% African American students, 4% Asian, and 2% Hispanic. The regular education program is composed of 384, while the other 39 students are involved with the special education program. The school’s attendance rate for the previous academic school year was 95.8%, averaging to 15.4 students absent on a daily basis. River City has a total of 24 teachers. Over half (53%) of the teachers at the school have a master’s degree or higher.

The framework of Leu and Kinzer (2003) as explicated in Chapter Three was followed to identify effective teachers of reading. The outline of principals for an effective teacher of reading was noted as: teacher insights, decoding skills, the use of exceptional works of literature, integrate reading and writing, vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, use different kinds of texts, assessment strategies, meeting individual needs, organizing your classroom to maximize, and integrating technologies in literacy instruction.

**Interview with Spring Creek Assistant Principal**

**Educational Background Experience**

The first interview involved the assistant principal who is referred to as Mrs. Lisa Brandon. Brandon has worked at Spring Creek School for 12 years. Brandon, with a bachelor’s degree in business, began teaching at Spring Creek as the part time Physical Education teacher and as a substitute for kindergarten through fifth grade. While working at Spring Creek, she began working on her teacher’s certificate for physical education and elementary education. Once she obtained her teaching certificate, Brandon
began her professional career in the classroom by accepting a second grade teaching position, which she held for six years. She currently holds the positions of Developing Director, Curriculum Director, and Assistant Principal of Spring Creek while pursuing her master’s degree in Education.

**Communication and Self-Efficacy**

Communication and self-efficacy were deemed an important component of Brandon’s teaching philosophy. From personal experience, Brandon notes communication and positive verbalization should be one of the most important tools used in the classroom.

If the students feel like they can come to you, no matter what, and they know what you expect, then they tend to do better. If the students feel as if you are going to attack them when they come to you, then they will not open themselves up to you. Without positive communication in the classroom, the teacher will lose half of the kids. Positive communication and verbalization is the only way to handle your kids. I do not think anyone responds to negative communication.” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Brandon also noted that once establishing a positive communicative environment with the students, then self-efficacy of oneself simply emerges from within.

The teachers of Spring Creek are also encouraged to work on self-improvement throughout the academic year. Each teacher’s and administrator’s yearly plan requires at least two inservices during the academic year, which may include observing classrooms in another school or city, workshops, and conferences at the local, regional, and national levels. “Teachers are required to come back from their inservice – whether it be a national conference or classroom observation – and share what they have learned. This gives everyone the opportunity to learn.” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15,
The administrative staff does not limit teachers to a particular topic(s) of interest during the inservice process. “Inservice topics vary from discipline problems to how to handle kids with special needs to how to incorporate different types of literature in the classroom. This wide range of topics allows our staff to keep up to date with current information in all fields” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Observation and Modeling

Observation and teacher modeling are two characteristics that are encouraged by the administration at Spring Creek. Observation and monitoring of the students’ progress begins in the summer prior to the academic school year. Teachers are required to research the students’ progress through teacher collaboration and cumulative folders. “Teachers look for patterns that will help the students improve and excel throughout the year. I tell my teachers every year ‘if you are not going to monitor the students’ progress than who will?’” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003). Brandon also notes that the faculty and staff are always consulting with the students’ former teachers. She adds that it is not uncommon for a fifth grade teacher to ask the first grade teacher about the initial progress of former students. This form of communication and collaboration among the teachers helps guide all students’ growth and development for all aspects of the curriculum.

Instructional modeling is also used to demonstrate to students the importance of learning to read. “One of the most effective ways to learn to read is through modeling. We also encourage parents to model reading to their child on a daily basis” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003). Brandon also states that all of the lower elementary grades have a contract between the parent and the child to read together as a family. The contract requires the student to record the amount of time he/she reads with another
family member, and what type of reading material each person read. “It does not matter if dad reads the newspaper and the children read a book, the point is everybody in the family is reading. We tell the parents that if the child sees you reading, then he/she will also want to read” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003). The same theory applies to the teachers as well. Teachers are required to provide an instructional model for all of their students, creating an environment for each student to succeed.

**Assessment**

Assessment is used throughout the year to help teachers and the administrative staff determine the level of performance for the curriculum and students. The third, fourth, and fifth grade are required to take a standardized test, known as the ERBCTP4, at the end of every school year. The kindergarten, first, and second grade, however, are not required to take any type of standardized test. The reason for choosing this particular standardized test is to evaluate strengths and weaknesses in student performance and the curriculum. “We changed from using the Stanford achievement test to the ERBCTP4 because all of our students were passing at a 99% achievement rate. The parents would get the results and be thrilled, but it did not tell the teachers and/or administration staff anything” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003). The ERBCTP4 is a standardized test that is used within the framework of Spring Creek’s curriculum and gives a more accurate indication of the curriculum’s weaknesses and the students’ overall performance. Brandon (2003) notes “We do not give this test as a means to pass or fail our students. We give this test to critique and improve our own program and monitor students’ progress for three consecutive years” (personal interview, April 15, 2003). The standardized test is not a primary focus throughout the year with the students. The third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers give each student a practice test the week
before testing begins to refresh test taking skills. Students then take the standardized test the following week, without the pressure of a pass/fail status. The test results are sent to Spring Creek by the ERBCTP4 Company during the summer. The teachers from each grade level analyze and discuss the results from the standardized test, as well as meet with the administrative staff to make improvements in the curriculum for the upcoming academic school year. “I do think the test scores are indicative of how we are doing here, but do not replace what we are doing here” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

**Environment, Behavior Management, and Free-Choice**

Brandon believes that a literacy environment should be conducive to meeting all needs and learning styles of the students in a classroom. “I feel that a literacy-friendly environment is a classroom that is readily available to students. Resources, such as dictionaries and a word wall are constantly available to the students to improve their reading and writing skills” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003). Brandon also notes that the classroom library is one of the most important focal points of a classroom.

> I always had at least four shelves of books in my classroom library at all times… books that the students could take home, books that the students could keep in their desk. If you have books readily available for your students at all times, then they will read them (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Classroom management is a process that Brandon perceives as learning with experience. “I think you have to adjust your classroom management according to your class because not everything works for every group” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003). Brandon does believe, however, that the classroom plan that is
implemented within the learning environment should not be one that requires the teacher to stop teaching and prevent other students from learning. She also notes that an effective classroom teacher is one that does not raise his/her voice to express disapproval.

Providing students with a free-choice of literature is an important aspect of literacy for Brandon. “Free-choice of literature promotes the love of reading among students. If they are reading something that they enjoy, then they will read it again. I even use to allow my students to read comic books for free-choice, simply because they were reading” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003); however Brandon does not believe that it is essential to constantly give students a purpose for reading.

I know that there are times when students need to have a purpose for reading selected texts, but you do not always have to give them a reason. Part of the reading process is for the students to find their own purpose, allowing them to connect with the text on a personal and individual basis. (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Expanding instructional time has not been a priority at Spring Creek because the need for remediation occurs infrequently. However, the school has been recently accredited by the Southwestern Association Board, and one of the recommendations suggested by the Board members was the need to offer more leveled reading and math.

We know that this is an area that needs improvement. The majority of the teachers offer only whole group instruction because a high percentage of our students are at or above grade level. Due to the environment of where we teach, we have very few struggling students. If our parents find out that their child is struggling, then they work with their child and bring them up to grade level. We
are making efforts to address the needs for leveled reading, not so much for our struggling readers, but mainly for our readers who are above level. (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Brandon also suggests that reading and writing are interrelated. “I think that they are one in the same. Yes, I think it is important to read, but I also think it is important to write, and read what you write.” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003). She believes that it is important for students to read aloud stories that they have written so the students connect the integrated process. Brandon (2003) notes, “Good readers are good writers. Good writers can be good readers. It is all encompassing and one should not be taught without the other” (personal interview, April 15, 2003).

In addition to writing, Brandon indicates that the top five reading skills that she considers most important in the classroom are comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, context clues, and picture clues. “I think phonics is very important, but I also think you can overdue phonics. During my teaching experience, I used to teach my students all of the phonics rules. I soon realized how very rare they always come into play” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Technology is also an area of importance at Spring Creek. “Technology is great enrichment; it’s great to incorporate within the reading program, as long as you do not replace the actual reading instruction with technology” (L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003). Each teacher is equipped with four computers and software that reinforces specific reading skills and strategies to strengthen the students’ reading ability. Technology workshops and conferences are attended by the administrative staff throughout the year to stay abroad of new technology advances.
Overall, Brandon states that an effective teacher is one who demonstrates a love of reading on a daily basis. She adds that it is important to demonstrate to your students that reading is a lifelong skill. Brandon’s philosophy in reading can best be described as implementing numerous strategies and approaches within the reading curriculum, while using positive verbal communication as reinforcement within a literacy environment that is conducive to all learning styles.

In conclusion, Brandon (2003) defines characteristics of an effective teacher of reading in an elementary school setting as, “one who models reading on a daily basis, and teaches children to love reading. If you show students the importance of reading, then it will carry with them the rest of their lives” (personal interview, April 15, 2003).

**Interview with Spring Creek Second Grade Teacher**

**Educational Background Experience**

The second interview involved one of the second grade teachers of Spring Creek referred to as Mrs. Patricia Mickey. Mickey obtained her bachelor’s degree in elementary education. Upon graduation, she worked as a substitute teacher at Spring Creek School until a second grade teaching position became available. Mickey has been at Spring Creek School for 19 years.

**Communication and Self-Efficacy**

Mickey encourages communication in the classroom. “If there is not communication in the classroom, then the students will not understand the teacher, the teacher will not understand the students, and problems cannot be resolved” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003). Positive verbalization is a key factor of success in Mrs. Mickey’s classroom because it builds the overall self-confidence of the child. She does not believe in singling out a student in front of the other members in the classroom, avoiding any
type of embarrassment or humiliation. Feedback is given on a daily basis to keep the students informed on their individual progress. Mickey also creates a classroom environment that encourages students to ask questions. “I create and promote a feeling of no one is perfect, everyone is going to make a mistake, so if you do not understand a reading skill, let’s review the skill on the board so you can see it” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Communication involves not only the students in the classroom, but also extends to the parents as well. Mickey issues papers home once a week to keep communication open at all times on individual student progress. “I encourage the parents to review the papers with the child every week, even though we go over the papers together as a class. This provides the students with repetition, so they are less likely to make the same mistake twice” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003). She has found that encouraging parents to review each paper with the child has strengthened the parents’ role in the academic welfare of the child.

As far as self-improvement, Mickey notes that the administrative staff requires each teacher to complete two observations, workshops, inservices, and/or conferences throughout the school year. She states that at least one of the two choices must involve technology, while her second choice is usually completed at some type of workshop that focuses on self-improvement as a teacher. Collaboration among teachers occurs once a week to discuss the curriculum and plan upcoming lessons. “The K-2 teachers get together to plan the curriculum and discuss any problems. Our collaborative planning throughout the year provides solutions to help one another overcome any problems” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).
The faculty is also required to fill out “meaningful faculty evaluations” (MFE’s) where each teacher meets with the principal and decide on personal goals, professional goals, and how each teacher is going to achieve each goal. “One of my goals this year was to read more professional journals to improve teaching techniques, and then I shared my new information with my colleagues at a faculty development” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003). Each teacher is required to share new insights and professional knowledge with other faculty members at least once a year.

**Observation and Modeling**

Mickey states that the best way to monitor students’ progress is by observation. She constantly walks around the room throughout each lesson to check for comprehension of the material. “My reasoning to constantly monitor the students’ work is to observe the students’ problem solving skills as a means to understand their analytical thinking behind the problem” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003). Another reason that observation is emphasized within the realm of Mickey’s classroom is because grades are not considered a priority.

We do not have to have a grade per week like the public school, and I like that. Sometimes, especially with the little ones, it is not possible to acquire one grade per week for each subject. This gives me more flexibility to focus on the individual needs of my students. We do not keep portfolios on each one of our students. Our form is more traditional (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Modeling occurs every day to demonstrate to students the importance and skill of reading. “I model everyday because I try to teach them the developmental stage of reading phrase by phrase instead of word by word with expression” (Mickey, personal
Mickey also notes that modeling reading for all of the students in the classroom exhibits the importance of reading as a lifelong skill. She states that if the importance of reading is expressed at an early age, then the students will more likely become lifelong readers.

**Assessment**

Standardized testing does not occur in the second grade at Spring Creek School. Mickey notes that the only type of standardized testing her second grade students have endured is an academic test that each student is required to take when first applying to Spring Creek School to determine if he/she is on grade level.

When the students enter the school, they are given a test. Our philosophy at Spring Creek is that you must be on grade level to enter the school. However, not all of our students are right on grade level, maybe a little bit below. But it cannot be someone who has a lot of academic problems because we do not have the facilities and/or the personnel to address these issues. (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Mickey does implement her own type of “testing” at the beginning of the school year. Throughout the first few weeks of school, she allows the children to read aloud as a group to distinguish the accelerated readers from the struggling readers. This strategy allows Mickey to meet the individual needs and differences of each and every student in the classroom.

We start reading a couple of stories at the beginning of the year, and I can always find my struggling readers. At this point, if they are struggling with reading, then they are struggling with writing. I then divide the students into two groups for the
remainder of the year to meet the needs of all my students. (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

**Environment, Behavior Management, and Free Choice**

A literacy environment conducive to all learning styles and individual needs is considered a priority in Mickey’s second grade classroom. Although each student in her classroom is exposed to reading at home and makes frequent visits to the library, Mickey still provides an enriched literacy environment for each and every student.

My students are not deprived when it comes to reading. Each student in my class is read to every evening by his/her parents and brought to the library frequently throughout the week. But I still feel that it is important to develop a positive reading atmosphere in my room by providing many readily available books, modeling, and a collection of posters/decorations that demonstrate reading is fun. (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Mickey notes that she offers many different genres of books in her classroom library. Magazines, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry are among a few selections that are highlighted in the classroom library. “I love books, and I love modeling different types of books to my students. For instance, I might read a picture book to my students in the morning, and after lunch we might read part of a novel together” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

An effective classroom management plan is in place at the beginning of the school year with Mickey’s classroom.

I start off slow at the beginning of the year. I do not start my centers until after Labor Day weekend. I think that too many times teachers try to cram too many things within the first few days of school. We take the first three weeks of the
school year to go over rules and reinforce each rule many times throughout the
day. I post the rules at the front of the classroom so it is visible to each student at
all times. As long as you are consistent with the students, and do not let up, then
the students will behave for you and they will learn. (Mickey, personal interview,
April 15, 2003).

Mickey does note that the majority of the students that attend Spring Creek School are
not behavior problems. However, Mickey has encountered a small percentage of students
with behavioral disorders throughout her teaching experience. She notes that behavioral
disorders are corrected by monitoring the students as well as close communication with
the parents. “We do have some students with behavior problems, and I do not hesitate to
call the parents. Some students receive a daily note to discuss a child’s behavior, which
promotes open communication between the teacher and the parent” (Mickey, personal
interview, April 15, 2003).

Free choice of literature is offered in Mickey’s classroom throughout the school year in
the classroom library. “I think it is important to give students a choice when selecting a
book to read. Students are more likely to enjoy reading when he/she chooses a book that
is of personal interest” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003). All of the books in
Mickey’s classroom library are labeled according to the level of difficulty to
accommodate a wide range of readers in her classroom.

I have appropriate books for all levels of reading in my classroom, ranging from
picture books to long chapter books. Second grade is usually the first year
students are introduced to beginning chapter books. My advanced students are
able to immediately read chapter books without any difficulty, whereas my lower
ability readers tend to struggle with books that are on a second grade level. I try
to encourage my students to choose books that are on each student’s level. The problem lies with my struggle readers wanting to feel important with a thick chapter book on their desk. During free-choice, I allow the struggling readers once in a while to choose a chapter book and ‘pretend’ to read. I use this strategy to build self-confidence, hoping that they will keep practicing reading every day to eventually be able to read chapter books on his/her own (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Expanded instructional time is offered by Mickey to increase the reading ability and fluency for struggling readers in her classroom.

