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An exploration of reading methods in first-grade: comparing the basal approach and balanced literacy

Richelle LeBlanc Acosta

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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AN EXPLORATION OF READING METHODS IN FIRST-GRADE: COMPARING THE
BASAL APPROACH AND BALANCED LITERACY

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 School of Education

by
Richelle L. Acosta
B.A., Nicholls State University, 1991
M.Ed., Nicholls State University, 1996
Ed.S. Certificate, Louisiana State University, 2008
December 2012

This dissertation is dedicated to my two precious angels, Hannah and Olivia, who I hope will always be life-long readers and learners. Thank you for sacrificing so much time away while I had schoolwork. Aim your goals high and work toward achieving them. You can do anything you set your minds to. I love you always, Mommy.

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Give thanks to the God of heaven, for His steadfast love endures forever (Psalm 136:26).

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ABSTRACT

Few topics in education have sparked as much interest and debate as the teaching of reading. Throughout the past century, instructional approaches have come and gone but one thing has remained constant: the teacher. Behind every effective classroom lies a teacher. It is ultimately the teacher's decisions that drive daily instruction in the classroom.

But what is the best way for teachers to teach children how to read? For decades, researchers have plagued studies seeking to find the best method for accomplishing this. Just as students' physical characteristics are very diverse, so too are their academic abilities. Reading teachers must be able to understand these differences and consequently choose and employ teaching materials that meet the needs of all the students among the class. With the ever-increasing importance of high-stakes testing and accountability, schools expect their teachers to deliver effective reading instruction that will produce results.

The purpose of this study was to compare two approaches to reading instruction: a basal program and balanced literacy. Classroom observations and teacher interviews were conducted and collected in order to investigate the following questions: How do basal programs and balanced literacy impact reading instruction in elementary school classrooms? How are the perceptions of teachers and students impacted in these respected settings?

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Former president Harry S. Truman once said, “*Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers*”, while Dr. Seuss is coined with the quote, “*The more you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn the more places you will go*”. What these two phrases share is that reading is seen as a quintessential life-long skill. A lot of what we know about the world, we learned from reading. In fact, being able to respond to the needs of society and the workplace is contingent upon being able to read because so much of what we encounter entails reading.

Few topics in education have sparked as much interest and debate as the teaching of reading. Throughout the past century, instructional approaches have come and gone but one thing has remained constant: the teacher. Behind every effective classroom lies a teacher. The importance of the teacher in the literacy realm was highlighted by the landmark First-Grade Studies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967/1997). A primary finding of the First-Grade Studies was that “the teacher was a variable underlying student success in learning to read” (Farstrup & Samuels, 2002). It is ultimately the teacher’s decisions that drive daily instruction in the classroom.

But what is the best way for teachers to teach children how to read? For decades, researchers have plagued studies seeking to find the best method for accomplishing this. In 1967, Bond and Dykstra conducted one of the earliest comprehensive studies to establish “which of the many approaches to initial reading instruction produces superior reading and spelling achievement at the end of first grade” (Bond & Dykstra, 1967/1997, p. 348). The researchers concluded that “no one approach is so distinctly better in all situations and respects than the others that it should be considered the one best method and the one to be used exclusively” and that classrooms that used an integrated (or balanced) approach, which combined systematic phonics with reading for meaning and writing, far surpassed those using mainstream basal

programs (p. 416). What's the best way to teach reading? Routman (2003) believes the answer to this question "depends on your students, your teaching contexts, your beliefs, your curriculum, and your standards" (p. 6).

Reading instruction contains components of both art and science. The art of teaching literacy lies in matching instruction to the unique strengths and needs of each student in a class. Just as there is no single way all readers read, there is no one way all readers learn about reading. The science of the learning-to-read process forms "a necessary foundation and knowledge base for the enterprise that is effective teaching" (Farstrup & Samuels, 2002, p. 1).

While accepting Dr. Seuss's premises that going places will equate to learning, we must also recognize that not everyone will want to go to the same place. For the classroom, this means that the materials and activities used in developing reading skills must be carefully selected with sensitivity to the needs and interests of the students with whom they will be used (Adams, 1990). So the question posed is, "What characteristics in literacy materials and resources do teachers believe are essential to providing effective reading instruction?"

Statement of the Problem

The definition for diversity, according to Merriam-Webster (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diversity>), is *the condition of having being composed of differing elements; the inclusion of different types of people in a group or organization (i.e. school)*. If one walks into any classroom, the above definition rings true. Looking among the children seated at the desks are a wide range of differences including hair color, sizes, heights, weights, and etcetera. This variety also exists in the teachers at the helm of the class and in the reading instruction being delivered. As the old adage goes, *is variety really the spice of life?* The question is really focused on the literacy classrooms. Just as students' physical characteristics are

very diverse, so too are their academic abilities. Reading teachers must be able to understand these differences and consequently choose and employ teaching materials that meet the needs of all the students among the class. With the ever-increasing importance of high-stakes testing and accountability, schools expect their teachers to deliver effective reading instruction that will produce results.

The statement of the problem becomes clear. How are the chosen methods of reading affecting instruction and teacher practices in elementary classrooms? What factors drive a teacher's decision regarding resources used for classroom implementation? These, as well as other emerging questions, are the focus of this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to compare two approaches to reading instruction: a basal program and balanced literacy. Classroom observations and teacher interviews were conducted and collected in order to investigate the following questions:

How do basal programs and balanced literacy impact reading instruction in elementary school classrooms?

How are the perceptions of teachers and students impacted in these respected settings?

Setting

The setting for this study took place in two rural cities located in the southern United States. Both cities are urban industrial communities positioned on the outskirts of a larger metropolitan city. Approximate populations for both locations are: Central City 7,000; River City 1,600.

Central School District

Central School District exists to serve all the people as best it can. In order to do that, the school system, believes that individuals should be accepted at their level of development and guided in such a way that they learn what is expected of them. Central School District, according to its district website, expects students to mature to their individual capacity emotionally, intellectually, physically, socially, and vocationally.

Central School District believes that all children are endowed with individual capacities and characteristics, and that their schools, to the best of their abilities, should provide students with the kind of education best fitted for them as individuals. Central School District knows that the needs of children are similar, but not identical, and they try to adapt their program to this knowledge.

Some of the educational objectives Central School District believes that will support its philosophy and educational goals are as follows:

- Quality instruction will be provided for each student.
- A structured curriculum for all students will be a responsibility of the school system.
- All students will attain acceptable standards designed for academic growth.
- Adequate personnel, facilities, equipment, materials, and auxiliary services will be furnished by the school system.
- Educational objectives will serve as the criteria by which instructional materials are selected and prepared, content outlined, and instructional procedures and educational technology developed.