I do have a small group of struggling readers each year, and that is one of the drawbacks as far as having most of the students here on or above level. It is hard to spend quality time with only two or three students when the rest of the class needs to move on. (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

If a student requires additional practice with a certain reading skill, Mickey extends instructional time by working with the student(s) before and/or after school. Another alternative to expanding instructional time is involving the parents with the reading curriculum as well. “I will conference with parents about a student’s deficiency with a particular reading skill, and ask them to also work with the child at home. This way the child is exposed to the skill at school as well as home” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Writing is considered an integral part of the reading curriculum in Mickey’s classroom. “Reading and writing are definitely an integrated process. The students that are poor readers are also poor writers. You hardly ever find a child that is a poor reader
and a great writer or a poor writer and great reader” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003). Mickey also notes that a great portion of each child’s reading grade is how well he/she can respond to reading, which of course, is through the writing process.

Second grade introduces a lot of writing. We write stories in every subject. In English we might write a story using descriptive adjectives where as in science we write down the sequential order to perform certain experiments. Reading and writing are integrated and cannot be taught as separate subjects (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Technology is one area of the curriculum that Mickey would like to improve. “The students actually have a computer lab teacher that teaches the students a wide variety of computer lessons throughout the year. I do use the computer in the classroom but probably not to the extent that I should” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Mickey does incorporate a program known as “Tec Works” in the classroom, which helps the students identify different purposes for using a computer. The Internet became available to Mickey’s classroom this year, which has influenced the reading/writing process. “This year we did a unit on biographies and the students found and read a personal life story about someone famous on the Internet. The students then typed their own autobiographies in a word processing document” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Mickey feels that the one of the most important aspects of an effective reading teacher is one who uses a balanced approach to reading.

I have asked myself in the past to list the most fundamental skills students need to learn in order to become good readers. I teach my students different types of strategies to use during reading lessons. I emphasize decoding skills,
comprehension, applications, vocabulary, and picture clues as the most important strategies to use when learning to read. (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Mickey best defines an effective reading teacher in an elementary school setting as one who “motivates children to read, an encourager to help students along when he/she is struggling, and one the can provide enrichment for advanced students to take them one step further” (Mickey, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

**Observation Data with Spring Creek Second Grade Teacher**

**Communication and Self-Efficacy**

Positive communication is used throughout Mickey’s second grade classroom during language arts. Common phrases that the teacher used throughout reading instruction are:

1. “Let’s look at that again.”
2. “What rule should this word follow?”
3. “Would this word make sense in the sentence that you chose?”
4. “Take of the –ing and look at the base word.”
5. “Reread to see if it makes sense.”

The students in the classroom communicated with the teacher in an openly, positive manner. When students answered a reading comprehension question incorrectly, Mickey would not degrade/humiliate the student’s answer. Instead, Mickey redirected the question that met the individual student’s ability level/learning style. Students were aware that Mickey would not reprimand incorrect answers. In turn, students were honest when he/she did not answer a problem correctly. The class discussions did not focus on the wrong answer, but instead concentrated on the analytical reasoning of the correct answer.
Discussions with reading skills and new literature were reiterated through student’s past experiences and prior knowledge. Students were encouraged to share past experiences when the teacher introduced a new story or reading skill to help students transfer past experience to new material. Prior knowledge was used as an effective tool to help Mickey understand the differences among the students both culturally and academically.

The positive communication that was used in the classroom helped establish a constructive level of self-efficacy within each student. Throughout the observation period, students were encouraged to speak freely without the fear of ridicule or failure. When a student did not understand a specific reading skill or concept, Mickey redirected the student with a different teaching approach. Mickey would not raise her voice or reprimand any student the classroom. In fact, when the students became louder, Mickey’s voice became softer. Positive self-esteem was an embedded theme within Mickey’s classroom.

**Observation and Modeling**

Observation occurred in Mickey’s classroom on a daily basis. Throughout the language arts instruction period, Mickey did not sit at her desk. She was constantly monitoring the students’ reading progress by walking around the room several times, observing students’ work and clarifying misunderstandings. During reading groups, Mickey observed the students’ reading fluency by listening to each individual student read aloud. Monitoring during whole group instruction consisted of Mickey not only listening to each individual student read aloud, but also observing the other students silently following along.
Running records were used throughout the course of the school year to assess students’ reading ability. Running records were updated every six weeks to monitor the progress of each student’s reading level. Mickey documented a biweekly progress report for the struggling readers in her class. A weekly reading test and spelling test were administered once a week to note development and growth with reading comprehension, vocabulary, and spelling.

Modeling was exhibited by both the teacher and the students. The teacher modeled reading fluency, tone, expression, context clues, picture clues, and vocabulary by reading to the students twice a day. A significant portion of modeling occurred in the classroom every Monday when Mickey introduced the reading story. Each Monday, Mickey read aloud the reading story from the textbook to model correct fluency and expression. Each Monday she would tell the students, “I will read the story aloud while you think about what I am reading. Be sure to listen to my voice and expressions as you follow along.”

Student modeling was used in Mickey’s classroom to influence the development of reading. Reading partners were used throughout the week to help struggling readers gain fluency and confidence. The lowest level reading student was paired with an intermediate level reading student to lower the risk of frustration. This helped the struggling reader build confidence while the intermediate reader gained strength through repeated readings of the story.

The teacher emphasized student modeling by noting effective reading skills and strategies students use in particular situations to decode text such as:

1. “What phonics rule did Susie use to sound out this word?”
2. “Why did Robbie look at the picture before reading this paragraph?”
3. “Why did Matthew reread this sentence?”
Mickey used her advanced readers as role models to the struggling students. On several occasions, Mickey told the students “If you do not know a word, then you can learn it by watching and listening to another student model it.”

**Environment, Behavior Management, and Free Choice**

The reading environment in Mickey’s classroom was designed to promote reading success and positive self-esteem. A reading center was available to all students throughout the day. The reading center was equipped with a reading carpet, bean bags, stuffed animals, and two large bookcases filled with all genres of literature. A rocking chair was available in the reading center for the teacher to use when she taught whole group/small group instruction during language arts.

The importance of reading was promoted through the use of signs, bulletin boards, and door decorations. Mickey’s reading signs included:

1. “Books take you places to meet new faces.”
2. “Set yourself free – Read a book.”
3. “Reading can make you feel good.”
4. “How to build your reading power.”
5. “Recycle…Share a book with a friend.”

Two bulletin boards were designed in the classroom to promote and encourage reading. The first bulletin board was titled “A Garden of Good Books” displaying one flower for each student. The flower included four petals asking each student to label a book’s setting, main characters, what happened in the story, and why he/she liked the book. The center of the flower contained the title of the book along with the author and the illustrator. The reading center displayed the second bulletin board with the theme of a
dragon. The dragon was large, covering the entire wall of the reading center displaying the words “Get fired up and read!”

Providing students with a print environment was a necessity in Mickey’s classroom. A word wall was located to the right of the reading center, where two words were added each week. The word wall was reviewed by the teacher and the students daily to build the students’ sight word list. The word wall was used as a writing tool to help students learn how to spell common second grade words. Each object in the classroom, such as the garbage can, chalkboard, door, etc., was labeled to again increase the students’ sight words.

The behavior management plan was initiated through an index card system. Each student had his/her own index card which was placed in a pocket chart at the front of the classroom. Each index card had four different color stickers, one sticker on the top and one sticker on the bottom of each side on the card. The colors were coded for the following grade scales: yellow sticker- A, blue sticker – B, green sticker – C, red sticker – D. An envelope was located next to the pocket chart with the letter F written on the outside. Every day each student began his/her day with the index card displaying a yellow sticker. If a child disrupted the classroom, then he/she was responsible for turning his/her index card, which resulted in a lower grade. Once the child had turned the index card three times, he/she must place the index card into the “F” envelope. Mickey’s behavior management consequences were as follows:

- Blue sticker – warning
- Green sticker – lose recess
- Red sticker – The student had to write a note home explaining his/her behavior to the parents
• “F” envelope – a visit to the principal’s office

As Mickey noted in her interview, Spring Creek does not have many discipline problems. During reading instruction, Mickey did not stop instruction to correct a student. If Mickey noticed a student off-task during reading, she would simply give the child a soft tap on the shoulder to remind the student to pay attention. It was indirectly understood that if the teacher tapped the student’s shoulder more than once during reading, then the student must go turn his/her card. This type of classroom management allowed Mickey to continue teaching, without having to stop and correct students throughout the entire reading lesson.

Free choice was given to students in Mickey’s classroom. Each day the students and the teacher participated in a sustained silent reading program, averaging ten minutes per day. During the allotted time, the teacher and students were allowed to read a book of his/her choice. Mickey did not limit the students in her classroom to a specific genre of literature. The reading genres included but not limited to magazines, comic books, joke books, nonfiction, fiction, and picture books. Students used free choice upon completion of work. Each time a student finished his/her own work early, he/she continued reading a free-choice book at his/her desk while waiting on the rest of the students to complete the assignment. This not only encouraged and motivated students to read but also minimized any disruptive behavior, allowing Mickey to provide additional instruction to struggling students.

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Additional instruction time was given to the struggling readers in Mickey’s classroom. Struggling students were sometimes withheld from enrichment classes, such as music, physical education, or French, to receive additional tutoring from Mickey. In addition to
enrichment classes, Mickey often met with struggling readers before and/or after school to practice and reinforce specific literacy skills. If additional instruction was needed beyond the time Mickey has allotted, then parents were encouraged to hire a tutor to improve reading instruction.

Mickey provided struggling readers expanded instructional time by dividing students into reading groups. Every Monday, the students had an hour and half designated computer time. Mickey used the computer enrichment class as a means to work with both struggling and accelerated readers. At the beginning of the year, Mickey divided the class into two different reading groups. One group consisted of struggling readers, in which instruction is primarily based on the use of phonics, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The other reading group was designed to meet the needs of the accelerated readers, in which instruction was primarily based on fluency, inflectional voices, inference, and analytical thinking.

The computer lab time was based on 45 minutes per group. The struggling readers stayed with Mickey the first 45 minutes, while the accelerated readers received instruction in the computer lab. After a 45 minute time increment, the accelerated readers received reading instruction, while the struggling readers attended computer class. Mickey did not draw attention to the fact that each group was based on reading abilities, but rather explained to the students that they must go to the computer lab in two different groups due to limited space in the computer lab. Each reading group read the same story and learned the same vocabulary words so the students did not acknowledge the difference in reading groups.

Writing was used throughout the language arts curriculum. During spelling, the students were required to dictate sentences by using each spelling word in a sentence.
During English, students had to correct and rewrite sentences that Mickey placed on the board for morning work. Vocabulary words and definitions were written down in a notebook. Each Monday, students discussed the setting, plot, and characters of the reading story and recorded the information in his/her reading notebook.

Creative writing activities occurred on a weekly basis, and invented spelling was encouraged during the first half of the school year. The students responded to a journal prompt every morning as part of his/her seat work. The journal writing included four complete sentences, capital letters, and correct ending marks. A picture accompanied the journal prompt to aid the students with descriptive writing.

Technology was used as well. During centers, the computer was used as an interactive teaching tool to reinforce specific literacy skills. Computer software programs were available to serve as a tutor, primarily focusing on skills such as phonics, comprehension, and context clues. Mickey had numerous interactive CD-Rom story books in which the computer served as a model for fluency, inflectional voice, sight words, and vocabulary skills. Other technology used in Mickey’s classroom on a daily basis included the overhead projector, a tape recorder with the reading tape to model the reading story, and the listening center.

**Interview with Spring Creek Fourth Grade Teacher**

**Educational Background**

Nina Hamlet has been teaching fourth grade at Spring Creek for five years. Her undergraduate degree is in music, specializing in voice performance. She did not envision that she would ever become a teacher, although her mother is also an elementary teacher. She then decided that she would like to teach elementary school and went back to school to be certified as an elementary teacher. While Hamlet began her teaching
career, she decided to work towards her master’s degree in reading. Hamlet taught school during the day while working on her master’s degree in the evenings, and she finally received her master’s degree in December of 2000. From there, Hamlet decided to work on her Ph.D. She now has six completed hours toward her doctoral degree.

**Communication and Self-Efficacy**

Hamlet notes that communication is one of the most important parts of teaching in an elementary school setting. “I find that if you treat the students with respect, and you give them some freedom to say what they feel, then you are going to have better communication with one another” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Hamlet reinforces her role of leadership in the classroom by not allowing the students to disrespect her in any way. Hamlet notes that the students are aware that she is always available to listen/discuss any personal problems that may or may not be related to school. “We do not have a counselor at our school. At the beginning of the school year, I make clear to the students that if something is happening at home or at school that they would like to talk to me about, then I am their ‘go-to person’” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Positive verbalization is the focal point of Hamlet’s classroom.

I think that we are dealing with children here…not mature adults who understand sarcasm and who can sort through snide remarks. I really feel that most of the comments that I make, in fun and in seriousness, need to be given from a positive perspective. I think that you can slant everything positively or negatively, and it is a conscious decision you make when dealing with children (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).
Hamlet suggests that her classroom promotes success and builds self-esteem. She believes that the students are not only at school for academic growth, but also for character building as well. “I promote positive self-esteem through my decorations on the wall, but most importantly I model positive morals and values through my teaching” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003). Hamlet also states that in order to emphasize a positive learning environment, she does not discipline a student in front of the other students.

If there is something that I am unhappy about, I speak to that student in the hall. Now everyone knows that I am in the hall with the student, but they do not know what I am saying. Typically, I pursue it in a positive manner, rather than a harsh tone. I do not attack the student, but rather ask them how he/she could make the better choice next time (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

**Observation and Modeling**

Observation occurs in Hamlet’s classroom in a variety of ways. Observation occurs visually, where the teacher is constantly analyzing facial expressions and participation. “Another form of observation is through close proximity. In other words, I get close to them to keep students on task. Sometimes with me just being close to the student is the motivation they need to complete an assignment” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003). The last form of observation used in Hamlet’s classroom is by actual grading the students’ work. “I check the students’ work by testing or on a specific assignment. It just depends on where I think they need less and more teacher interaction” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Hamlet acknowledges that modeling reading to her students each day is one of the most important parts of being a teacher.
I think reading aloud is one of the best things that one can do for a child, be it a parent, friend, teacher, or tutor. Children absorb what you do, good or bad. I think it is important for children to hear men read as well as women. I also think it is important to represent all types of genres in the classroom, such as fiction, nonfiction, poetry, etc. I think the better reader you are out loud, the better reader you are silently (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Hamlet not only models the words of the story, but also emphasizes the grammatical structure of the sentences as well. Hamlet explains that she also models punctuation as part of the reading process. “Once you consciously take the period as a signal to stop or the quotation marks as a signal to speak as another character, the reading comes alive. That is what it is all about for me” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Assessment

The policy of Spring Creek School in reference to standardized testing is for the teachers to teach the scope and sequence of the fourth grade basal. The teachers educate the students on what they need to know. “Standardized tests are a snapshot in the day of the life of a child. They are not reflective of potential or ability. They are a picture of one week in the fourth graders’ life” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Testing procedures are practiced only one week before the test. Hamlet provided test-taking tips for reading to help the students identify the correct answer (Appendix B). The test taking tips are discussed and reviewed one week before the test. The purpose of the practice test is to demonstrate the procedures of a multiple choice test and for students to also note the lengthy stories. The test is not considered a significant part of the school or child’s curriculum.
I do not feel that teaching to a test that they are going to take for four days out of 180 day school year is valuable use of my time. I teach them what they are to know and this test measures what they are expected to know. We take those scores with the lumps with the good. I think that they are a great tool for noting deficiencies, and it gives me great information about how I teach. But I do not think it is as valuable as society does (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Hamlet explains that the most difficult part of standardized testing is explaining to the parents how to interpret the scores. She states that every year she has parents upset about certain scores, especially with the stanine scores. “I have to give at least five parents each year a statistic lesson” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

**Environment, Behavior Management, and Free Choice**

Hamlet states that it is essential to provide students with a literacy-rich environment. “I think it is crucial to have reading displayed in your classroom with books and decorations; everywhere you look there needs to be something that is making you read, without realizing you are reading” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Hamlet also notes that it is necessary and important to provide a classroom that invites all students to read.