The focus of the Central School District is on the learner, the student. The student's educational development toward the school's goals is the central concern of the Board's

policies and the administrative regulations. The teacher is the key figure in carrying out the school's responsibility in the educational process. However, the teacher alone cannot effectively achieve all the objectives of education. The purpose of the various administrative departments is to provide conditions in the schools which permit teachers to work with maximum effectiveness and to provide them with a variety of tools and specialized assistance in developing and carrying out a program which will meet the needs of our students. The Board will seek to provide the facilities, personnel, equipment, and materials necessary for the education of all students for whom it is responsible.

Whispering Forest Elementary

Whispering Forest Elementary, located in the heart of Central District, houses approximately 680 first and second grade students with 38 highly qualified and dedicated faculty and staff members. Whispering Forest Elementary focuses its educational energy on recognizing and shaping the needs of the whole child. Their aim is to instill in every child a sense of dignity and self-esteem. Whispering Forest's mission is to improve and promote literacy through family awareness and parental involvement. They believe that an increase in family involvement promotes literacy as well as successful home-school partnerships. At Whispering Forest, the teachers strive to educate every child, every day no matter what it takes.

Of the total school population, 37.3% constitutes minority children. The percent of students receiving free and reduced price lunch is almost 70%, while the attendance rate is close to 96%. Based on information obtained from its latest school report card, the percent of teachers at Whispering Forest that are highly qualified is 86.5

(<http://www.louisianaschools.net/reportcards>).

Because the percent of students enrolled in the free and reduced price school lunch program exceeds the baseline total of 40%, Whispering Forest qualifies for Title 1 funding. Title 1 is a federally funded program that provides monies to school systems for students at risk of failure or living in poverty (Malburg, 2011). Originally, Title 1 was enacted in 1965 under the Elementary and Secondary Act which was committed to closing the achievement gap between low-income students and other students. The policy was rewritten in 1994 to improve fundamental goals of helping at-risk students. With the implementation of No Child Left Behind, schools must make adequate yearly progress on state testing (iLEAP, LEAP, GEE) and focus on best teaching practices in order to continue receiving funds (Malburg, 2011).

The enacting of a School Improvement Plan (SIP) is required by federal and state regulations for schools in academic status, also known as an Academically Unacceptable School (AUS). The plan must cover two fiscal years and must be revised every two years while the school remains in academic status. The School Improvement Plan is part of Louisiana's Public Education Accountability System and is designed to assess a school's strengths and weaknesses, implement strategies and activities to address the school's needs, and continually evaluate the school's progress toward achieving its objectives and meeting its goals (Louisiana Department of Education, 2010a). Whispering Forest Elementary's School Improvement Plan for the 2011-12 school year lists its strengths as: low number of discipline referrals; employee longevity; and 58% of their 1st and 2nd graders scored at or above the benchmark level on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a measure designed to assess phonological awareness, alphabetic principle, and fluency with connected text (https://dibels.uoregon.edu/dibels_what.php).

Reported as weaknesses for Whispering Forest Elementary are that students do not know basic math facts, the existing facilities require physical improvements to meet the needs of the students and teachers, and the DIBELS reports show that 2nd grade students had the highest number of students at risk for two consecutive years.

The School Improvement Report for Whispering Forest also indicates contributing factors for both the strengths and weaknesses. For strengths, they are: consistent and systematic use of Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS); supportive relationship among staff, parents, and community; and quality instruction aligned with curriculum assessment. For weaknesses, coordinated resources and the need for a wider variety of instructional and assessment strategies to better meet the individual students' needs were noted.

River School District

River School District, established in 1879, is committed to providing a quality education for all students. The district's superintendent believes in striving for quality performance at all levels of the organization, and that the focus must be on continuous improvement. The superintendent further states that with the persistent diligence of the administrators, teachers, parents, students, and the community, River School District can continue to be one of the best school systems in the region.

River School District consists of 17 schools with a total enrollment of approximately 9,700 students; 45% minority, 16% special education population, and 2% making up gifted students. The percent of students receiving free and reduced price lunch is a little over 50% while the attendance rate soars at over 95%. The students per teacher in each classroom, on average, are that of a 20:1 ratio. In River School District, 98% of the teachers are certified and

95.9% are highly qualified, according to its current school report card information (<http://www.louisianaschools.net/reportcards>).

River School District believes that the purpose of education is primarily the development of skills, concepts, knowledge, processes, and attitudes necessary for students to become responsible, productive citizens. Taken from their district's website, River School District claims that education should recognize the characteristics unique to each individual and they claim to provide a process for the development and expression of each student's innate potential and talents.

A standards-based curriculum model is used in River School District. Academic standards are statements about what students should know and be able to do. The content areas to which River School District's curriculum was built are language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, foreign language, and the arts (<http://www.louisianaschools.net/curriculum>). River School District believes that following this type of curriculum will assure its graduates have the learning experiences necessary to develop the skills, concepts, knowledge, processes, and attitudes that are essential to success in higher education and in the work place.

The model utilized by River School District is based on the following:

- Virtually all students are capable of achieving at higher levels in learning the essentials of formal schooling.
- Schools, in partnership with parents and the community, have the responsibility of controlling the conditions of success.
- Schools can maximize the learning environment for all students through clearly stated objectives, high expectations for all students, and a continuous, balanced assessment of student learning.

- The instructional process can be adapted to improve learning.
- Successful student learning must be based on providing meaningful challenging experiences to insure maximum student achievement.

River School District believes the most powerful element in a child's formal education is the teacher. Therefore, the district has established the following expectations for the instructional delivery of the adopted curriculum:

- Teachers shall expect that virtually all students will perform at high levels of learning.
- Teachers shall use curriculum guides as a framework from which they will develop units of study, lesson plans and instructional approaches that address individual student needs.
- Teachers shall connect curriculum to previously taught content and skills, as well as to what students are expected to learn in the future.
- Instructional delivery in all classrooms shall be based on sound teaching principles grounded in research.
- Teachers shall employ a variety of instructional strategies, provide adequate time for practice, use flexible grouping patterns and create multiple opportunities for learning and success.
- Teachers shall conduct frequent diagnosis of learning needs and adjust instruction accordingly.
- Classroom assessments shall be aligned with the curriculum.

Pine Grove Elementary

Established in 1990, the mission of Pine Grove Elementary is to provide developmentally and challenging instruction that supports the intellectual, physical, social, and emotional growth of each student. Their vision is for faculty and staff to model caring behaviors that influence students to respect and care for all members of the school community. They believe students feel supported and challenged as they learn the social and academic skills necessary for a productive and meaningful life. Students' development is further enhanced through instruction in the fine arts and physical education, resulting in students who are sound in mind, body, and spirit. At Pine Grove Elementary, their motto is to not fear failure, only lost opportunity. They believe this atmosphere inspires students to challenge themselves as they prepare for their future roles as citizens in an independent, changing world.

Serving grades pre-Kindergarten through third, Pine Grove Elementary's enrollment peaks at approximately 525 students. The ethnic distribution for this population is 58% white, 35% black, and 7% other. 46% of the students at Pine Grove Elementary receive free or reduced lunch and the school attendance rate is 96.1%. There are 27 classroom teachers, 10 special education teachers, four Reading Recovery teachers, four enrichment teachers, one Math resource/dyslexia teacher, three speech therapists, 15 Para-educators, and six kindergarten monitors. Five of the classroom teachers are National Board Certified Teachers (NBCT). National Board Certified Teachers have successfully completed a voluntary assessment program designed to measure teaching excellence (<http://www.nbpts.org>). Support programs offered at Pine Grove Elementary include: Reading Recovery, Early Reading Behaviors, Math Resource, Comprehensive Literacy, Literacy Groups, Academically Gifted Classes, Peer Support Leaders, Young Authors Contest, Character Education Program, Responsive Classroom, Inclusion,

Tutoring Programs, Response to Intervention (RTI), Collaborative Planning, and a Technology Site Coordinator who provides instructional support to all classes.

Because Pine Grove's percent of free or reduced lunch number exceeds the qualifying 40%, they also receive Title 1 funding. The allotted monies for Title 1 status allows Pine Grove Elementary to have on staff four full-time Literacy/Reading Recovery teachers to offer assistance to low-ability students.

The School Improvement Plan for Pine Grove Elementary, as indicated on its 2011-12 plan, reveal three priorities for improvement; Component 1: Improving Student Learning, Component 2: Improving Student Learning through Technology, and Component 3: Building a Positive School Climate. Specific priorities and rationales for each component are as follows:

- Component 1

Priority 1: To improve student achievement in math

Rationale: Through the analysis of trends in math data, results indicate that problem solving remains a challenge. The need is to implement and refine problem solving strategies to improve overall math achievement.

Priority 2: To improve student achievement in Language Arts

Rationale: Through the analysis of Language Arts data, results indicate a need for closer alignment to current best practices and the writing series, comprehensive literacy instruction, grade level expectations, and district assessments to increase writing achievement.

- Component 2

Priority 1: To improve student engagement and use of current technological tools

Rationale: While the availability and teacher use of technological tools has increased, there continues to be limited student use of these tools in classroom applications.

Research suggests that technology is a tool used to enhance learning and improve student achievement.

- Component 3

Priority 1: To increase the use of Responsive Language throughout the school

(Responsive Language is a component of the *Responsive Classroom* approach which emphasizes social, emotional, and academic growth in a strong and safe school community; it is also referred to as *positive teacher language* and the premise is for the teachers to use words and tone to promote children's active learning and self-discipline)

Rationale: The use of Responsive Language is not consistently evident throughout the school. Responsive Language promotes a positive environment which supports the intellectual, physical, social, and emotional growth of each student.

Among the faculty at Pine Grove Elementary, there is a strong belief system in the following principles:

- All children can learn when appropriately challenged and highly engaged
- Although students' attendance is mandatory, their attention must be earned
- Effort and intellectual ability work together to affect learner outcomes
- Teachers must know their children and their individual learning styles
- All children can show caring behaviors when modeled and taught
- Self-disciplined children become successful learners
- Children want to do the right thing

- Every child is to be valued and treated in a caring, dignified manner

In light of those beliefs, the teachers at Pine Grove Elementary will:

- Design learning activities, use a variety of materials, and create situations that compel all students to put forth the effort needed to succeed
- Communicate expectations necessary for success
- Create a community of learners acting and reacting within socially acceptable standards
- Influence behavior while maintaining and building character, integrity, and self-esteem
- Nurture self-disciplined, independent citizens
- Create in students a love for learning
- Work with children to develop and use appropriate behaviors and work habits in a variety of situations
- Model and instill the following habits of goodness: Cooperation, Assertion, Responsibility, Empathy

Standardized Data for the Districts and Schools

Louisiana's School Accountability System is based on two principles: rewarding schools that grow academically and assisting schools that need help. Each year, schools receive a numerical score known as School Performance Score (SPS). District Performance Scores (DPS) are a "roll up" of a school district's individual student scores on the LEAP, iLEAP, and Graduation Exit Exam as well as attendance and dropout rates and graduation outcomes. District

Performance Scores are calculated with the same formula as School Performance Scores, but use one year of data (Louisiana Department of Education, 2010b).

Beginning in the 2010-11 school year, Louisiana began assigning districts and schools letter grades. Letter grades correspond to District Performance Scores, and are based on the following grading scale:

Letter Grade	SPS Range	Students Below Basic
A	120.0-200.0	0-12%
B	105.0-119.9	13-24%
C	90.0-104.9	25-36%
D	65.0-89.9	37-61%
F	0-64.9	62-100%

The District Performance Score for Central School District for 2011 is 87.8, which is a grade equivalent of D. Spring 2011 iLEAP test results reveal that 59% of the third-grade students in Central School District for English Language Arts (ELA) scored at or above the Basic level. That same data for 4th grade LEAP indicate 72% of the students at or above the Basic level while 5th and 6th grade iLEAP students received 62% and 64%, respectively.

According to its most recent School Performance Report (2010-11), Whispering Forest Elementary's Baseline School Performance Score is a 95.1 which is the equivalent of a C- letter grade. A minus sign indicates the school performance score declined by 0.1 point or more.

For River City School District, the District Performance Score for 2011 is 106.7, which is a B grade. Testing data for 3rd graders show 79% at or above Basic for iLEAP; 85% 4th grade

LEAP; 5th grade iLEAP 75% and 79% for 6th grade iLEAP. Again, the above scores represent only the English Language Arts part.

Data from the School Performance Report for the 2010-11 school year has given Pine Grove Elementary a Baseline School Performance Score of 115.1 and a letter grade of a B-. Achievement levels in 3rd grade for the iLEAP ELA (English Language Arts) assessment show that 84% of the students scored Basic and above.

Significance of the Study

This ethnographic qualitative study of the impact of the basal reading program and a balanced literacy approach in two elementary school settings is a case study of four teachers' perceptions regarding reading instruction to first-grade students. It provides an analysis of two perspectives of classroom teaching strategies and practices and how these best meet the needs of the students.

Part of the intent is to also bring awareness of this relevance to those involved in the decision-making process for curriculum materials and/or resources for schools.

Throughout the study, similarities and differences between and among the two settings and methods were noted and results shared.