In my opinion, the ideal literacy-conducive classroom is one that contains a classroom library, with a reading rug, bean bags, benches, and book shelves displayed in an open square so that the reading center would be set apart from the rest of the classroom (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

An effective behavior management plan is implemented in Hamlet’s classroom the first day of school.
My behavior management plan is strict at the beginning of the year. In the beginning, I set my discipline plan tight and rigid. Then, as the students get comfortable with me and I with them, and they know the rules where I do not have to remind them constantly, then there is much less nagging on my part. As the year goes on, the students assume more responsibility. I put a lot of time in at the beginning, so at the end of the year, it is like clockwork. I do not have to fuss a lot (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Hamlet also notes that the most important aspect of classroom management is being consistent with the students. “I think that consistency is the biggest key to being a teacher period. You do what you are supposed to do every day as a teacher. In turn, I have to be consistent with my students as well” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Free choice is also given to students each day of the school year. I think that free choice encourages the students to become better readers without he/she knowing that they become better readers. Free choice is more important than making the students read out of the basal or assigning each student to the same book in the classroom. There is something about getting to choose and having freewill that is enticing. I am not excluded in that. I like to pick what I read. I do not like to be told what to read either (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Hamlet also states that free choice helps students gain knowledge through personal interest, along with gaining reading skills. “I think free choice is a win-win situation for both the teacher and the students” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Giving students a purpose to read is a priority in Hamlet’s classroom.
I think you have to set the stage before you start reading, especially reading for skills. The biggest strategy I use to set a purpose for reading is previewing and predicting every week. I have found that the previewing/predicting strategy peaks the students curiosity before we start reading…..to me that is setting the purpose. (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Hamlet does not provide additional instructional time to students who are struggling with the language arts curriculum. “We teach on grade level…what I give is what they get” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003). Hamlet does make accommodations for students who have evaluations from psychiatrist/psychologists regarding Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or learning disabilities by sitting him/her closer to the teacher or give them untimed test. She does not reteach to that child.

I do not reteach to the child because that to me is tutoring. I am not going to use my break times, which is used for grading and planning, to tutor a child that is not up to grade level. I know that may sound rigid, so let me say that I will work with students individually during instructional time to check for comprehension. I will not just leave a child that does not understand a specific skill at his/her desk and say ‘You know what, you don’t get it, oh well.’ However, I do not remediate. I think if I did teach in public schools, then that would be a rude awakening for me. I think I would probably have to rethink my philosophy. (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).
Hamlet commented that one reason her remediation philosophy is successful within her classroom is because she has supportive, educated parents who are interested in the academic success of his/her own child.

Reading and writing are taught as an integrated process in Hamlet’s fourth grade classroom.

Reading provides the model for good writing. I think writing skills can be taught but I think there is a gap between teaching the writing process and people who get it. I have taught writing for four of my five years. You can give students the skills and structure, but unless they take that on themselves, you cannot pull it out of them. Writing is more intrinsic than taught. (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Hamlet notes that she struggles with writing more than any other subject that she teaches. “I do not think I am the best writing teacher in the world. I think I am a much better reading teacher” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003). She does not support the philosophy “good readers make good writers.”

I do think children who are constantly reading a variety of authors and genres have much more vivid imagination, creativity, and a better perspective from an author’s position. I do think reading and writing are integrated, and I think that they are related. But I do not believe that just because you are a good reader makes you a good writer. I think the reason that I do not support the statement is because some of my most creative writing students are the ones that struggling with reading (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Hamlet’s classroom environment does not focus on technology as a source for learning.
Technology is a sore spot with me. My class is too small to have all of those computers in my classroom. I feel that it takes away space that could be used to expand my reading center. I do not feel that I am a good manager of time to get everyone on the computer and use it as an instructional tool. It is more of a pain than a value. It is not my own incompetence, because I do know how to use a computer. I do not find that it helps me as a teaching tool. It has been one roadblock after another. I have tried to do PowerPoint presentations on it with my students, or connect the TV monitor to the computer, but something always comes unconnected. It never fails. I have four subjects to teach in two hours, and I do not want to spend 25 of those minutes trying to figure out what is wrong with the computer. (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Hamlet suggests that the most important reading skills to teach students are fluency (silent and oral), comprehension, making inferences, and context clues. She notes that an effective teacher is one that “makes books come alive for kids” (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003). She also adds that effective reading teachers are constantly peaking the students’ curiosity. I am always trying to get them involved with the story, build their vocabulary, and teach them strategies to figure out words that they do not know. Effective teachers serve as good reading models to their students. An effective reading teacher provides opportunities for his/her students to not only read for structure and strategies but also read for fun and play. But most of all, the teacher must have a passion for reading himself/herself. I do not think you can instill the importance of reading within your children if you do not exude it yourself (N. Hamlet, personal interview, April 15, 2003).
Observation Data with Spring Creek Fourth Grade Teacher

Communication and Self-Efficacy

Positive communication was exhibited throughout Hamlet’s classroom. This was demonstrated by her avoidance of negative innuendos such as do not, never, and cannot. Instead, Hamlet’s vocabulary consisted of optimistic, encouraging words such as always and can. A harsh tone was not used in Hamlet’s classroom. Instead, the teacher explicitly chose a calm, soothing voice that did not involve sarcasm or scorn. Along with the respect and positive interaction between teacher and students, laughter was used to generate a conducive learning environment.

Self-efficacy was demonstrated daily within Hamlet’s classroom. Hamlet would encourage students to ask questions, and she would respond to questions with dignity and respect. Hamlet would solicit different students’ input on a daily basis to make each individual member feel as if he/she is an established member of the classroom community. Students’ input varied from deciding what subject he/she would like to do next to how the class should line up on a particular day. This self-efficacy strategy not only allowed spontaneity within the classroom, but also provided the teacher as well as the students with a positive learning environment, not a rigid one.

Observation and Modeling

Observation of the students’ academic progress was consistently monitored within the language arts curriculum. The primary observation period occurred directly after whole group instruction. Hamlet would walk around the room and individually check on the progress of each student. This time was used to provide supplemental instruction to students that seemed frustrated or to clear any misconceptions or confusions that the student might have had about a particular concept. Observation occurred as Hamlet
would monitor progress on weekly assessment tests. Homework was used in Hamlet’s class as a measuring tool to check for consistency and accuracy of concepts and objectives. Hamlet checked and reviewed homework each day while the students were independently writing in their journals to look for any inconsistencies or errors within their homework.

Modeling was demonstrated every day. Using the reading basal series, Hamlet introduced the story on Monday to the students by reading it aloud and having the students follow along. As Hamlet would read, she used different character voices and read with different tones and expressions. She stopped after reading three-four sentences and asked her students questions such as “What does the author mean?” or “What descriptive words did the author use to make this sentence more visual?” During novels, Hamlet followed the same procedure as the basal. When the students read it orally in class, they were praised for using clear reading voices with added expressions.

**Environment, Behavior, and Free Choice**

Hamlet’s classroom environment was designed to promote reading. The reading center in her classroom was a focal point of this fourth grade classroom. Three bookcases, two beanbags, and two cushioned chairs were located within the reading center for the students’ comfort. Positive reading reinforcement decorations were placed throughout the reading center to persuade and support students’ reading habits. Hamlet’s reading signs included:

1. “Reading is succeeding.”
2. “Reading takes you anywhere.”
3. “Books are great.”
4. “I love to read.”
5. “Reading is the way to grow.”

Like the reading center, the rest of Hamlet’s classroom was configured to encourage reading. The front of the classroom, where Hamlet presented her instructional techniques and methods to her fourth grade students, was also decorated with positive reading signs and posters including:

1. “We love books!”
2. “Drop everything and read.”
4. “A book can take you anywhere.”

Other decorations in Hamlet’s classroom were used for daily reinforcement to strengthen specific language skills such as parts of the friendly letter, punctuation, sentence structure, antonyms, synonyms, homophones, descriptive words, the writing process, and the parts of speech.

The classroom setting provided by the teacher facilitated an environment conducive to student success. Pictures of Hamlet’s students were placed on all four walls of the classroom from field trips, as well as random classroom photographs. In an informal interview, Hamlet explained that the photographs emphasize that each student in her classroom is unique, and the photographs allowed each student to become active members of her classroom community.

A behavior management plan was implemented into Hamlet’s classroom the first day of school. Both fourth grade teachers at Spring Creek School abided by the same behavior management plan to provide more structure for the students. Hamlet’s behavior management plan was monitored by a conduct grade sheet. A series of indiscretions were typed on the conduct sheet, serving students as a reminder for proper behavior. The
conduct sheet was written in a positive framework. Indiscretions were listed as the following:

1. I treated others with kindness and respect.
2. I behaved in chapel.
3. I respected adults and authority figures at school.
4. I worked quietly.
5. I listened and followed directions.
6. I completed my homework and brought it to school.
7. I raised my hand to speak out.
8. I behaved in extracurricular classes and the lunchroom.
9. I returned my conduct sheet and signed.

Each time a student violated a classroom rule, he/she was asked to place an “X” on his/her conduct sheet.

Upon receiving an “F” in conduct for the week, the student reported to the principal’s office for further discussion on improper classroom behavior. During the visit to the principal’s office, the student called his/her parents and explained to them how he/she has misbehaved in the classroom.

The conduct card was divided into categories that are considered important rules by the teacher as well as the students. Each classroom rule had a category, which was then divided by the days of the week. On any given day, a student could receive an “X” among any category. The conduct card was then sent home at the end of the week. The parents must sign the conduct sheet at the end of the week, and then it is collected by the teacher on Monday. Each student received a new conduct sheet on Monday, giving each student the opportunity to begin a new week. Each grade was recorded weekly, and
Hamlet used those nine weeks of conduct grades to calculate the conduct grade for the report card. The philosophy behind the conduct card was that it became an incentive from the parental perspective, teacher perspective, and administrative perspective to keep each and every student intact. Throughout the observation period, it was quite evident that the students adhered to the established classroom rules.

The grading scale for the report card is as follows:

1-2 X’s – A
3-4 X’s – B
5 X’s – C
6 X’s – D
7 X’s or more – F

Free choice was a given to students on a daily basis through the means of a sustained silent reading program. Hamlet set aside 20 minutes each day to provide students with an opportunity to read a book of the student’s choice. She set the stop watch on top of her desk and allowed the students to read until the stop watch signaled the students to stop. In an informal interview, Hamlet noted that she used a stop watch as a tool in her classroom begin/end the sustained silent reading program to enforce structure. During the sustained silent reading program, Hamlet participated with the students and read a book of her choice at her desk. Hamlet did not have a preference on the type of reading material that the students read for personal choice during the sustained silent reading program. Students read an assortment of literature in Hamlet’s classroom ranging from car magazines, joke books, lengthy novels, to biographies.

Free-choice was given to students every day throughout the school year within the parameters of a Sustained Silent Reading program. Each day Hamlet gave the students
30 minutes to read a book of their choice. She accepted and encouraged a variety of
genres in her classroom. Students always finished one piece of literature before moving
on to the next selection. Bathroom and/or water breaks were not allowed during this
particular reading program, and not one student ever asked to leave the room.

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Instructional time was provided to the fourth grade students by means of whole class
instruction. Whole class instruction can be defined as the teacher presenting the
curriculum to the students with an emphasis on one particular method such as visually,
verbally, or in a tactile approach. Whole group instruction is not designed for struggling
students. Struggling students that are taught through whole group instruction often
become frustrated due to the lack of specialized instruction that meets the needs of the
individual student. Hamlet’s whole group instructional procedure did not accommodate
the struggling student; however this approach coincided with the philosophy of the
administrative staff. Brandon noted earlier “the majority of the teachers offer only
whole group instruction because a high percentage of our students are at or above grade
level” ((L. Brandon, personal interview, April 15, 2003).

Although the whole group instruction approach was used in Hamlet’s classroom, all
students appeared to be aligned with curriculum standards without any signs of struggle
or frustration. If a student did seem to be perplexed with a particular concept, Hamlet
offered the student a modified one-two minute summarization of the lesson to clarify any
miscommunications. Hamlet constantly monitored students’ work by walking by each
student’s desk. Hamlet could best be described as a “hands-on” teacher within her
classroom. She was either teaching in front of the class or walking around to monitor
each student’s progress. In fact, the only time Hamlet ever sat at her desk was during sustained silent reading.

Writing was used in Hamlet’s classroom on a daily basis. Each morning the students started the language arts portion of the curriculum by keeping a journal. The main purpose for the journal writing was for each student to express creative thoughts about one’s personal experience and background knowledge. The journal usually consisted of topics that interrelated with the reading characters and stories that the class was studying about each week. Hamlet stated that the journal helped the students find and relate to specific characters of the story.

Another aspect of writing that Hamlet integrated within the curriculum was to study the different writing genres of particular authors with her students. Each time the class was involved with a particular reading lesson, whether it be the weekly reading story or a trade book, Hamlet would constantly and consistently ask the students their opinion of the author’s writing. The following questions were frequently asked:

1. “What do you think the author means?”
2. “How is this author’s writing compare to the other author’s writing?”
3. “What words does the author use to make this text come alive?”
4. “Do you like this particular genre of writing? Why or why not?”

Other writing activities that were included within the curriculum were spelling, reading, and grammar. Spelling activities were completed as a structured routine each week. The structured routine is as follows:

1. Monday – Write spelling words three times each
2. Tuesday – Write a sentence with spelling words 1-5
3. Wednesday – Write a sentence with spelling words 6-10

4. Thursday – Place spelling words in alphabetical order/study for test

Reading activities included Hamlet writing the vocabulary words on the overhead projector while students copied the vocabulary words along with the definition in their notebook. During each weekly reading story, students were to write the characters, setting, problem, and solution in descriptive detail. Writing activities in grammar were initiated at the beginning of each lesson with Hamlet writing a grammatically incorrect sentence on the board, and the students had to rewrite the sentence using correct capitalization, punctuation, and grammar usage. The students were further required to make the sentence more elaborate, descriptive, and detailed by adding adjectives.

Technology, however, was the one area in Hamlet’s classroom that was not a priority. The only type of technology that was used in Hamlet’s classroom was the overhead projector. The overhead projector was used at least once a day in at least one subject. Hamlet had two computers in the back of her classroom that remained unused. It was quite apparent that Hamlet’s teaching style and beliefs focused more on whole group instruction with a verbal/kinesthetic approach rather than a technology driven approach.

**Interview with River City Principal**

**Educational Background Experience**

The principal of River City is referred to as Mrs. Sarah Curry. Curry began her teaching profession in 1973 when she graduated with her undergraduate degree in elementary education. She immediately pursued her master’s degree while teaching elementary school. Curry then decided that she wanted to expand her knowledge in the area of reading, soon obtaining her reading specialist degree. From there, Curry became interested in educational leadership, and became certified in administration and
supervision. She has been a professional educator for 30 years, three of which have been as principal.