Research Questions

The following questions provided the direction of the study:

1. How does the use of the basal reading approach impact instruction in first-grade classrooms?
2. How does the use of balanced literacy impact instruction in first-grade classrooms?
3. How has being a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) changed/impacted instruction in a first-grade literacy classroom?

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The pendulum, a fitting if unfortunate symbol of our vacillating approach to beginning reading instruction has a long history; and the fervor and often resentment that have so often powered the reading pendulum can be found at various points in time. For generations, education professionals have debated whether reading instruction should focus first on phonics or first on meaning making (Harp & Brewer, 2005). Given its importance, it is not surprising that the dispute over the teaching of reading is the site of some of the most intense and emotional battles in the school wars.

Whole Language

The "Reading Wars" in American education can be traced back to the inception of Whole-Language (also called the Look-Say method) which started in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Sutton, 1986). One of the most significant research studies in the evolution of whole language education was conducted by Kenneth Goodman in the mid-1960s (Raines, 1995). Goodman wanted to learn more about the process of reading rather than methods used to teach reading as had been studied by prior researchers. He was interested in the "relationship between thought (psycho) and language (linguistics) as it applied to the reading process" (Raines, 1995, p. 2). For his research, Goodman chose hundreds of first- and third- grade students from various parts of the country and observed them read passages (Routman, 1994). After reading passages, students were asked to tell about the story. Comprehension was measured by their retelling of the story and by their reading errors, referred to as *miscues*, which were analyzed to determine why children skipped, substituted, or added words. Goodman's (1967) seminal piece, entitled *Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game*, conjectured that readers use three cueing systems to make sense of text: syntactic (structural) cues, semantic (meaning) cues, and grapho-phonetic

(visual) cues. By attending to all of these systems, Goodman contended, readers could decode unknown words, thus rendering both the word identification and comprehension processes more effectively (Cobb & Kallus, 2011).

Goodman's research showed that it was not necessary to introduce and drill words out of context, teach phonics in isolation, teach reading in a hierarchy of skills to be mastered, or use contrived reading materials. It was therefore concluded that reading was a thought/language process and instructional materials needed to contain language that was whole and meaningful to the learner. Thus, the term *whole language* was coined to describe a perspective on reading and writing instruction. Although the foundations of whole language do not begin with Goodman's contributions, he is recognized as one of the most significant figures in the establishment and development of the whole language movement (Raines, 1995).

The main idea behind whole language was that children could learn to read through repeated exposure without direct attention to sub-word parts. According to Watson (1989), the term *whole language* originated from a concern of keeping language "whole" during instruction, to avoid fragmenting language into isolated drill practice. Whole language educators were influenced by the work of cognitive psychologists and learning theorists who emphasized the roles of motivation and social interaction in teaching (Weaver, 1994). Thus, whole-language advocates derived the following principles regarding their understanding of how literacy was best developed: 1) The most significant learning is when it is constructed by the students themselves, 2) Learning that is perceived as purposeful and meaningful by the learner is more effective, and 3) Individual learning is promoted by social collaboration (Weaver, 1994). With whole language, children learned to recognize whole words or sentences rather than individual sounds. It worked on the principle that children learned to read by reading (Flesch, 1981).

Students would look at a word which was pronounced by the teacher, then would repeat the sound (the word). Whole language (sometimes referred to as "psycholinguistics") was developed by modern psychologists and denied the students the tools used in the phonics system but instead taught them to learn through rote memorization of whole words. Whole language was not referred to as a methodology; it was instead a philosophy that was biased toward constructivist epistemology (all readers must construct their own meanings from the text they encounter) (Strickland, 1995 & Cobb & Kallus, 2011). It was considered child-centered and embraced using good children's literature. It also emphasized teaching skills in the context of real reading and writing activities, integrating curriculum and instruction, and teaching skills when children needed them (Goodman, 1986; Smith, 1978). Whole language was considered a "top down" approach because the reader derived a personal meaning from a text based upon using their prior knowledge to interpret the meaning of what they were reading (Reyner, 2008).

Phonics

Phonics proponents were led by Rudolph Flesch in his 1955 book *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It* in which he warned that American schools would produce a generation of illiterates if they continued to rely on "faddish" techniques (namely the look-say, or whole-language approach) to teach reading. Flesch (1955) also emphasized that the abandonment of phonics and other traditional approaches to reading would inevitably wreak havoc on the nation's schools.

Although the public accepted Flesch, American educators rejected his arguments. A decade later, Jeanne Chall's (1967) *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* was finally considered in academia. At the time, Chall was a professor at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education where she published her book after five years of research reviewing eighty-five

classroom and clinical studies (Flesch, 1981). The basis of the studies was to compare phonics-first programs to look-say methods of reading instruction. Specifically, four main elements considered effective to literacy (teacher competence, pacing, method, and content) were debated.

A summary of her conclusions is as follows:

My review of the research from the laboratory, the classroom and the clinic points to the need for a correction in beginning reading instructional methods. Most school children in the United States are taught to read by what I have termed a meaning-emphasis method. Yet, the research from 1912 to 1965 indicates that a code-emphasis method – i.e. one that views beginning reading as essentially different from mature reading and emphasizes learning of the printed code for the spoken language – produces better results, at least up to the point where sufficient evidence seems to be available, the end of third grade. (Flesch, 1981, pp. 29-30)

Phonics is a set of instructional strategies for teaching the relationship between letters and sounds. Tompkins (2011) defines phonics as “the set of relationships between phonology (the sounds in speech) and orthography (the spelling system) (p. 107). It involves an understanding of the alphabetic principle (there is a relation between spoken words and letters or combinations of letters) on which the English language is based and a knowledge of the sounds associated with a particular letter or combination of letters (Strickland, 2011). The goal of phonics instruction is to help students develop the alphabetic principle. Students who understand the alphabetic principle know that the sounds of spoken words are mapped onto written words in systematic ways. As students develop understandings of this principle, they become adept at using letter-sound correspondences to figure out unrecognized words. Command of the alphabetic principle is the foundation for accurate word recognition and a prerequisite for fluency— well-documented characteristics of skillful readers. These attributes are critical because they enable readers to invest their energies in the real business of reading—comprehension (Villaume & Brabham, 2003).

Phonics-based approaches are designed to teach children to unlock or decode the sound/symbol relationships in our language and to begin reading instruction by teaching children to associate the graphemes (letters) with the phonemes (sounds) they represent (Harp & Brewer, 2005). There are two competing views regarding the teaching of phonics. One approach is known as *synthetic phonics instruction*, and the other approach is known as *analytic phonics instruction* (Reutzel & Cooter, 2005). Synthetic phonics is more traditional in that students learn how to change letters or letter combinations into speech sounds, and then blend them together to form words (i.e., sounding out). In analytic phonics, children are first taught to read a word and then to analyze the individual sounds within the word. They are taught to decode unfamiliar words by looking to see if they can find a similar word (i.e., knowing the sounds in *cake* and *me* can help a child to use the /m/ sound in *me* and the /ake/ sound from *cake* to decode *make*) (Harp & Brewer, 2005).