**Communication and Self-Efficacy**

Positive communication is considered a priority to Curry. Curry notes that if a student is not able to communicate properly, then he/she will not be able to function as a member of society. “In order for the kids to communicate effectively with their peers and teachers, they have to have lines of communication. They have to know when to speak formally and informally and know the difference between the two” (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003). She also feels that this is not something that is learned just in elementary school. “Communication is a lifelong skill. It is learning process that begins in elementary school and continues all the way through adulthood” (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

She also notes the difference between positive verbalization and negative verbalization among classroom teachers. “I look at it this way. Positive verbalization gives you more interaction and feedback from the students. There are times when kids will be kids but using a negative verbalization with children can put a stigma on them” (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003). Curry added that teachers should demonstrate to the students the proper way to positively communicate with one another and that it does have a great impact on the child’s life and his/her surrounding environment.

Curry suggests that one of the most important attributes of River City is the teacher’s ability to promote success and self-esteem in the classroom. “This is my third year in an administrative position. All of my teachers each year go to workshops and conferences to build communication skills with the students in their class” (S. Curry, personal
interview, June 16, 2003). She further suggests that each teacher who works at River City School must possess strong characteristics of positive verbalization and open communication due to the diverse needs of each individual child at this particular school.

Self-improvement among the teachers and the administrative staff is monitored and assessed throughout the school year. The teachers are required to collaborate with one another on a weekly basis by appropriate grade levels. Each teacher, along with the administrative staff is required to attend at least one seminar, workshop, or conference of personal choice during the school year.

This year, my teachers, along with the librarian and me, just finished a course called “Scholastic Read”, which is a literacy program. The program is designed to incorporate reading into the classroom and to show the children how they can go about making personal choices in reading (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Other types of self-improvement programs are workshops that are given during faculty meetings. A speaker is present at these particular “in-house” workshops. The speaker is usually a specialist in a particular concentration area such as reading, math, or self-efficacy.

**Observation and Modeling**

Curry notes that observation is the key factor to monitor a student’s progress.

“Observation of the student’s work is essential. Teachers must observe the students’ progress on a daily basis and constantly interact with them. If a teacher does not observe each and every day, the students face a higher risk of failure” (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003). She further states that assessment is needed at least once a
week in each subject area and a self-assessment reading test is required every six weeks on each individual student.

The self-assessment reading test is required by my teachers every six weeks. This involves students in grades first through fifth. The self-assessment exam is a simple running record of the child reading to the teacher. The results help the teacher to determine reading abilities, as well as gains and losses of students’ reading abilities throughout the semester (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Curry states that a reading model is a necessity for all students at any age. “When the teacher models reading, each individual child understands the importance of fluency, inflectional tones, and a good reading voice. Without modeling, students miss the opportunity to learn” (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003). She adds that many of the teachers do not get parental support at home, especially when it comes to reading. “My teachers must be role model readers for the students during school because many times it is the only reading that they will be exposed to for the rest of the day” (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

**Assessment**

The curriculum of River City is aligned with the annual LEAP test, Louisiana Educational Assessment Program, which is given to the fourth graders each year. Beginning in the second grade, the teachers begin closely monitoring students that are considered at-risk, which is defined as at least one grade below level. Each second grade student is evaluated every six weeks by means of a running reading record given by the teacher. Students that are considered at-risk begin to receive expanded instructional time with their classroom teacher. Expanded instructional time activities include working in
small groups, peer tutoring, or tutoring provided by the teacher during an enrichment period such as P.E. or music. In the third grade, students still considered at-risk are provided a tutor to assist in increasing reading abilities. The tutors are usually college students from a local university that are receiving their undergraduate degree in elementary education. A tutor is provided to the student all year. Reading is the primary focus of teachers and the administrative staff when it comes to the LEAP test.

The standardized test consists mostly of reading. Students do not just give a one answer response to a particular question. Each student actually has to expound on how he/she got that particular answer. The third graders must start preparing the grade before so it is not overwhelming when they get to the fourth grade (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

**Environment, Behavior Management, and Free-Choice**

Curry feels that the well-balanced literacy environment is necessary to ensure that all students read.

The classroom itself should promote the idea that reading is important and fun. The classroom library should be one that is well-rounded, not particularly centered on only one area. The kids should be able to get a vast amount of knowledge from the books made available to them by the teacher (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

She further states that word walls not only help the children with basic sight words that are encountered on a daily basis, but also serve as an instructional tool for daily reinforcement.

River City has adopted a school wide behavior management plan that is conducive to the needs of the administrative staff as well as the teachers. Curry notes that the reason
the behavior management plan at the school is effective because of the consistency of its application among the teachers.

Each teacher abides by the same school policy for an effective behavior management plan. Each teacher and student is aware that the same school rules apply, no matter what grade level. Each teacher has a conduct sheet representing each student. Whenever a student has committed an offense, he/she marks the sheet. Those students who have not marked their sheet throughout the week get to visit the school store and choose something as an incentive for good behavior. The store is full of different kinds of school paraphernalia ranging from pencils to cups to t-shirts (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Curry suggests that giving students free-choice for selecting literature helps maintain the student’s curiosity in a literacy program.

Everybody’s taste is different. I know that there are times when the teachers select a book for the students due to an assignment, but I think giving a child an opportunity to go and select his/her own book makes a whole lot of difference. (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

She also notes that allowing free-choice in the classroom permits each student to progress at his/her own reading level, without the concern that a teacher-selected book could be too easy or difficult.

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Instructional time is given to struggling students that are one or more grades below level. Curry notes:

Expanded instructional time is given to students by pulling them out of the regular classroom and providing them additional tutoring. These are the kids that are
having difficulties in the classroom. Tutors, that are actually teachers, work with these kids on an individual basis. Volunteers also come into our school on a weekly basis that are associated with local affiliate universities. (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Curry also adds that the school performance would be much lower if it were not for the additional help that the school receives from teachers and volunteers. “We are extremely fortunate to have all of the wonderful tutorial assistants available to help our struggling students, especially since we start prepping our third graders for the LEAP test” (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Writing is an intriguing part of River City’s curriculum. Curry states that reading and writing are an integrated process. “It is true. Reading and writing are not separated. They go hand in hand with each other. In order to be a good writer, you must be a good reader” (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003). She also notes that in order to become a good writer, the student must be exposed to different genres of authors and literature. “When a reader is exposed to numerous types of literature written by different authors, then he/she more apt to becoming better descriptive, detailed writers” (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

River City is equipped with numerous software programs as well as classroom equipment for the benefit of the teachers as well as the students. “Technology is changing on a daily basis. We have many software programs available to our students and teachers to help reinforce skills in reading and math. This allows the students a wonderful opportunity for learning” (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

River City’s primary computer program, which is used daily in the classroom, is Compass Learning. Compass Learning is described as computer tutorial program that
reinforces specific skills in subject areas of reading, mathematics, and social studies. Students are able to use the program without the need for the teacher to monitor the questions or the answers. The computer program generates explanations and examples of skills that need reinforcement by the struggling student. Scholastic Red, the literacy program noted earlier, is also a computer literacy program that teaches children how to select a book for personal choice reading. After each teacher became certified with the computer program, the software was downloaded onto their personal classroom computer for student use. Scholastic Red also gives each certified teacher using the software program in the classroom “the opportunity to purchase books for their own personal classroom library” (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Overall, Curry states that the five most important reading skills that should be taught in an elementary classroom are comprehension, fluency, phonemic awareness, context clues, and picture clues. She also notes that it is important to offer students a balanced reading approach, one which includes the use of trade books, a basal, and skill reinforcement. Curry closed the interview by stating that an effective reading teacher is one that is:

well-rounded…..A well-rounded reading teacher is one that is willing to use numerous strategies and techniques to meet the diverse needs of individual differences in the classroom. An effective reading teacher promotes a wide variety of literature and authors to his/her students to increase fluency, vocabulary, and writing” (S. Curry, personal interview, June 16, 2003).
Interview with River City Second Grade Teacher

Educational Background Experience

The second grade teacher at River City is referred to as Ms. Julia Spears. Spears has been in the field of education for five years. She has an undergraduate degree in Agriculture Economics. She became interested in the profession of teaching soon after graduation, and shortly became certified as an elementary school teacher. Upon certification, she immediately began teaching at River City, and will begin her sixth year as a professional educator.

Communication and Self-Efficacy

Spears emphasizes positive communication. “Communication is the key to an effective classroom. Communication lets the students know what you expect of them in the classroom as well as finding out what the students expect of the teacher (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003). Spears also adds that if a teacher does not create an environment that reflects positive communication and thinking skills then the students are less likely to learn to their fullest potential.

If I come into my classroom each day with a poor attitude and negative feedback, then my students will respond negatively as well. I have found that even adults respond better to positive communication instead of negative communication… why should children be any different? (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Spears notes that she begins critiquing a child's work with a positive statement.

It is extremely important to me as well as the child to begin the critiquing process of his/her work with a positive remark, even if the student has completely missed the concept of the assignment. If I immediately start to criticize a child’s piece of
work, then the student will shut down on me. But if I begin the conversation with something positive, I am more likely to get better results (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Spears states that her classroom and teaching beliefs promote success within her classroom. “I think my classroom promotes all positive aspects, mentally and physically, for the well-being of the child. You have to praise the students each day to make them feel as an important member of society” (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003). She further adds that it is important to continue positive communication even on days when an individual student demonstrates signs of struggling.

As a teacher, it is important to remember that all students are not perfect. I always try to continue my positive verbalization each day, even if a student might not be doing as well as I expect. These are the days when that student needs me the most (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

**Observation and Modeling**

Observation is noted as an integral part of Spear’s teaching methods. Spears monitors observation on an individual basis as well as in small groups. “When I am working in groups, it helps me identify specific academic needs for my students and provides me with the opportunity to reinforce skills that have been previously taught in a whole group instructional setting” (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003). Individualized observation is assessed and monitored daily. “When a student finishes his/her work, I check the student’s work to make sure he/she did exactly what was required” (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

One of the most helpful insights for the second grade teachers at River City is the use of teacher planning and collaboration. “Throughout the school year, we have planning
periods. The two teachers that teach the same grade level meet for one hour a week. During that hour we discuss and plan what we will be teaching for the upcoming week” (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003). Spears adds that this planning period also provides ample time for teachers to exchange ideas to help a struggling student with a particular skill. “This collaborative meeting also serves as a time to help colleagues enhance students’ learning. Collaborating helps me try new ideas to help a particular child rather than exude frustational energy into the classroom” (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

One of the strongest roles Spears provides to her students is serving as an instructional model in the area of reading.

I think that you have to provide and instructional model with all aspects of the curriculum with your students. If you do not model for your students, then he/she will not know what you expect. I model even the simplest of skills such as the correct way to hold a book, turn a page, reading with expression, reading from left to right, and placing an emphasis on punctuation marks. (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Spears postulates that instructional modeling is only effective if the teacher allows the students to practice and perform reading skills on an individual basis as well as with their peers.

I do feel that it is important to provide ample instructional time for my students to practice the reading skills that I just modeled for them. There is no point to model the reading skills each day if I do not encourage the students to practice on their own (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).
Assessment

The curriculum of River City is centered on the LEAP test that is given in the spring, beginning with the second grade.

At the beginning of the year, we keep a running record on each student’s individual performance. Every six weeks, we continue the running record process to find students who are potentially at-risk, reading at least one-grade below. This running record helps assess and evaluate students all the way through fourth grade. Students who are at-risk begin receiving expanded instructional time in second grade. I give additional instructional time to at-risk students by means of small group work and peer tutoring. If I see that a student is severely struggling, I keep them in from a particular enrichment to continue working one-on-one individually. Summer school is also offered and recommend to at-risk students. All of the group work, peer tutoring, and individual assistance is available to the students to better prepare them for the LEAP test (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Environment, Behavior Management, and Free-Choice

Spears places much emphasis on providing her students with a literacy-rich environment supplemented with books of different authors and genres. “It is very important to have a variety of literature to provide to your students in the classroom” (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003). Along with rich literature, Spears states that it is important to equip students with a reading center that offers different readability levels for the students.

I think you should provide students with books that are on their level, above their level, and below their level….that way it keeps the children motivated and
challenged daily in your classroom. I feel that if you only provide students with easy books, then he/she has no room to grow as a reader in the classroom (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Spears conceptualizes classroom management and behavioral modifications in several ways. “When we are in groups, I make sure we have a lot of center activities to keep the students engaged in learning” (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003). A conduct chart is used to monitor students’ behavior in the classroom. “I have a conduct chart to keep students on task and aware of his/her actions at all times. The conduct chart provides a visual representation to each student, displaying positive and negative behavior along with consequences for his/her actions” (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Spears offers free-choice to each student in the classroom.

Free-choice gives students the opportunity to read books of interest. Students do not like to be told what they have to read all of the time. It makes reading monotonous. They like to be able to choose. When they have the opportunity to choose, they will select a book of interest and read the entire story. But when the teacher chooses for them, they do not care. (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Spears does not provide her students with a purpose for reading every time a story is read.

I think it is always important to know why they are reading. But even as adults we do not always have a purpose when selecting a book. Sometimes we choose a book because it is a hobby that brings us pleasure and relaxation. I think there needs to be a balance. You do need to let your students know that sometimes we
do read for a purpose, whether it is to build vocabulary, increase our reading ability, etc. But sometimes we simply read for enjoyment (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Spears provides expandable instructional time for struggling students as well as the high achieving students in her classroom. “I definitely expand instructional time for my students who are above level, at-risk, and below level. I will divide the students into groups to help me maximize the different levels of students in my classroom” (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003). Spears notes that not every group is always provided with the same amount of instructional time.

Sometimes I might have to spend more time with one group verses the other two. I find if I give my high-achieving students too much time, they tend to get bored quickly. My struggling students obviously have a greater need of my time and enjoy the one-on-one attention with me. I try my best to balance my time equally among all three groups, but it does not always work out that way (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

The LEAP test ensures the need for the teachers of River City to provide expanded instructional time for struggling students to lower the risk of retention.

As I mentioned earlier, students who are labeled as ‘struggling’ receive individualized help. This might mean that I have to use one of my own personal breaks, such as an enrichment class, to tutor a particular student. The school encourages us to provide struggling students with special accommodations in order to better prepare them for the fourth grade LEAP test. (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).
According to Spears, reading and writing are indeed an integrated process.

I think that reading and writing are integrated because when you are writing, you have to go back and read to make sure it makes sense. You have to be able to do both. You have to be able to read to write, and you won’t be able to write without knowing how to read (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Spears states that being able to read and write well can affect a student’s level of comprehension.

It is very important for a student to be able to respond to a particular selection of literature. One of the best ways to check a student’s comprehension of the story is for him/her to react/reply to the story itself. This process builds language and vocabulary development, along with communication skills. Reading and writing definitely go hand in hand (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Technology is one of the strengths at River City Elementary school. “We have always gone to technology conferences that focus on ways to enhance instruction in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies through the means of technology” (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003). The primary technology-based program that is being used within this elementary school is Compass Learning, mandated by the district’s central office staff.

This program is designed for use in kindergarten through fifth grade. Reading and math are the central focus for this program. The teacher has downloaded every lesson made available for his/her appropriate grade level. The reading section contains numerous skills such as comprehension, vocabulary, context clues, etc. Each week the teacher is expected to use no more than two or three lessons. The lessons are based on those concepts and skills that have already
taught to use as reinforcement. The lesson begins with the basic concepts and continues to make each activity a little more difficult. The students are required to spend forty-five minutes in each subject each week, completing all of the required lessons for the week. Compass Learning also provides the teachers with a pre-and post test for each student, listing areas of strengths and weaknesses for the teacher to monitor and evaluate each week. (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Spears states that the five primary reading skills that an elementary teacher should reinforce within his/her classroom are sight words, comprehension, reading fluency, vocabulary, picture/context clues. She further adds that an effective reading teacher is one that:

- addresses the needs of each student. An effective reading teacher does not compare students to each other, because he/she knows that each and every student is different from one another. An involved reading teacher provides numerous word attack strategies for his/her students and is one that knows if every student comprehends the story. Last, but not least, an effective teacher of reading encourages all students to reach their fullest potential as a reader and a writer. The teacher does not limit his/her students but rather provides students with great expectations (J. Spears, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Observation Data with River City Second Grade Teacher

Communication and Self-Efficacy

Spears used positive communication each day in the classroom. In an informal interview, she noted that it was important to her to work one-on-one with the students daily to build a child's sense of purpose. When she monitored and observed students’
work, Spears would always begin with a positive statement before addressing individual errors. After correcting the errors, Spears would end with a positive remark to keep the child motivated. This procedure created a classroom environment that made the students accept criticism in a positive manner. Students did not get nervous when the teacher approached nor did they become frustrated after the teacher left.