Why is phonics instruction important? Stanovich and West (1989) attest that learning phonics influences children's decoding skills. Having an early acquisition of decoding skills is desirable because this ability has been shown to be a powerful predictor of a child's future skill in reading comprehension (Beck & Juel, 1995; Lundberg, 1984). Another positive rationale for including phonics in an early reading program is that phonics knowledge leads to increased fluency and comprehension (Stahl, 1992). The goal of phonics should go beyond teaching children to "sound it out." Rather, educators should aim to develop fluent readers who read efficiently and meaningfully so that comprehension can be constructed by the reader (Rasinki & Padak, 2001).

Phonics advocates focus their efforts on the primary grades and emphasize the importance of students being able to sound out (read) words based on how they are spelled. The

National Reading Panel (2000) confirms that systematic and explicit phonics instruction is more effective than nonsystematic or programs that ignore phonics. Adams (1990) also corroborated that “approaches in which systematic instruction was included with the reading of meaningful connected text resulted in superior reading achievement overall for both low-readiness and better-prepared students” (p. 125). Supporters of phonics-based approaches to reading instruction hold a bottom-up view of reading. In this view, instruction is text-based and begins with the smallest pieces of language – the sounds (phonemes) and their written symbols (graphemes). Instruction then moves to blending sounds in words, to reading words, and then to reading sentences and longer pieces of text (Harp & Brewer, 2005). Many educators, parents, and politicians take a “phonics first” stance, arguing that reading instruction should begin with phonics in isolation and support a synthetic approach where phonics should be taught apart from the reading program. Others propose that phonics instruction is critical to learning to read, but should be taught systematically with children learning sound/symbol relationships, blending those sounds into words, and then reading those words in connected text.

Opposing intensive phonics are those that contend that English does not have a one-to-one sound symbol relationship; phonics generalizations have many exceptions. The attention should be on teaching students to use comprehension-based strategies such as using context clues instead of so that the meaning of a passage is retained (Reutzel & Cooter, 2005). Learning to read needs to involve a balance: attention to the larger meanings of whole texts (including their relations to other texts and to the lived experiences of the reader) and also to the “decoding” of the letters on the page (Dombey, 1999).

Basal Reading Approach

Basal readers in one form or another have played an integral role in American reading instruction for many years and are likely to continue to do so well into the future (Giordano, 2001). In fact, basal programs have been documented as the dominant reading materials used in American elementary classrooms from the 1940s through the 1990s (Koeller, 1988; Shannon, 1989). In 1958, according to Koeller (1988), 95% to 99% of teachers used basal programs, and in 1980, these figures were down slightly with 80% to 90% of the teachers reporting the use of basal reading instruction.

Reutzel and Cooter (2005) define basal readers as “commercially prepared and marketed resource materials that provide classroom reading instruction in elementary and middle schools” (p. 162). They feature a grade-level student textbook containing reading selections, accompanying workbooks, supplemental books, and related instructional material (i.e., audio tapes of each story, flip charts to accompany certain lessons, leveled readers for guided reading groups). Phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and spelling instruction are coordinated with each reading selection and are aligned with state standards. The teacher’s guide provides detailed procedures for teaching the selections and related strategies and skills. Instruction is usually geared to whole-class, with some emphasis on re-teaching to small groups of struggling students (Tompkins, 2011).

Current basal readers have descended from a long ancestry. The first in line of predecessors was the hornbook (a paddle which contained the alphabet and the Lord’s Prayer all on a 3” x 5” inch surface), the earliest reading instructional material widely used and recorded in American history (Smith, 1986). Another ancestor of the modern basal published around the same era as the hornbook was the *New England Primer*, which began “A – In Adam’s fall we

sinned all” (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, & Murphy, 1988). Both the hornbook and primer stemmed from the religious freedom movement of the American colonists prevalent at this time (Reutzel & Cooter, 2005).

Led by William H. McGuffey in the 1830s, the McGuffey’s *Reader* was introduced to the educational community as an early attempt at phonics instruction because it emphasized the sounding out of words by teaching letter-sound associations (Bohnig, 1986). The McGuffey readers dominated American primary education from the middle of the 19th century until the early 20th century. During the Progressive Era, some educators and social scientists began to believe the McGuffey’s moralizing texts were too complex for young readers, and they argued for a simpler approach, one that used a carefully limited vocabulary and story lines that were more relevant to the lives of children (Shermer, 2003).

After World War I, publishers began to produce primers incorporating some of the changes experts were advocating. The new primers introduced characters with whom children could identify, and they contained stories featuring the same set of siblings engaging in normal day-to-day activities. The New Basic Readers, more commonly known as the “Dick and Jane” readers, emerged and were originally authored by William S. Gray and Marion Monroe and originally published by the Scott, Foresman and Company in 1941 (Reutzel & Cooter, 2005). The readers were accompanied by a guide for teachers in which the whole word (or *look-say*) method was emphasized. The whole word approach teaches the meaning of words, rather than using rote phonics drills. Pictures were also used to help readers associate a word with its meaning (Shermer, 2003).

Ekwall and Shanker (1985) cite in a study that basal readers are designed to be comprehensive, developmental, continuous programs that provide for the sequential and

systematic learning of all reading skills. The central premise of basals is that the all-inclusive set of instructional materials they offer can teach all children to read regardless of teacher competence and regardless of learner differences (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, & Murphy, 1988). It is presented around a hierarchy of skills and a tightly controlled vocabulary. Publishers also believe basal readers are a complete literacy program, but effective teachers realize they are not (Tompkins, 2011). Other advantages of the basal reading, as noted by Reutzel and Cooter (2005) are the complete set of stories, instructional directions and activities, instructional practice materials, and assessment and management devices that are included; the provided lesson plans; the variety of literary genres of the stories; the way the student texts are arranged in ascending difficulty; and the supplemental materials including trade book libraries, big books, leveled books, and decodable books that come with the series.

Although for some teachers the provided lesson plans are a positive factor, according to Burns, Roe, and Ross (1992), some educators believe that the detailed lesson plans offered in the basals tie them down to a specific lesson sequence and release them from exercising personal judgment. Still another disadvantage of the basal approach is that it is so structured that it can stifle the teacher's creativity and result in a rigid and traditional approach to the teaching of reading (Ekwall & Shanker, 1985). It lends itself to the teaching of reading in groups where the needs of the individual might be ignored. Henderson (2006) acknowledges that basal readers provide practice in only one kind of reading material, and does not include the reading of library books, maps, charts or even mathematical problems. Quite often, teachers spend so much time covering the publisher's suggested activities that little time is left for children to actually read.