She stated in an informal interview that it was important for children to have goals that they are actively pursuing. During class, Spears would not admonish a child in front of the class or on an individual basis. Instead, she used positive reinforcement to teach students to monitor their progress, helped them recognize personal strengths, and taught them to praise themselves for their successes. Promoting this type of classroom environment improved academic performance and reduced behavior problems and peer conflicts in the classroom. Each student experienced a sense of self-worth as part of a large group, knowing that they were accepted by their teacher as well as their peers.

Spears not only kept in close communication with the students, but also with the parents as well. When a student performed well in class, Spears made an effort to send a note home to the parent describing how the child had improved or excelled during class that day. The teacher handed out pencils on occasion for students who used vocabulary words correctly during a classroom discussion. These techniques not only promoted self-esteem within the classroom, but also encouraged the other students to perform to the best of their ability.

**Observation and Modeling**

Spears observed her students daily by monitoring students’ work individually. She walked around the room during independent work and checked for comprehension of the material and their ability to perform independently. Another form of observation used by
Spears was to check comprehension by the oral responses she received from students during the lesson. Spears noted during an informal interview that this was one of the most important types of assessment a teacher can use to properly evaluate a student’s progress during a class discussion/lecture. She always had a checklist on her desk to make notes as to who was participating throughout the lesson as well as students who remained quiet. If a student remained quiet, Spears would ask a question to that particular student. Based on the student’s response, she determined which students needed more individualized attention through group work and which students needed enrichment.

Assessment instruments were used quite frequently to evaluate each student’s performance in both reading and mathematics. As mentioned earlier, Spears was required to keep a running record of each child reading in her classroom. This was performed every six weeks to determine the instructional reading level of each child, as well as strengths and weaknesses. This increases the teacher’s awareness of the progress of each student throughout the school year. The central office staff mandates that teachers give each student a pretest and posttest in mathematics. This indicates to the teachers and principal what the students know and what they should be taught in the second grade. These test results are sent home for the students and parents to review.

Other types of assessment procedures that assisted the teachers in monitoring and evaluating each student’s performance level were quizzes, mid-chapter reviews, and chapter tests. The quizzes were given at least twice a week to check the individual understanding of the child. Mid-chapter reviews were used to reinforce skills before progressing to a new sequence of skills. Weekly and chapter test were given for the
purpose of providing teachers, parents, and students with a compilation of skills indicating the degree to which each student has performed.

Spears also used modeling during lectures, classroom discussions, whole group instruction, and small group instruction. Lectures and classroom discussions involved Spears reminding students on a daily basis to use word attack strategies, such as pictures clues and context clues, when approaching an unfamiliar word. She modeled these strategies by talking out loud for the students to understand her logical reasoning. She then had other students model in the classroom, logically speaking out loud for others to listen to the process involved in implementing word attack strategies. The students were always encouraged to practice these strategies on their own when reading independently.

Whole group instruction as well as small group instruction relied on the teacher as well as the students modeling oral reading. The teacher always introduced a new story by having students preview and predict what the story might be about as well as share experiences that any student might have had to better relate to the story. The teacher read the story to the students the first day, emphasizing punctuation marks and expressive reading tones. This type of introduction to the story gave students the opportunity to listen for reading tones, analyze unfamiliar words, and place the new vocabulary words in context without the pressure of decoding an unfamiliar text. For homework, the students were required to read the story to his/her parent three times a week to improve fluency. Throughout the week, students became the model for each other as they began to gain fluency, expressive tones, and note punctuation endings.

Environment, Behavior Management, and Free Choice

The classroom environment was designed to display the tone of a student-centered environment. All twenty student desks were centered in the middle of the classroom to
give students optimal vision of the white board. Five computers were against the left wall along with a television monitor and a VCR. The center wall displayed the reading center which included three bean bags, stuffed animals, and two bookcases. Each bookcase presented many different genres of books, authors, and reading levels. The calendar was located right next to the reading center along with the white board. A word wall displayed all of the sight words that had been discussed in class was located on the other side of the white board. Each morning the word wall was orally recited by the teacher and the students. The writing center was directly in front of the word wall so students could use the word wall as a reference to improve writing skills.

The back wall contained a collection of stories that the entire class had constructed together during writing lessons. The writing samples varied from recipes to letters to creative writing. Two more bookcases and a clock were also located on this wall. The classroom wall to the right was designed for small group instruction. A table and five chairs were available to be used for individualized instruction. A vocabulary word wall was also placed for visual reinforcement as well as a word family wall, and a chalkboard was located near the table where small group instruction takes place.

The behavioral management plan used in Spears’ classroom was clear, concise, and easy to follow. A conduct card was used to monitor and evaluate the students’ behavior on a daily basis. The conduct card displayed the letters A, B, C, D, E, and F. The letter E was included as a grade for the conduct card to make students aware that this was his/her last opportunity to stay on task.

When a student misbehaved, he/she was warned three times. After three times, the student must take out his/her own conduct sheet and lower the grade from an A to a B. After the student has lowered his/her conduct sheet from an A to a B, he/she only
received one warning thereafter for the next five letters. If a student did receive an F in conduct during the course of one week, the student had a meeting with the principal to discuss his/her behavior. If a student was called to the office more than twice, the parent was then required to have a meeting with the principal. Every Friday the student took his/her conduct sheet home and had to return the conduct sheet on the following Monday. On Monday, each student began a new week with a new conduct sheet.

Free-choice was given to students each day. Students had the opportunity to visit the library once a week for one hour. Part of the library routine permitted each student to check out two books of his/her choice for the week. Spears allowed students who finished with their books early to revisit the library and check out two more books. Each time a student finished his/her work early, he/she read silently at his/her desk while waiting for further instruction by the teacher. This not only motivated the students to read frequently, but also provided Spears the opportunity to work with students who required expanded instructional time.

Spears implemented a Sustained Silent Reading program requiring students and the teacher to silently read a book of free choice for a set number of minutes. In an informal interview, Spears stated at the beginning of the school year, ten minutes per day were devoted to Sustained Silent Reading. As the students progressed, Spears increased the number of minutes to fifteen. All types of books were accepted during Sustained Silent Reading and students were not allowed to leave the room.

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Instructional time was given to students during whole group and small group instruction. During whole group instruction, Spears observed student’s work on an individual basis. As soon as a student was finished with his/her work, he/she
immediately began reading a book while waiting on the teacher to check his/her progress.
This concept made it convenient for Spears because she was able to give individualized
attention to struggling students in her classroom without having a discipline problem with
the other students. If a student still appeared to struggle with a particular concept or skill,
then Spears continued tutoring the student during enrichment hours. This gave Spears the
opportunity to expand instructional time with the student without any distractions or
interruptions.

Small groups were used to expand instructional time with struggling students.
Students were grouped according to ability, permitting Spears to categorize students by
specific skill deficiencies. There were a total of three reading groups: a reading group
above level, on level, and below level. The reading groups were determined by the
teacher at the beginning of the year based on running records. Each group worked on
reading skills that had been previously taught during the year that needed reinforcement.

A hands-on activity emphasizing a specific skill was provided for each group designed
to enable students to practice the skill within the context of the reading passage. There
were sets of word families placed on the wall that were reviewed each morning and
students volunteered new words to be added to the appropriate word family. If a student
gave the teacher a new word, he/she also had to explain the meaning of the word before
the teacher would place the new word on the poster.

Spears assigned daily writing in each subject throughout the day. Every morning
when the students walked into the classroom, there were three grammatically incorrect
sentences on the board. The students were to rewrite all three sentences making changes
to improve each sentence. The teacher selected volunteers to come to the board and
improve the sentences through punctuation, capitalization, and subject/verb agreement.
During spelling, the teacher required the students to write creative stories of their choice using all of the spelling words from the week. This not only improved their creative writing skills, but also reinforced correct grammar usage of each spelling word. Spears chose two-three students per week to share their stories aloud. At the bottom of each story, students were asked to illustrate a picture.

At the beginning of each week, a new reading story would be introduced. Students were asked to write a short descriptive paragraph about a character that he/she could relate to and why. Students illustrated his/her story with colorful pictures. In an informal interview, Spears stated that the reason she asked her students to relate to one character in the story was to connect past experiences with the characters and the story topics. She found that this not only improved the students’ vocabulary, but brought a purpose to her students for reading.

Technology was used daily in this second grade classroom. Spears, who had attended many technology workshops and conferences during the year, used the computer each day to reinforce vocabulary words, sight words, context clues, pictures clues, and phonics. There were multiple computer programs available to help assist students with strengthen reading skills. The computers were used as a classroom center. Each child practiced reading skills daily for at least 20 minutes. Spears would rotate different reading skills each week that coincided with the reading skill that was emphasized with the basal reader. The students were able to use the computer independently without interrupting the teacher as she worked with small groups.
Interview with River City Fourth Grade Teacher

Educational Background Experience

The fourth grade teacher of River City Elementary school is referred to as Margaret Harrington. Harrington has been teaching at River City Elementary School for fifteen years. She has a bachelor’s degree in elementary education. Harrington is certified to teach first through eighth grade.

Communication and Self-Efficacy

Harrington believes that the focal point of her teaching relies on providing students with positive communication and building self-efficacy in the classroom. “Communication is the survival part of being able to present the information to the children and for them to be able to receive it” (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003). Harrington further stated that positive communication helps her establish a relationship with each one of her students in the classroom, especially since many of the students hear negative feedback from their home environment. “Positive communication helps me build a rapport with the children to open up a desire for the children to want to learn” (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Verbalization is used as a positive form of communication in Harrington’s classroom as well.

I feel that encouragement is the major building foundation for the students, especially our children. I have to be careful. These children receive a lot of negative attention from home. When I correct a child that comes from an unstable home environment, then many times he/she interprets this form of communication as pessimistic and unconstructive. This particular type of
students becomes defensive when you try to push them academically (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Harrington promotes positive communication and self-esteem in her classroom through bulletin boards and sign.

I use my classroom as a prop to continue positive emotional behavior in my classroom. I know that the self-esteem of a lot of these children is at the lowest level. As an educator, I feel that my most important job is making the students realize that they can do it and that their capabilities are there. I think that positive communication is the primary emphasis that should be in the classroom (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Harrington states that positive feedback has a strong correlation with communication and self-esteem.

Feedback needs to be more in the line of encouragement; it should be a conviction not a condemnation. Sometimes you do have students that can test you emotionally as a teacher, and with those types of students you do have to use a stern approach. One important method that I have learned with this particular type of student is that when he/she completes an assignment, immediate feedback is important. You have to let the student know what he/she did right as well as wrong….if you wait to late, it has no effect on them what so ever (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Overall, Harrington suggests that her classroom environment does promote self-esteem.

My desire is to allow the opportunity for each student in my classroom to feel special in their own unique way. I even up a poster in my classroom that states
‘You are special.’ I hope that my students do feel important because they are. It is one of my personal objectives and goals to make each student feel loved (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

As far as self-improvement, Harrington continues to advance her professional career by attending conferences and staff development meetings.

I am involved in several workshops each year, such as Scholastic Read and Investigation Math. Both of these programs keep me abroad and updated in the reading and mathematical field. I try to expand. I know that I am older, but I feel that attending workshops and conferences keep me updated with new methods and programs. I am also going to pursue my master’s degree this year (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Harrington and her fourth grade colleagues collaborate each week to plan and discuss the curriculum.

We have school grade level meetings each week to prepare for the upcoming week. I also have a teacher aide that I work closely with on a daily basis. She has been reinforcing math skills and concepts with the students to better prepare them for the LEAP test, so we have to meet each day to discuss each student’s strengths, weaknesses, and improvements (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

**Observation and Modeling**

Harrington monitors and observes students’ work by incorporating hands-on activities in the classroom.

I believe that hands-on activities give the teacher immediate feedback. These types of lessons help the teacher check the students’ comprehension of the
material as well as provide the students in the classroom with a kinesthetic learning style. I also find that hands-on activities promote student generated questions, rather than teacher generated questions (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Assessment procedures are used frequently to monitor the students’ comprehension. “Assessments, such as teacher made tests and book tests, provide me with results of the level of academic performance of my students” (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Although hands-on activities and assessment procedures are used to monitor the students’ progress, Harrington states that the most important way to monitor students is by observation.

Assessments and hands-on activities provide me with a foundation of my students’ progress. But the main way to understand your students’ academic performance is through observation. At the beginning of the year, I go through each student’s record and get his/her academic background before he/she ever steps foot into my class. Then, I get to know the child on an individual basis, such as facial expressions and personalities. This personal relationship helps me identify each student’s strengths and weaknesses as well as check for comprehension by means of the individual child’s body language (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Harrington states that she provides an instructional model to her students each day. “I spend 20-25 minutes each afternoon reading to my students. I try to show them how to express the reading and bring it to life” (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16,
Harrington also states that modeling motivates students to become better readers on their own.

When I read, I try to express the conversation and note details that occur throughout the story. I find that my students read flat…just read words. I think that is why it is so important for me to model reading to my students so that the children can see that it is okay to use expression when you read (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

**Assessment**

The focal point for assessment at River City Elementary school among the fourth grade teachers and students is the LEAP test.

All of our assessments, which are mostly teacher made, are geared to the format of the LEAP test. We prepare our students at the beginning of the year to answer in open response format or to use rubrics in their writing and hands-on activities because this is how the LEAP test is organized (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

When asked how much of her instructional time applied to the LEAP test, she smiled and replied “all of it” (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003). Harrington notes I make sure my material is in line with the curriculum indicators and benchmarks, but that is not enough. I then take the material and bring in creativity and make learning fun. Every thought and plan that I make goes directly towards the LEAP test. I set up everything towards the test. However, I do try to take it one step further. Yes, the common question in my classroom is ‘Do we have to know this for the test?’ I always respond to my students as ‘Yes, you must know this for the test but how could this apply to your every day life?’ I feel that the teacher is
responsible for taking these students past the standardized test. Teachers have to make fourth grade more than ‘You have to know this….this is on the LEAP test.’ Yes, it is on the LEAP test, but we have to go further with it. (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

**Environment, Behavior Management, and Free-Choice**

Harrington provides her students with an environment that encourages students to read.

I do not think that you have to have a thematic themed library in your room. If you teach science, you should not have only science books in your classroom library. This discourages students to read. I always make sure my library offers all types of literature to open all worlds of reading to the students (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Harrington notes that students are more likely to read when the classroom environment is conducive to the students’ needs.

I provide my students with fiction, nonfiction, biographies…all types of genres are available to my students at any given time. I have a reading corner set up with a variety of trade books that are below level, on-level, and above level for the students to enjoy. I also have a section of social studies books, science books, and even math books for the students to read (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Harrington states that classroom management is the key factor to classroom success. “We set our rules right of the beginning of the school year. I reinforce these rules not only with consequences but also with rewards” (M. Harrington, personal interview, June
Although rules are set in place at the beginning of the year, and positive reinforcement is used as a reward, sometimes it might not be enough. If it gets to the point where I see it is not working, I then seek help from guidance counselors, administration, and even with probation and truancy officers. We try our best to do our best with the kids….we do not just leave them or ignore them because they are a discipline problem (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Harrington states that free choice provides students an opportunity to become a better reader.