Other limitations of the basal reader approach as noted by Reutzel and Cooter (2005) include the fact that the skill instruction is rarely applied in or related to decoding the text or

comprehending the selection's content; the basal lesson design in teacher's editions very often fails to relate one part of the lesson, such as vocabulary introduction, to subsequent parts of the reading lesson, such as story comprehension discussion; stories often do not relate to students' interests; and the teacher's editions seldom contain useful directions on how to teach or model reading comprehension strategies.

But how do struggling readers or advanced students fare with the "cookie cutter" regime of what the basal readers offer? Burns, Roe, & Ross (1992) express that the basal approach is teacher-centered, and not child centered: that it lectures, and asks a minimal interaction of ideas and creativity. Consequently, they contend, the basal series approach "sets itself up as literal in its focus, and consequently children do not develop higher level thinking skills" (p. 217). Many experts also contend that the basal program does not always follow the research information on how children learn (Pike, Compain, Mumper, 1994). Acquiring higher level skills also presents a challenge to basal-taught students when transitioning to content material. According to the National Research Council (1998), students in upper elementary, especially third- and fourth-grades, experienced difficulty when changing from the basal reader format to content material. This was evident in both proficient and poor readers. Factors such as different format, application of reading and writing skills, vocabulary, and new concepts were the main reasons for the trouble with content material (National Research Council, 1998).

In the wake of the amendments to the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997, classrooms host much more varied student populations, presenting a broad spectrum of unique strengths and weaknesses. To meet students' varied needs and preferences, teachers are finding that they need yet additional training, time, and resources (other than what is offered in the basal program) in order to properly individualize instruction. With regard to students with

reading difficulties in particular, the rigidity of a basal reading program limits teachers in providing the ongoing support or adaptations within the curriculum that would allow individual students to overcome their difficulties and make progress (Tom, 1997). The basal can offer instructional support to some students, but not all. Teachers need to incorporate various approaches within the literacy classroom to maximize the learning potential of all students.

Additionally, the kinds of instruction and support that a student with decoding-based learning disabilities (like dyslexia) will need are very different from those that will be required for students with other disabilities, such as Asperger's syndrome, Specific Language Disabilities, and so forth (Vance, 1995). The central premise of the basal reader is that a "sequential, all-inclusive set of instructional materials can teach all children to read *regardless of teacher competence and regardless of learner differences* (Goodman et al., 1988). Teachers simply do not have the skills or resources to individualize instruction for the range of students that they now encounter.

Further, the basal program is organized around a hierarchy of skills and controlled vocabulary that implicitly claims teachers' competence is not a factor in successful reading development, provided the teachers follow the manual exactly (Goodman et al., 1988). As elaborated by Cheek, Flippo, and Lindsey (1997), students do not learn the introduced skills at the same rate, nor do they bring the same perspectives to the reading process. There are factors such as the characteristics of the reader, experiential background, and linguistic and sociocultural differences that alone or in combination can affect reading-skill development.

Despite its limitations, the comprehensive package that is included with the basal series is still preferred by most educators as the most desirable way to teach children to read. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) estimated that between 75% and 90% of what occurs in the

name of reading instruction in the United States is based on basal programs. Other research indicates that basal readers are used daily in 92% to 98% of primary classrooms in the United States (Flood & Lapp, 1986; Wade & Moje, 2000). Wade and Moje (2000) also contend that 85% of intermediate grade classrooms continue to rely on basal readers to some degree. Because so many teachers' main means of literacy instruction is the basal, Reutzel (1991) and Morrow (2002) offer that by systematically analyzing and monitoring individual skill needs, teachers can modify their basal reading program in numerous ways to help achieve their reading goals.

The aforementioned data clearly demonstrate the significance the basal reader has played and continues to play in contemporary American reading instruction. Because of this, Goodman et al. (1988) notes several recommendations for teachers:

1. Teachers should develop a clear position on how reading is best taught and examine instructional materials from this professional perspective.
2. Teachers individually and collectively need to be responsible for making basic decisions in their classrooms and be willing to take risks while asserting their professional judgment.
3. Teachers should communicate and work with administrators in choosing materials and resources.

Yoakam (1955) offers the following needed improvements for the basal reading program:

1. A single series without additional supplemental material, including other readers, factual material, and stories from a variety of sources is not adequate.
2. Better provisions for children of different levels of ability, such as provisions for differentiation in the use of material and grouping children according to their needs, should be included.

3. A reasonable limitation over the vocabulary control is needed.
4. Descriptive titles, rather than specific grade designations, would be useful.
5. The use of seatwork materials, excessive isolated word drills, workbooks, and busywork devices, should be discarded.
6. Basal instruction needs to be at the base of a comprehensive reading program with recreational and curricular reading an integral part of the whole.

Balanced Literacy

In recent years, there has been a great deal of controversy about the best way to teach reading. State legislators have joined the debate by mandating systematic, intensive phonics instruction. Teachers tend to side with Allington and Walmsley (1995) who claim that there is “no quick fix” and no single program to meet the needs of all children. The call for a balanced approach came as teachers and parents began to realize that reading instruction is not a “one-size-fits-all” matter. Balanced literacy employs the fundamentals of letter-sound correspondence, word study and decoding as well as holistic experiences in reading, writing, speaking and listening (Pressley, 2002). To some, it is considered a philosophy for reading instruction that includes both systematic and explicit phonics instruction, with whole language philosophy. According to Willows (2002), it is important to underscore the place of phonics in a beginning literacy program. Systematic phonics instruction alone does not help students become effective readers and writers. Instead, it needs to be combined with other essential instructional elements to create a complete and balanced program. It is further claimed by Honig (1996) that in order to develop proficient readers a balanced approach to reading instruction – one that combines the language and literature-rich activities associated with whole language activities with explicit teaching skills – is needed.

In a balanced literacy classroom, instruction is based on developing each reader by using curriculum goals and assessment data to inform and drive instruction. Goals and outcomes are written for each grade level and are aligned to state and/or national literacy standards (Harp & Brewer, 2005). This curriculum guides overall instruction as it provides learning goals for the class. The teacher uses assessment to monitor the progress of the students in meeting these goals and providing the necessary interventions to assist as needed.