Free-choice with guidance has been extremely beneficial to my students. I do not believe in telling my students ‘you have to read this!’ But I do find that guided free-choice allows the students to choose the genre of their choice with some assistance by the teacher to offer appropriate readability levels. (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Harrington teaches her students how to make appropriate free-choice decisions when choosing a book of pleasure.

I think that this is an important skill for life, and if I do not teach them how to choose an appropriate book, then who will? I teach my students to read the back cover to see if this is a book of interest. Another important skill we use for free-choice is to read the first two pages of the book. If it seems a too easy or too difficult, then it is probably not the best book for you (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Harrington notes that it is important to provide students with a purpose for reading.
When I introduce a story by previewing and predicting, I also supply students with a purpose for reading. I try to always choose a topic in the story that most of my students will be able to relate to through experience and connect a purpose for reading with that particular experience. This applies not only to the reading basal but also with the trade books that we read during the year. I try to open their imagination and try to get to them to relate to the characters in the story (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Instructional time is provided to the students in Harrington’s class each day.

We do full modifications for students in need. On the CAT test or the IOWA test the students are timed, but for the LEAP test the students are not timed. I am not looking for the student who finishes first but rather for the student that takes the time to produce work to his/her capabilities (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Harrington states that additional tutors are brought in to the classroom to reinforce skills to students that are considered at least one grade level below academic performance.

“These tutors are available to the students to practice skills that will be addressed on the LEAP test. The additional tutorial help allows the student to feel emotionally, physically, and academically prepared for the LEAP test” (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Reading and writing are considered an integrated process according to Harrington’s philosophy. “Reading and writing are like the horse and the carriage….one will not work without the other one. When the reading is at full capacity, then a students writing will begin to come to life” (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003). Harrington
suggests that the growth of a writer is contributed towards the reading process. “When a student becomes an advocate reader, then he/she will grow into a writer. I feel that reading and writing go hand in hand…a good reader begins to develop into a good writer with an expansive vocabulary” (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Harrington postulates that integrating technology with the reading program is of great value to her students. “We do a lot of research where the students have to read and research about different topics and historical people through the internet” (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003). Harrington notes that technology has made the curriculum more appealing to the students through the use of hands-on activities. “The internet has helped break up the monotony of a teacher lecture. Now technology can help enhance a classroom discussion by providing the students with kinesthetic activities that reinforces everything that I have said during the lecture” (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Overall, Harrington identifies the five reading primary characteristics as vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, sight words, and phonics.

Vocabulary and sight words are important because the children cannot read without knowing the words. Comprehension deals with the children being able to understand what they read…there is not a purpose in reading if the kids cannot understand what they have read. Phonics is a great skill for the students to acquire. I have seen students that have had phonics sometimes tend to do read and spell better than other students. I do believe that fluency is developed once all of the other skills are mastered. Each skill builds on top of the other skills to complete the reading process (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).
She states that there are some students in her classroom that can read silently but struggle with reading orally in front of the class.

I have some students that can read silently to themselves, but in some way when they speak it out themselves, there is a struggle. The fluency is not there. They can decipher vocabulary words along with its meaning. I put a written test in front of them and they can pass it with 100 percent. But when you try to get them present, it is a different story (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

Harrington states that an effective reading teacher is one that has “passion for teaching and helping children. You can’t be there just to be there. A teacher’s responsibility is show students what reading can do for them. A good reading teacher opens up new worlds to her students” (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003). Harrington relates reading to her students on a personal level.

I share my own personal reading experiences with my students to show each individual child the endless possibilities to reading. I have shared with my class that I have never traveled as far as Iowa or South Dakota towards the north, or as far as Florida to the east and Texas to the west, yet I have traveled all over the world through my books… that is what an effective reading teacher should do (M. Harrington, personal interview, June 16, 2003).

**Observation Data with River City Fourth Grade Teacher**

**Communication and Self- Efficacy**

Harrington promoted positive communication within her classroom. Positive communication was used through body language as well as verbal. She gave hugs and praise to those students who completed their work on time and had shown progress. If a student seemed frustrated with a particular task or skill, Harrington placed her hand
lightly on the student’s shoulder and tell the student “Do not worry because we are going to work it out.” The principal stopped by frequently to offer support to Harrington as well as her students. The principal used positive verbalization as she monitored the students’ progress such as “I knew you could do that. You are going to pass that LEAP test!” Due to this positive environment, students were motivated by the teacher and the principal to eagerly show their work as well as participate in class.

Positive self-esteem was promoted each day in Harrington’s classroom. She noted a particular student’s strength and told him/her that they were really going to do well on the LEAP test. Students were encouraged to think as individuals, choosing a problem solving strategy that worked best for the student. Negative behavior exhibited during class was reinforced with positive verbalization. A bulletin board displayed a train with each students’ name on it along with the words “I think I can, I know I can” was often used as a reference point towards negative behavior. Harrington addressed negativity in a positive demeanor by stating “Where are you on the train? I do not want you to be in the back trying to catch it. I want you to be on board!” Harrington encouraged the students to be kind to their classmates. Sarcasm and/or negative remarks to their peers were not allowed in her classroom.

**Observation and Modeling**

Harrington observed her students during instructional grouping. She worked with only six students for 45 minutes and was able to monitor the students’ progress on an individual basis. A portfolio of the students’ work was kept by Harrington to assess at the end of each day. Practice LEAP tests and writing samples that were given each day were placed in the portfolio for evaluation and review. Each afternoon Harrington wrote daily assessments on each student in a notebook, noting strengths and weaknesses on
each child. She also kept a checklist along with her notebook and would check off a particular reading skill once it had been mastered by the student. The checklist allowed Harrington to note students that had made continual progress as well as students who continued to lack specific reading and writing skills. The portfolios, practice tests, checklists, and the notebook were to be used as documentation once the summer LEAP results were posted. The documentation served as a protection for Harrington to show the administration and parents the skills that had been taught, samples of the students’ work, and progress that had been made over the summer.

Harrington continually provided an instructional model for her students daily. As she read stories aloud, she used a projected voice and expression. She modeled important reading skills to demonstrate how to choose a book of free-choice. Harrington modeled free-choice selection by reading the back of the book cover aloud and asking who might be interested in this particular book. She selected a book and read the first two pages and discussed with students the level of difficulty of a particular book by noting the vocabulary words. Harrington demonstrated to students how to be a better writer by providing students with a visual representation on brainstorming. She placed a sentence on the board and modeled how to improve a sentence by adding descriptive details.

Harrington modeled from a student aspect as well. Sample writings from former fourth grade students were handed out to the class and students analyzed why the paper was proficient. When a student successfully completed a task, Harrington read aloud his/her work to the rest of the class as an incentive to the other students.

**Environment, Behavior Management, and Free-Choice**

Harrington’s classroom environment was designed as a student-friendly reading environment. All of the students’ desks were located in the center of the classroom, and
set up in groups of five. The teacher’s desk was located directly in the right corner of the room, facing diagonally towards the students’ desk. When entering Harrington’s classroom, one’s attention was drawn to three bulletin boards displayed on the right wall, which assisted in building the students’ self esteem. The first bulletin board presented a train, with the words LEAP written across the top of the train, with the theme “I think I can, I think I can, I know I can.” The second bulletin board portrayed a picture of outer space with the theme “Your possibilities are endless.” The last bulletin board enhanced the theme “We are all of the same family under one sky” with pictures of different multicultural children standing in a circle holding hands with one another.

The first half of the left side of the classroom was dedicated towards the LEAP test. A bulletin board was decorated with 18 different leaping frogs, each student’s name written on the back of a frog, displaying the theme “LEAP into learning.” The monthly calendar coincided with the LEAP theme, filling in the blank with the correct month for the statement “LEAP into ____________.” The numbers for the calendar were frogs. Directly next to the calendar, three math posters were hung on the wall. The first poster explained how to understand and interpret graphs. The second poster demonstrated all of the correct mathematical signs that are used during the fourth grade academic year. The third sign displayed three ways to correctly use problem solving strategies to acquire the correct answer on a standardized test such as drawing a picture of the problem, using the process of elimination, and disregarding unimportant information in a problem.

The white board was located in the center of the left wall. Four students desk were located to the direct left of the white board. In front of the four students’ desk, four posters and signs were displayed for the students’ use. This area of the room comprised the writing center. The four posters and signs were used by the students as a reference
for the writing process. The first poster displayed a list of the prewriting strategies such as brainstorming, outlines, and concept mapping. The second sign listed numerous steps to good writing such as using descriptive details, punctuation, main idea, supporting details, and proofreading. The third set of posters displayed the classroom word wall that is reviewed each day. The word wall was used as a sight word reference list for the students to use when writing. The last poster was the cursive alphabet serving as an appropriate manuscript reminder to the students.

Two bookcases were located on the back wall that exhibit books of different genres of literature. Each genre was clearly labeled with a sticker marking the classification of the book as science, mathematics, social studies, reading, and poetry. A second sticker was placed on each book labeling it as fiction or nonfiction. A small group instruction table was located in the back of the classroom with six chairs. A clock was placed on the wall.

The right wall had a television/video recorder displayed in the corner. Seven computers were positioned against the right wall as a designated computer center. Each computer was equipped with a computer monitor, hard drive, CD-Rom, and headphones to accompany computer software. A white board was located to the right of the computers to assist Mrs. Harrington with individual and small group instruction.

Harrington’s behavior management program was designed to teach the students natural consequences of their actions. At the beginning of the school year, Harrington allowed the students to create the rules for the classroom. Harrington then typed all of the classroom rules in the form of a checklist, listing the days of the week at the top. Students then kept the checklist in his/her binder throughout the year. When students did not adhere to a specific rule, he/she was responsible for taking out his/her binder and
placing an “X” in the column under the rule that was broken. The conduct grades were as follows:

1-2 X’s - A
3-4 X’s - B
5-6 X’s - C
7-8 X’s - D
9 or more X’s - F

Each week a new conduct sheet was given to the students. The conduct sheets from the previous week were collected by the teacher and filed in a student folder. The conduct sheets were available to the teacher and parent during parent/teacher conferences to be used as a reference. If a student received more than 3 F’s during one nine week grading period, the student and the parent was required to meet with the administration. If the problem continues or advances, a probation officer may be required to enforce disciplinary procedures.

The conduct grade was recorded each week. After nine weeks, the grade is calculated and recorded on the report card. The student must take his/her conduct sheet home each week for the parents to sign. This weekly conduct progress report kept open communication between teacher, student, and parent. This type of behavior management plan taught students to choose their own consequences. Students were taught to accept the consequences for their own actions.

A positive reinforcing behavior management plan was effective in Harrington’s classroom. If a student performed a task well, whether it be helping a friend or improving in a particular subject area, Harrington would take the time to notify the parent of the student’s positive behavior. Harrington would take time out of her day to call a
parent and give positive feedback on the student. She used technology to her advantage as well. Harrington had gathered the parents’ e-mail addresses at the beginning of the school year to use as a line of communication. E-mails were sent to parents as a positive reward for students who had performed well and had a positive role in the classroom.

Harrington would give her students an opportunity to read a book of free-choice each day for 20 minutes. She offered many genres of literature in the classroom library so student were not limited. If a student appeared to be struggling to find a book of choice, Harrington would help the student by choosing two or three books that were of the student’s interest, and the student would make a final selection.

Harrington reinforced skills for choosing a book of free-choice daily. Simple skills were taught to the student to help them make good choices for free reading. She encouraged the students to choose books that were of interest. Harrington told the students to choose books that enhanced their ability to relate to the character. Students were encouraged to read the back of the book cover to see if the story might be of interest. Harrington taught them to select books on appropriate reading levels by reading the first two pages of the story. If the students found that the readability level was too easy or hard, the student was encouraged to make a different selection. Each student was on his/her own reading level in the classroom, and it was not obvious to the other students. She explained to the students that it was important to try and read all different genres of stories and authors to help improve their own individual writing style.

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Instructional time was set into small group instruction. All students that did not pass the LEAP were required to attend summer school. Groups were selected in accordance with the LEAP test results from the previous spring semester. The groups, averaging six
people per group, were divided into three different sections: a low ability group, a medium-low ability group, and a high-low ability group. Each group session was approximately 45 minutes in length. Choral reading frequently took place during reading instructional time. The teacher checked the students’ comprehension by discussing the story with the students and asking each student for feedback. She had the students relate to the story by asking each individual child if he/she has had a similar experience to a character in the story.

Certain reading skills were continually used to correlate with test taking skills. Students were often reminded to always keep their books open when answering questions, so he/she could use the book to answer questions he/she did not know. Harrington required students to look at clues in the story to help decode vocabulary words and to improve their comprehension of the story. The teacher had the students peruse each story and list facts that the author has presented. The teacher recorded the facts on sticky notes and placed them on the students’ desk to note the difference between fact/opinion as well as to distinguish important/unimportant information. Students were always required to write in a complete sentence to practice writing essays for the LEAP test, and were expected to explain why they chose a particular answer. If a student had an incorrect answer on the LEAP test, the student was required to reinforce the correct answer in written text by using a highlighter for visual aid, and the correct answer was repeated again. Students were required to label the main idea and supporting details for each paragraph read during the lesson.

The writing program for River City fourth grade students coincided with the LEAP standardized test. Harrington gave each student writing samples that fourth grade students from other schools had submitted for their LEAP test during the spring. The
students were required to analyze each paper and distinguish the difference between papers that were viewed as unsatisfactory, approaching basic, basic, proficient, and advanced. Students perused many samples and discussed what was right and/or wrong with each paper. Capitalization, punctuation, main idea, supporting details, and vocabulary were writing skills identified by the students as important for the LEAP test. The teacher had the students highlight areas that were written correctly.

The teacher used the white board to demonstrate how to identify a main idea and supporting details. Harrington encouraged the students to visualize the story in his/her mind, including the beginning, middle, and the end of the story. Students studied the proficient and advanced papers and identified why they connected with a particular writer. Students were given writing prompts and encouraged to write an advanced and/or proficient paper. After the papers were submitted, Harrington worked individually with each student to discuss the positive and negative aspects of each student’s paper. Aspects of this type of instruction occurred daily in Harrington’s classroom.

Technology was used frequently in Harrington’s classroom. Seven computers were available each day to assist the teacher as well as the students. Groups rotated each day in the computer center to practice reading and math skills similar to those found on the LEAP test. The software programs that were chosen by the teacher were user-friendly and did not require teacher assistance. To correlate with Harrington’s preferred instructional style, she chose software programs that explained why the correct answer is the best choice. Harrington used technology to monitor classroom behavior and to maintain communication with the parents. E-mails were exchanged between teacher, student, and parent for both positive and negative feedback.
Summary

The demographics of each school were significantly different. Spring Creek had a total of 247 students, composed of 96% White students and 4% African American students. The maximum number of students allowed per class for preschool is 14, whereas kindergarten through fifth grade are allotted a maximum number of 25 students. River City is a public sector elementary school that offers kindergarten through the fifth grade. River City had a total of 423 students, almost twice as many as Spring Creek. The demographics of River City are 19% White students, 75% African American students, 4% Asian, and 2% Hispanic.

Each school performed at different academic levels. The standardized test results from the 2001-2002 academic school year for Spring Creek Elementary for third, fourth, and fifth grade students indicated above average performance in the areas of verbal ability, reading comprehension, quantitative ability, and mathematics. The two areas that were noted as “average” were vocabulary and writing mechanics. River City has been placed in the category of corrective action, as a result of not meeting growth requirements set by the state of Louisiana. However, the performance level of the school has been labeled as academically above the state average, which is in the percentile range of 79.9-99.9.

The socioeconomic status differed in each school setting. The parents of prospective students of Spring Creek were required to pay tuition for admission. This tuition requirement was a contributing factor to the high level of parental involvement at Spring Creek Elementary. The students’ tuition and fees represent 90% of the total school profits accumulated throughout the school year and is used to provide high quality instructional resources to the teachers and students, including field trips, conferences, and
an advanced computer lab. The parental involvement of River City School was almost nonexistent. Tutors were provided to struggling students during enrichment classes to expand instructional time because of the lack of instructional time received from home. This lack of parental involvement impacted behavior in the classroom.
CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This ethnographic study examined the effective characteristics of four teachers of reading in elementary classrooms by observing each teacher’s philosophy and instructional procedures related to communication, self-efficacy, observation, modeling, assessment, environment, behavior management, free-choice, instructional time, writing, and technology. The review of literature identified characteristics of teachers of reading that must be present in order for effective instruction to occur in the classroom, and provided a framework that is instrumental in the provision of effective instruction. Observation data was recorded to reflect involvement of people, places, and activities. Activities noted within the study consisted of a variety of techniques and approaches. Descriptive observation methods compiled a list of questions that guided the research in the appropriate manner. During descriptive observations, recurrent activities were noted that were taking place on a daily basis, which assisted in identifying themes and establish evolving relationships. This study answered these questions concerning effective literacy instruction:

1. What characteristics do administrators believe are essential to providing effective reading instruction in an elementary school setting?

2. What characteristics do teachers believe are essential to providing effective reading instruction in an elementary school setting?

3. What is the relationship between teachers’ beliefs about effective reading instruction and their practices in the elementary classroom setting?
Question 1: What characteristics do administrators believe are essential to providing effective reading instruction in an elementary school setting?

Data Analysis with Administration

Educational Background Experience

Although both principals received a formal college education, each chose a different undergraduate degree. Curry received a bachelor’s degree in elementary education while Brandon pursued an interest in the college of business. Upon graduation, both principals immediately began working in the education field. While Brandon began working on her teaching certificate, Curry began her graduate studies, receiving her master’s degree, a reading specialist degree, and also became certified in administration and supervision. Curry taught for 27 years in the classroom and has currently served as principal for three years. Once Brandon obtained her teaching certificate, she taught second grade for six years, and she recently completed her first year as the Developing Director, Curriculum Director, and Assistant Principal for Spring Creek. Brandon is currently working on her master’s degree in Education.

Communication and Self-Efficacy

Both Brandon and Curry considered positive communication in the classroom a top priority. Brandon noted that when positive communication and verbalization are used in the classroom among the students, they tend to perform better academically and emotionally. Curry stated that positive verbalization is not only important in the classroom but also teaches the students that the communication process is a lifelong skill that will continue through adulthood. Curry and Brandon also agreed that positive communication and verbalization among the students in the classroom develops the well-
being of the overall child’s confidence, allowing the self-efficacy of oneself to emerge from within.

Both schools are encouraged to work on self-improvement throughout the school year, but in different ways. Curry required her teachers to meet on a weekly basis by appropriate grade levels to discuss curriculum plans and remediation techniques. Curry also required that each teacher attend at least one workshop, seminar, or conference during the school year, while Brandon required her teachers to attend at least two. Brandon also encouraged each teacher to share what they have learned at each conference to give everyone the opportunity to learn, whereas Curry did not. Curry provided teachers with “in-house” workshops throughout the year accompanied by a speaker who specialized in a particular area of expertise.

**Observation and Modeling**

Observation occurred at each school in effective, different ways. Brandon suggested that each teacher research the student’s progress through teacher collaboration and cumulative folders, as well as inquire about students among themselves. For example, it was not unusual for present teachers to question former teachers about students’ progress, behavior, and social skills. In contrast, River City performs observation through means of assessment. Teachers were required to give students a self-assessment reading test every six weeks, which involved a running record to assist the teacher determine reading abilities, as well as gains and losses throughout the academic school year.

Modeling was considered essential for all students at both schools. Teachers at both schools modeled reading to the students daily to stress inflectional tones, fluency, and a good reading voice. Both Brandon and Curry stated that modeling is an effective way to
Spring Creek also encouraged the parents to serve as reading models within their home environment. All of the lower elementary parents are required to sign a contract with the school stating that their child will read with another family member on a daily basis. In contrast, Curry stated that many of the River City teachers are unable to engage parental support; therefore school is the only place that many students received exposure to reading.

**Assessment**

The use of standardized testing at Spring Creek and River City was profoundly different. River City School was mandated to give all fourth grade students the LEAP test because it is a public school. Although students do not take this test until the fourth grade, teachers begin preparing the students for the test as early as second grade to achieve a higher score. Curry prepared teachers and students for the LEAP test by means of running records, expanding instructional time, and making tutors available to at-risk students. The River City curriculum is geared to the LEAP test and the students’ overall performance on the test results in a pass/fail to the fifth grade.

Spring Creek’s administrative staff did not teach to the test. As a private school, Spring Creek was allowed to choose the type of assessment tool that would be beneficial to the students as well as the administrative staff. The ERBCTP4 assessment instrument is compatible with the school’s curriculum and gives the principals, students, and parents an accurate indication of the curriculum’s strengths, weaknesses, and the students’ overall performance. The purpose of the assessment instrument is to make improvements to the curriculum. Students given this instrument are not subjected to the pressure of a
pass/fail status. The ERBCTP4 helps the school improve academically, yet does not replace the entire curriculum.

Environment, Behavior Management, and Free-Choice

Brandon and Curry both agreed that the literacy environment should be well-balanced and conducive to meet all needs of the students in the classroom. Both principals stated that word walls help children with basic sight words and improves their reading and writing skills. Brandon and Curry advocated that classroom libraries should offer books of all readability levels and genres. Each principal indicated that the teachers at their schools make books readily available to all of the students to encourage the importance of reading as a lifelong skill.

The philosophies of behavior management differed among the two principals. Curry implemented a school wide behavior management plan where each teacher and student abide by the same set of school rules, using a conduct sheet to record inappropriate behavior. Conduct sheets were used to record offenses made throughout the week to keep the parents and administration in constant communication. Students were rewarded with incentives to recognize good behavior on a weekly basis. Brandon however noted that classroom management must be adjusted each year according to the current group of students. A school wide behavior management plan was not implemented at Spring Creek School, allowing each teacher to determine the appropriate behavior plan to meet the specific needs of each individual class. Students that attended Spring Creek are not rewarded for good behavior; it is expected.

Free-choice was promoted by both principals to help provide students with skills that will ensure lifelong readers. Both Curry and Brandon stated that teachers do not always
have to give students a purpose for reading. Both principals insisted that allowing
students to read for enjoyment strengthens the reading process. Curry and Brandon noted
that when a student reads for pleasure, then he/she connects with the text on a personal
basis and develops their own purpose towards the selected literature. The interviews
revealed that the students also benefit from free-choice because it permits students to
progress at his/her own reading level.

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Expanding instructional time for the students at each school differed due to academic
purposes. Spring Creek did not give students expanded instructional time to their
students because the need for remediation levels occurs infrequently. The administration
stated that they are making efforts to address the needs of leveled reading for students
who are above level; struggling students are an extremely low percentage of the
population. River City, however, began expanding instructional time for students
beginning in the second grade in preparation for the LEAP test. Expanding instructional
time provided struggling students additional tutoring in mathematics and reading. Tutors
and volunteers came to River City School on a weekly basis to assist third grade students
who are considered at risk for failing the LEAP test. Curry noted that the reason River
City expands instructional time and offers students a tutorial program is in accordance to
the demands of the LEAP test.

Brandon and Curry both noted that reading and writing are an integrated process, yet
share different views. Brandon stated that “good readers are good writers. Good writers
can be good readers” (personal interview, April 15, 2003). Curry however noted that “in
order to be a good writer, you must be a good reader” (personal interview, June 16,
Brandon further stated that it is important for students to share and read aloud their written work with their peers, whereas Curry expressed the need for students to be exposed to different genres of authors and literature. Overall, both principals noted that reading and writing cannot be separated as two different subjects in the language arts curriculum.

Although technology was considered important by both schools, each principal prioritized it in different ways. Brandon stated that technology should be used as enrichment for the students, but it should not replace the actual reading instruction of the teacher. She further states the each classroom is equipped with four computers and multiple software programs that reinforce specific reading skills that coincide with the teacher’s lecture. Curry noted that the technology program chosen by their school serves as a tutorial program that is used daily in the classroom. This tutorial program offers students explanations and examples that reteach the student specific skills in reading. Both principals encouraged their teachers to attend technology workshops and conferences throughout the school year to stay abroad with recent developments.

Brandon and Curry were both in agreement that comprehension, fluency, context clues, and picture clues were the top four most important reading skills that they consider important within the reading curriculum, however the principals disagreed on the importance of phonics within the classroom. Curry noted that phonics was an important part of the reading curriculum and had helped many struggling children to learn to read. Brandon stated that phonics does have an appropriate place in the classroom, but she thinks that teachers can over emphasize phonics. She stated that there are more exceptions to phonics rule than when the rule is applied. In conclusion, both Curry and
Brandon stated that an effective reading teacher is one who models reading on a daily basis and promotes a wide variety of literature and authors in the classroom.

**Question 2:** What characteristics do teachers believe are essential to providing effective reading instruction in an elementary school setting?

**Data Analysis with Second Grade Teachers**

**Educational Background Experience**

Spears and Mickey differed slightly with undergraduate degrees and teaching experience. Spears received an undergraduate degree in Agriculture Economics. After graduation, she became certified as an elementary school teacher. Upon becoming certified, she immediately began teaching at River City. Spears has been teaching for five years. Mickey obtained her bachelor’s degree in elementary education. She immediately accepted a substitute teaching position at Spring Creek School. A second grade teaching position became available and Mickey accepted the opportunity. She has been teaching at Spring Creek School for 19 years. Neither Mickey nor Spears intend to pursue a graduate degree.

**Communication and Self-Efficacy**

Mickey and Spears encouraged and emphasized positive communication in the classroom. Both teachers noted that if positive communication is not used in the classroom then the students will not know what is expected and will not understand the teacher. Through classroom observation, Spears and Mickey both focused on the positive aspects of their students instead of negativity. Spears began and ended the critique process with a positive statement. Mickey did not reprimand students for incorrect answers, but instead concentrated on the analytical reasoning of the correct answer. Both
teachers did not ridicule students for mistakes. Feedback was given to the students on a daily basis to keep the students involved on their individual progress.

Mickey and Spears both stated that parental communication is a necessity to ensure the success of each student’s education. Mickey sent papers home once a week to keep communication open on individual students’ progress. Mickey reviewed the papers with the children each week, and the children’s parents reviewed the papers at home to reinforce skills with repetition. Spears made an effort to send a note home to parents explaining what the child had improved or excelled in during class that day. This not only kept the parents informed on the student’s daily progress, but also reinforced positive self-efficacy among the students in her classroom.

**Observation and Modeling**

Mickey and Spears both noted that observation is an integral part of their teaching methods. Both teachers monitored the students’ work daily to check for comprehension and clarify misunderstandings. Observation occurred in whole group instructional setting and in small groups. During small group instruction, Mickey observed the students’ reading fluency by listening to each student read aloud, while Spears’ focus consisted of monitoring oral responses given by students during the lessons to check for comprehension. Mickey and Spears used running records to assess the students’ reading ability throughout the year. Both teachers performed running records with their students every six weeks to identify strengths, weaknesses, gains, and losses throughout the year. Weekly reading and spelling tests were given on a weekly basis to note development and growth with reading comprehension, vocabulary, and spelling.
Mickey and Spears provided instructional reading models to their students on a daily basis. Both teachers stated that if a reading model is not provided to the students, then he/she will not know what to expect, and the students will less likely become lifelong readers. Spears modeled even the simplest of skills such as a correct way to hold a book, turning a page, reading expressions, reading from left to right, etc., while Mickey tended to focus more on the developmental stage of reading phrase by phrase instead of word by word. Both teachers read to students daily.

When introducing the new reading story from the basal that week, Spears and Mickey read the story aloud to the students on Monday for students to be able to listen to correct fluency and reading expressions. Student modeling was used in both classrooms to reinforce decoding, fluency, and reading expressions. Spears modeled the strategies first by talking aloud to the students. She then had other students model aloud for others to listen to the process involved in implementing attack strategies. Mickey used the approach of reading partners for struggling readers to gain fluency and confidence by listening to their peers model. The lowest level reading student was paired with an intermediate level reading student to lower the risk of frustration. This process gave struggling students the opportunity to listen to reading tones, word attack strategies, and reading expressions.

**Assessment**

The standardized testing procedures varied greatly from each school. Mickey was not required to give any type of standardized test in the second grade. The only test that her students had ever taken was an academic test that each student was required to take when applying to Spring Creek School to determine if he/she is on grade level. Mickey
implemented her own informal test at the beginning of the school year to determine the reading levels of each student in her classroom so she would be able to meet individual needs and differences for each student throughout the school year. This informal test required the students to simply read aloud to the teacher to distinguish accelerated readers from struggling readers.

In contrast, Spears’ curriculum was centered on the LEAP test, even as early as second grade. As discussed in Chapter Four, running reading records were updated every six weeks to find students who are at potentially at-risk, reading at least one grade below level. These students who are considered at-risk in reading began receiving expanded instructional time in second grade. Additional instructional time was given to students through small group work, peer tutoring, and in some instances, they missed enrichment class to continue working one-on-one individually.

**Environment, Behavior Management, and Free-Choice**

A literacy environment conducive to all learning styles and individual needs was considered a priority with both teachers. Mickey and Spears advocated many different genres in their reading centers. Magazines, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction were always available to students at any time. These teachers also included a wide range of leveled books that accommodate the needs for the struggling, intermediate, and advanced readers. Spears decorated her reading center with three bean bags, stuffed animals, and two bookcases with different genres of authors, books, and reading levels. Mickey’s reading center was constructed with a reading carpet, bean bags, stuffed animals, and two large bookcases with a wide variety of literature. Mickey also emphasized the importance of reading through the use of signs, bulletin boards, and door decorations. Both teachers
implemented a word wall in their classroom to be used as reinforcement to sight words as well as a writing tool.

Although different, behavior management plans for Mickey and Spears were clear, concise, and effective. Mickey’s classroom behavior management plan was initiated through the index card system which was used on a daily basis. Spears used a conduct card to monitor the students’ behavior which was used on a weekly basis. Though the plans used different instruments to record inappropriate behavior, both teachers made the student responsible for his/her own actions by turning their card or marking their own conduct sheet.

Free-choice was offered to the students in both classrooms through a Sustained Silent Reading program. Both classrooms participated for at least ten minutes per day, teachers included, and were not limited to a specific genre of reading material. Students in both classes were also given the opportunity for free reading when they were finished with their class work and waiting on the other students to complete the assignment. Spears also encouraged students who finished their library books early to revisit the library and check out two more books.

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Reading groups were utilized in both classrooms to meet the needs of individual students. Mickey separated her students into two different reading groups, whereas Spears divided her students into three different reading groups due to the wide range of reading abilities in her classroom. Both teachers focused on reinforcing specific skills in the area of phonics, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Mickey and
Spears withheld struggling students from enrichment classes on occasion to provide additional tutoring.

Reading and writing were taught as an integrated process in both classes. Mickey’s students wrote stories in every subject. Spears had her students write stories about characters from the reading story that they could relate to from past experiences. Mickey and Spears also placed grammatically incorrect sentences on the board and had students rewrite them grammatically to reinforce grammar usage.

Technology was used effectively and appropriately with both second grade teachers. Although a full time computer teacher was hired to teach all of the children for grades kindergarten through fifth, Mickey still used the computers in her classroom as a teaching tool to reinforce specific literacy skills. Spears also used the computers in her classroom to strengthen reading skills. The reading skills Spears taught during the week through the basal coincided with skills used on the computer during centers. Both teachers had numerous software programs to help enhance learning.