Pressley (2001) reported that excellent elementary literacy instruction balances skill instruction (i.e. phonics, comprehension strategies teaching) and holistic literacy opportunities (reading of authentic literature, writing in response to text). In making that claim, Pressley (2009) reviewed evidence validating the positive impacts of literacy achievement where balanced teaching was in effect (Pressley, Rochrig, Bogner, Raphael, & Dolezal, 2009). According to Harp and Brewer (2005), the notion of balance in reading instruction means that a reading program balances the instructional time between word study, engaging with meaningful texts and literature study, instruction in reading skills and strategies, and thoughtful, communicative writing instruction. Glasgow and Farrell (2007) contend that a balanced approach could be described as “mixing some phonics with whole language” (p. 8). Spiegel (1998) advocates that a balanced approach is “built on research, views the teacher as an informed decision maker who develops a flexible program, and is constructed around a comprehensive view of literacy” (p. 117).

Pressley (2002) states that as children learn the skills and use them, the demands in balanced classrooms increase, with the goal of the balanced literacy teacher being to move students ahead, so that every day there is new learning; every day students are working at the

edge of their competencies and growing as readers and writers. Pressley (2002) further makes a case for a balanced approach by stating:

This balance seems more defensible than instruction that is only immersion in reading and writing, on the one hand, or predominantly skills driven, on the other... Good reading involves the learning and use of word recognition and comprehension strategies, the effectiveness of strategies use depending, in part, on the reader's prior knowledge about the world, including knowledge built up through reading. (p. 333)

Fitzgerald (1999) identified the following three principles of a balanced literacy approach:

- First, teachers develop children's skills knowledge, including decoding skills, their strategy knowledge for comprehension and responding to literature, and their affective knowledge, including nurturing children's love of reading.
- Second, instructional approaches that are sometimes viewed as opposites are used to meet children's learning needs. Phonics instruction and reading workshop are two examples of instructional approaches utilized in a balanced literacy approach.
- Third, children read a variety of reading materials, ranging from trade books to leveled books with controlled vocabulary and basal reading textbooks.

Advocates of a balanced approach also embrace integration of the language arts: reading, writing, speaking, and listening as well as integration of subjects across the curriculum. Further, in a balanced approach assessment data and knowledge about the learners' culture, values, and strengths are used to design instruction (Harp & Brewer, 2005). In her book, *American Reading Instruction*, Nila Banton Smith (1986) advocates for a balanced approach for four reasons; 1) research supports the need to teach readers to construct meaning, 2) a balanced approach is more respectful to the range of reading research, 3) a balanced approach supports the wisdom of practice, and 4) a balanced approach retains practices that have proven useful and effective.

Smith (1986) also reports the balanced approach “may represent our only alternative to the pendulum swing view of reading for most of the 20th century; a transformational rather than a cyclical view of the process” (pp. 470-472).

National Board Certification

In 1983, public outcry resulted after the issuing of the federal report, *A Nation at Risk*, in which the United States Department of Education painted a grim picture of our nation’s education system and offered a wave of reform initiatives aimed at improvements. An integral component that was missing from most of the report and essential to the education equation was: the teacher.

In response to a leading recommendation made by the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession in its pivotal report, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was established in 1987 (Rotberg, Hatwood, & Lieberman 1998). Part of its recommendations called for large-scale reform to improve the quality of the United States teaching force. According to the Carnegie report (Carnegie Forum on Education & the Economy, 1986, May):

The school would become the place where students developed their thirst for knowledge; teachers would be critical to this learning process and as such, they would be expected to think for themselves, act independently as well as collaboratively, possess a knowledge base of both depth and breadth, be able to communicate their knowledge, stimulate others to achieve, and be able to think and act with critical judgment. (p. 25)

It also included the formation of a National Board whose tasks were to establish standards for exemplary teaching practice and to develop means to award advanced-level certification to teachers who meet those standards (National Research Council, 2008).

The mission of the National Board is to:

Establish high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do, to develop and operate a national voluntary system to assess and certify teachers who meet these standards, and to advance related education reforms for the purpose of improving student learning in American schools. (Rotberg, Hatwood, & Lieberman, 1998).

National Board Certification was developed by teachers, with teachers, and for teachers.

It is a symbol of an advanced teaching credential that complements a current state's teacher license (<http://www.nbpts.org>). The certification is valid for ten years with a renewal process in the eighth or ninth year of a National Board Certified Teacher's tenure. National Board is contingent upon completion of an assessment program that is designed to recognize effective and accomplished teachers who meet high standards based on what teachers should know and be able to do. The assessments include ten artifacts: four portfolio entries that feature teacher practice and six constructed response exercises that assess content knowledge.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) are based on the following Five Core Propositions: teachers are committed to students and their learning; teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students; teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning; teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience; and teachers are members of learning communities (Vandevoort, Amrein-Beardsley, & Berliner, 2004).

A benefit for becoming a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) is that it strengthens practice. As outlined by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (<http://www.nbpts.org>), candidates demonstrate significant improvement in their teaching practice and have been assessed against the nation's highest advanced teaching standards.

In 2005, the National Research Council (NRC) released a report, *Assessing Accomplished Teaching: Advanced-Level Certification Programs*, which recognized that students taught by NBCTs make higher gains on achievement tests than students taught by non-NBCTs (National Research Council, 2008). The report acknowledged that the findings were based on an analysis of studies that the NRC says meet standards of sound scientific research. It further concludes that National Board Certification distinguishes more effective teachers with respect to student achievement and has a positive impact on teacher retention.

One other appealing reason that some teachers seek certification is that National Board Certified Teachers in many states and local districts offer salary incentives for those who certify.

Summary

For some teachers, administrators, and parents, the teaching of reading has become an “either/or” approach. What is missing from a lot of crucial decisions is the one factor that is of the utmost importance: the students. The focus should be on the learner. The best way for students to learn is for teachers to find out what works best for the students and gauge the instructional methods based on that. Hence, Flesch (1981) further justifies this point when he stated that “the teaching of reading should be child-centered rather than method-centered” (p. 85).

It is not necessary to choose one approach to teaching reading. According to the International Reading Association (1999), “There is no single method or combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read. Therefore, teachers must have a strong knowledge of multiple methods for teaching reading and a strong knowledge of the children in their care so they can create the appropriate balance of methods needed for the children they teach (p. 2).”

As outlined by Bond and Dykstra (1967), “children learn to read by a variety of methods; no one approach is so distinctively better in all situations and respects than the others that it should be considered the one best method and the one to be used exclusively” (p. 123). This claim is elaborated by the International Reading Association (2000) when it asserts that “excellent reading teachers include a variety of reading materials in their classrooms; sometimes they rely on several reading series as the anchor of their reading program, but they also have supplemental materials and rich classroom libraries and are aware of the reading abilities and interests of the children” (p. 3).