Mickey and Spears both agreed that the three primary reading skills that an elementary teacher should reinforce are comprehension, vocabulary, and picture clues. Mickey stated that application and decoding skills were also considered as priorities in her classroom, whereas, Spears placed greater emphasis on sight words and reading fluency. Mickey noted that an effective reading teacher uses the balanced approach to reading, and also meets the needs of each individual student in the classroom. Spears agreed that an effective reading teacher addresses the needs of students along with encouraging students to reach their fullest potential as a writer as well.
Data Analysis with Fourth Grade Teachers

Educational Background Experience

The fourth grade teachers’ educational background experience varied significantly from degrees to field experience. Harrington received her bachelor’s degree in elementary education and has been teaching at River City School for fifteen years. Hamlet received her undergraduate degree in music, specializing in voice performance, then she decided to become certified as an elementary teacher. Hamlet became a full time teacher and decided to work on her master’s degree in education in the evenings. Upon obtaining her masters degree, Hamlet began working on her Ph.D. She has six completed hours towards her doctoral degree.

Communication and Self-Efficacy

Positive communication and self-efficacy were the focal points of both Hamlet’s and Harrington’s teaching styles. Hamlet viewed her teaching philosophy as making a conscious decision to remember that she was dealing with children, and to refrain with sarcasm and snide remarks. Harrington expressed concern that most of her children receive much negative attention from home, so her goal was to communicate positively in the classroom to improve the students’ self-concept. Hamlet demonstrated her teaching philosophy of positive communication with her students by avoiding negative remarks such as do not, never, and cannot. Harrington conveyed positive communication through body language by giving hugs and praise to students who had shown progress.

Self-efficacy was demonstrated daily in both classrooms as well. Bulletin boards were used in Harrington’s classroom to build one’s self-esteem. Sarcasm and negative remarks to their peers were not allowed in her classroom. Hamlet exhibited self-efficacy
in her classroom by responding to questions with dignity and respect. She permitted students to make decisions such as deciding what subject he/she would like to do next or how the class should line up.

**Observation and Modeling**

Observation occurred in Hamlet’s classroom during whole group instruction. She walked around the room and individually checked on the progress of each student. Observation occurred as she would monitor progress on weekly assessments and homework to check for consistency and accuracy of concepts. Small grouping did not take place in Hamlet’s classroom; however, Harrington observed her students during the use of small groups as well as whole group instruction. She worked with a small group of six students at a time to monitor the students’ progress on an individual basis. She kept a portfolio of the students’ work to assess at the end of each day. She wrote assessments on each student daily. She kept a checklist and checked off a particular reading skill once it had been mastered by a student. This type of observation served as documentation to the administration and parents for the LEAP test.

Both Hamlet and Harrington modeled to their students each day. Hamlet used different character voices and read with different tones and expressions when introducing the new basal story for the week. She asked her students to infer what they thought the author meant on a particular passage. Harrington used different reading voices and expressions when reading a book to her students. She modeled to her students how to choose a book for free-choice by reading the first two pages of a book or reading the back of the book cover.
Assessment

The standardized testing philosophy was profoundly different between the two fourth grade teachers. Harrington was required by the state to prepare her students for the LEAP test. Harrington’s entire curriculum was taught to prepare students for the LEAP test. She began preparing her students at the beginning of the year to answer in open response format and how to use rubrics in their writing due to the organizational format of the LEAP test. She noted earlier that every thought and plan that she makes goes directly towards the LEAP test that the students must take in the spring.

Hamlet’s philosophy towards standardized testing was not considered a valuable use of her time. Hamlet stated that she teaches the students what they need to know and the test helps her note deficiencies among the students as well as give her feedback about how she teaches. She noted that standardized testing is not reflective of potential. She stated that the most difficult aspect of standardized testing is interpreting the scores to the parents. Testing procedures were practiced only one week before the test, and the test is not considered a significant part of the school.

Environment, Behavior Management, and Free-Choice

Both Hamlet and Harrington stated that providing a literacy-rich environment in the classroom is essential to their students. Hamlet noted that it is crucial to enhance the classroom with decorations and cases full of books to encourage reading. Three bookcases, two beanbags, and two cushioned chairs displayed in an open square are located within Hamlet’s reading center. Harrington stated that her main focal point for a literacy rich environment is to offer a variety of trade books that are below level, on level, and above level. Her reading center consisted of two bookcases are located on the back
wall that exhibit books of different genres of literature. Each genre was clearly labeled with a sticker marking the classification of the book as science, mathematics, social studies, reading, and poetry.

Both Hamlet and Harrington used a similar behavior management plan in their classrooms. Each teacher used a conduct sheet to monitor the students’ behavior. When a student did not adhere to a specific rule, then he/she was responsible for marking his/her own conduct sheet under the column of the rule that had been broken. Each week a new conduct sheet was given to the students. Conduct sheets were collected from the previous week were collected and filed in the students’ folders to be averaged together at the end of the nine weeks to record a final grade on the report card.

Hamlet and Harrington offered free-choice in reading by having students participate in a Sustained Silent Reading program. Hamlet required her students to read silently for at least 30 minutes a day, while Harrington requested that her students read for at least 20 minutes a day. All genres of literature were accepted during Sustained Silent Reading.

**Instructional Time, Writing, and Technology**

Hamlet and Harrington exhibited different approaches for expanding instructional time in the classroom. Harrington expanded her instructional time with small grouping, averaging six students per group. The students involved with the small grouping were considered at-risk of failing the LEAP test in at least one or more subject areas. During the 45 minute instructional time, Harrington reinforced reading skills that were vital to passing the LEAP test. She checked the students’ comprehension by asking each student to verbally respond to a question or confirm their knowledge of a specific skill through a writing activity. Hamlet did not provide her students with expanded instructional time in
a small group setting. Instructional time was provided by means of whole group
instruction. Hamlet would monitor the students’ progress by walking around the room
and observing the students’ work. Hamlet would be able to clarify any
miscommunications among the students with a one-two minute summarization of the
lesson. The majority of Hamlet’s students were above grade level.

Writing activities among the two fourth grade teachers were quite different from one
another. Hamlet emphasized creative writing through journals, studying the different
genres of writing, spelling activities, and grammar usage. Harrington’s writing program
coincided with the LEAP test. She gave each student writing samples that fourth grade
students from other schools had submitted for their LEAP test during the spring.
Students analyzed each paper and graded it as unsatisfactory, approaching basic, basic,
proficient, and advanced. The only type of writing examples that were provided to the
fourth grade students were copies of writings submitted to the LEAP test from the spring.

Technology use occurred frequently in Harrington’s classroom. Groups rotated each
day in the computer center to practice reading and math skills that are administered on
the LEAP test; however, Hamlet only used the overhead projector to assist her with
teaching. She had two computers in her classroom, neither of which were used by the
teacher or the students.

Both Harrington and Hamlet prioritized fluency and comprehension as the primary
two reading characteristics. Harrington emphasized sight words and phonics. She noted
that sight words help the students begin the reading process, and phonics is a great skill to
use when approaching an unfamiliar word; however, Hamlet postulated that making
inferences and using context clues are needed in order to become a lifelong reader. She
stated that an effective reading teacher provides opportunities for students to practice those strategies daily.

**Question 3: What is the relationship between teachers’ beliefs about effective reading instruction and their practices in the elementary classroom setting?**

**Reading Instruction and Practices**

This study suggests that although different strategies and approaches were used among the principals and teachers, the same elements and philosophies were required to effectively teach reading in an elementary school classroom, whether it be a public or private sector school. Both principals and all four teachers involved in the study obtained an undergraduate degree. Although each teacher did not receive her undergraduate degree in elementary education, all were certified as elementary teachers. Three out of the six participants were pursuing advanced degrees in the field of education.

Communication and self-efficacy were considered a priority with all six participants and became evident during observations of the school and the classrooms. Negative remarks and ridicule did not occur within the classrooms. Parental communication was important to each person that took part in this study. Although Spring Creek received more parental involvement at their school, River City acknowledges the importance of parental communication and was pursuing avenues for improvement. Both administrators and all four teachers attended workshops, seminars, and conferences to build self-improvement. Both schools used collaboration with administration and staff to provide the best possible learning environment for each student.

Observation was used on a daily basis within Spring Creek and River City schools. Some teachers used running records and portfolios to assess the students’ progress. Others inquired about students from former teachers to monitor students’ behavior and
social skills. All four of the teachers monitored the students’ work daily in the classroom by walking around the room and individually checking for comprehension. Also, each teacher administered weekly assessment instruments in spelling, vocabulary, reading, and language arts to determine the students’ progress. Modeling was used each day in all four teachers’ classrooms. The teachers read aloud to model the importance of decoding, fluency, and reading expressions. Students in the classroom served as models to their peers to reinforce decoding skills and inflectional tones. Three out of the four teachers introduced the new reading story from the basal by reading it aloud to their students using different tones and expressions. The remaining teacher chose to model to her students how to select a book for free-choice by reading the first three pages to check readability levels and by reading the back cover of the book.

Assessment was the only area that was vastly different among the two schools. The public school focused their entire curriculum around the LEAP test, beginning as early as second grade. Each lesson selected by the public school teachers intentionally related to the LEAP test; however, the private schools did not focus on assessment. Test results were considered moderately beneficial to the administrative staff, teachers, parents, and students of Spring Creek, but not necessary. The assessment test, ERBCTP4, provided useful data, yet did not directly impact the curriculum.

Environment was considered a priority to all four teachers. Each teacher firmly believed in offering students a classroom library that had different genres of literature, authors, and readability levels. Three out of four teachers created a classroom library equipped with beans bags, cushioned chairs, stuffed animals, and reading rugs. The teacher who did not provide this type of reading center opted for creating a library with
each genre clearly labeled with a sticker marking the classification of the book as science, mathematics, social studies, reading, and poetry.

All four teachers had a strict behavior management plan that was adhered to by the students. Discipline procedures were in place for the first day of school. Each teacher required their students to be responsible for their own actions by turning their card or marking their own conduct sheet. Administrators from both schools were fully supportive of each teacher’s behavior management plans.

A Sustained Silent Reading Program was in place for each classroom. Depending on the grade level, each teacher and student was required to read daily, on a scale ranging from 10 minutes to 30 minutes. The teachers did not limit the students to a specific genre during free-reading time.

Three out of the four teachers expanded instructional time to struggling students. The students were placed in small groups according to readability levels. The teachers reinforced reading skills such as decoding, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Two of the teachers withheld certain students from enrichment classes if needed to provide additional tutoring. Hamlet, however, did not expand instructional time with her students. Her instructional time was provided by means of whole group instruction, and she monitored the students’ work through observation and assessments.

Writing activities promoted creative writing. Although techniques varied, their philosophies emphasized reading and writing as an integrated process. Hamlet accentuated creative writing through journals as Mickey had her students write stories in every subject. Spears had students relate to characters from the reading story by writing about their own past experiences. Although Harrington’s writing curriculum did coincide
with the LEAP test, she provided her students with examples of work and encouraged her students to write a proficient, creative paper.

Three out of the four teachers used technology frequently in the classroom. Software programs were available in all three classes to reinforce reading and math skills. The majority of the software programs were user-friendly and required little teacher assistance. Hamlet was the only teacher who did not use technology in her classroom. She indicated that her ability level and training with computers was not advanced enough to enhance her curriculum.

**Implications for Future Research and Limitations**

It is reasonable to assume that continued study of the characteristics of an effective teacher of reading in an elementary classroom could offer educators more insight on critical elements struggling students need in a learning environment to improve reading. Additional studies may suggest specific factors in classrooms that impact the process of learning to read. Furthermore, this study could be expanded to include kindergarten through fifth grade, and may result in the identification of strategies that are effective in providing instruction to a variety of readers at all reading levels.

Limitations of this study involved three primary areas. The first area that some critics may consider a limitation relates to the narrow scope of the study in which data was gathered from only the second and fourth grade in two settings. While both of these grades are considered crucial in a child’s academic career, a study emphasizing a broader scope that encompassed kindergarten through fifth grade might more effectively reveal key characteristics used by teachers to successfully teach children to read at all age levels. The second limitation of this study was that only four teachers were included;
however, this goes to the very core of qualitative research. Increasing the number of informants would provide the researcher with a broader spectrum of experiences, techniques, philosophies, and characteristics of an effective reading teacher in the elementary classroom. The last final limitation relates to the number of administrators used as informants, since they define the parameters of the process occurring in each classroom. This study could be further enhanced by including both the principal and assistant principal from each school to explore their perspectives related to reading, and compare their ideologies with the classroom teachers’ characteristics for effective reading instruction.

Summary

This study has examined the characteristics of effective reading instruction in an elementary classroom. All four teachers were considered master teachers by their administrators and peers. Each teacher and administrator involved in this study placed a high premium on effective reading instruction. Sustained Silent Reading programs were in place for each classroom to minimize uninterrupted reading on a daily basis. All genres of literatures and authors were accepted in each classroom.

In conclusion, each of the participants stated that the five most important reading skills that an effective teacher of reading emphasizes to his/her own students is comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, picture clues, and context clues. Students must to have appropriate word attack strategies such as picture clues and context clues to assist them with difficult words. Fluency assists students develop as lifelong readers, while vocabulary brings meaning to the text. In the final analysis, all agreed in the significance of comprehension, without which there would be no understanding.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. What is your educational background experience?

3. How important is communication in the classroom?

4. What is your view on positive verbalization? Negative verbalization? Feedback?

5. Do you feel that your classroom environment promotes success and builds self-esteem? If so, how?

6. What types of activities do you employ throughout the school year for self-improvement?

7. How do you monitor students’ progress?

8. What types of assessment are used throughout the school year to help monitor students’ progress?

9. Do you feel that it is necessary to provide and instructional model during reading? If so, explain.

10. Do you feel it is important to provide a literacy-rich environment?

11. Please describe a literacy environment that you feel is conducive to meet the needs of all students.

12. What is your philosophy on classroom management?

13. How do you implement an effective classroom management plan?

14. Do you feel it is important to provide opportunities for the students to have free-choice when selecting literature?
15. Is it important to supply a purpose when reading?

16. Do you expand instructional time?

17. What is your philosophy on the statement “Reading and writing are an integrated process?”

18. What types of reading literature are available to your students in the classroom?

19. Do you integrate technology into the reading curriculum?

20. What do you think are the top five reading skills that are most beneficial to students?

21. Please describe how much of your teaching relates to standardized testing?

22. Define an effective teacher.
APPENDIX B

TEST-TAKING TIPS FOR READING

1. For each part of the test, read the directions carefully so you know what to do. Then read the directions again – just to make sure.

2. For questions about a reading passage, take a quick look at the questions first. Then you will know what to look for as you read the passage.

3. In each question, look for key words to help you decide what the question is asking. Examples of key words: who, what, when, where, how, why.

4. You do not have to memorize the information in each passage before you answer the questions. Go back to the passage to find the answers that you need.

5. To find the sequence of events, look for signal words, such as first, last, then, next, before, after, later, finally. You may also look for numbers, such as years or dates.

6. To figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word in a passage, look for clues in the sentence. Be sure to look in the sentences before and after the word, too.

7. To find causes and effects, look for signal words and phrases, such as because, so, since, as a result.

8. When answering a question, read all the answer choices carefully. Consider each possible answer before you choose one.

9. To find the main idea of a passage, decide what the whole passage is mostly about. Use the title and any pictures on the page to help you figure it out.

10. Be on the lookout for negative words in questions or directions, such as not,
*opposite, except, unless.* These words may be in all CAPITAL letters, in **bold** type, or *italics*, or *underlined*. Questions using these words can be confusing. Think carefully about what the question is asking before you choose an answer.
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