What every literacy classrooms hopes to achieve are life-long learners; students who have a love of reading and writing and continue to want to learn. Teachers need to maintain that same desire. Staying abreast to current instructional methods and understanding the needs of the students to which they teach should be the two goals of every effective reading teacher.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS AND MATERIALS

Design and Methodology

The philosophical basis for the research design in this qualitative study is one of an ethnographic, case study. Qualitative research uses a “naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena by producing findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Patton, 2002, p. 39; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17). Unlike quantitative researchers who seek causal determination, prediction, and generalization of findings, qualitative researchers seek instead illumination, understanding, and extrapolation to similar settings (Hoepfl, 1997). As expressed by Miles and Huberman (1984):

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 flows, assesses 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).

Ethnography is an account of the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a particular cultural group (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Spradley (1979) asserts that the central aim of ethnography is to comprehend another life from the “native point of view.” Rather than *studying people*, ethnography means *learning from people*; seeing the group from an “insider’s view.” A holistic cultural portrait is painted as views of both the participants (emic) and the researcher (etic) are incorporated (Creswell, 2007). In this way, the reader learns about the group from both the participants and the interpretations of the researcher. Such is the reason for choosing this approach for this study; to be able to understand teachers’ perspectives and feelings toward the effectiveness of the reading programs utilized at their schools.

The process of ethnography involves extended observations of the group, most often through participant observation, in which the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people and observes and interviews the group participants. Ethnography yields empirical data about the actions and events of people in specific situations to which we seek to learn. It is through these social interactions between the researcher and the group that the “meaning of the culture” is derived (Spradley, 1980). Hence, this “culture” is learned, revised, maintained, and defined in the context of people interacting. For the purpose of this study, the researcher assumed a passive participant role where he was present at the settings but did not participate or interact to any great extent.

The entire culture-sharing group in ethnography may be considered a case, but the intent in ethnography is to determine how a culture works rather than to understand an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration. Thus, case study research involves “the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e. a setting, a context)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). The essence of a case study is that it tries to “illuminate a *decision* or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (Schramm, 1971).

Case studies allow for a more thorough understanding of a phenomenon of a particular culture or group because the researcher is able to become a part of the real-life context to which he is studying. Through case study research, the investigator explores a bounded system (a case or cases) over time, collects multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports) and reports a case description and case-based themes. This study was bounded to an eight- to ten- week period and is considered a *multi-site*, or *multi-case* study since the focus was on two sites.

It is important for the researcher to fully immerse in the context of the classrooms. This immersion is needed to allow for a more thorough understanding of the reading programs at the chosen schools. Patton (1985) provides insight into the philosophical basis of qualitative research when he contended that it is necessary to understand situations as part of a particular context and the interactions within the context. Yin (2003) elaborates that “you would use case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions – believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study” (p. 13). By just interviewing the teachers without classroom observations would not warrant the same desired results for the basis of this study. Creswell (2007) further contends that qualitative research is a form of inquiry whereby the researcher makes an interpretation of what he sees, hears, and understands. It is through these qualitative research perspectives which this study sought to illuminate through a deeper understanding and perceptions of reading practices.

Framework

James Spradley (1980), renown anthropologist, surmises that the “best way to learn to do ethnography is by doing it” (p. 38). Utilizing this premise was the basis upon which the method of analysis in this study was followed. Spradley’s approach, entitled the Developmental Research Sequence (D.R.S.) Method outlines a participant observation methodology where the researcher shares in the activities of the subjects being studied. The steps of the D.R.S. Method that was used throughout the course of the research are described below.

Social Situation

The social situation is the nature of the ethnographic research. This study was conducted in two elementary school settings that are both Title 1 classification. The focus was on four 1st-grade teachers; two from each of the above-referenced schools. Whispering Forest Elementary

uses a Basal reading program as its primary choice for reading instruction and Pine Grove Elementary employs a Balanced Literacy approach. This study was designed to compare and contrast the two approaches so the activities noted were daily observations of classroom whole-class instruction, guided reading groups, center time, intervention assessments, and teacher reflections of lessons via interviews. It was the goal to capture the teachers' true feelings and viewpoints regarding the use of the reading program in each of their schools and specifically how it affected their instructional practices. As noted by Spradley (1980), the setting is defined by a "single social situation" which involves numerous activities that fall under the general event of reading programs impacting instruction. The single social situation ensured the simplicity of the study, which focused on the impact each reading program had on the students. Due to the interest of time, the involvement of a single social situation also significantly narrowed the scope of the study which spanned over an eight- to ten- week period.

The purpose of this study was to obtain an understanding of teachers' perceptions of the reading programs they are using and how it impacted instruction in their classrooms. In doing this, it was important to become "part of the culture" of the classroom by remaining as unobtrusive in the environmental setting as possible. To accomplish this, the researcher assumed a low profile during classroom observation visits by sitting at a back table set apart from the regular grouping of the class. This kept the focus on the front of the room and allowed both the teachers and students to maintain a sense of normalcy to proceed with the day's lessons without distractions and thwarted against the possibility of the "observer effect". This is when the students and/or teachers act differently in the presence of the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

One reason in choosing elementary schools as the social situation for the study was the importance of being granted unlimited access. Unlimited access provided the researcher numerous opportunities to participate within and among the classrooms and students. Spradley (1980) asserts that this research situation as a “limited entry that requires permission from one or more persons before conducting the research” (p. 49). Schools chosen for this study were purposely selected out of convenience. Permission was acquired by both principals of the cooperating schools and all four teachers involved in the study as well as from the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participant Observation

During field visits, the researcher had a dual purpose: for classroom observations, the researcher assumed a passive participant role so that the focal point remained on the students, teachers, and classroom environment which allowed a broader spectrum of information to be acquired; when interviewing the teachers, the role of the researcher was somewhat more engaged and active as the perspectives and feelings of the teachers were the primary objective. This experience also warranted a simultaneous insider/outsider position of the researcher in order to gain knowledge of both vantage points.

Ethnographic Record

Spradley (1980) pointed out that “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 a society’ including, of course, informants’ responses to the ethnographer, his queries, tests and apparatus” (p. 63). For this study, the ethnographic record mainly consisted of the written field notes. The language recorded during interviews was *concrete language*, which was focused

on specific details of each situation as much as possible. An audio tape recorder was also used to capture the concrete language of the teachers to ensure their words were written verbatim.

Notes taken during classroom observations were a condensed account of the actual happenings. The intent was to record key words and phrases without being mindful to transcribing an exact account of the observation. A more expanded version of each visit outlining specific details was written at a later time away from the setting of the classroom. This technique allowed the researcher to remain focused on the actual task at hand: observing the interactions of the classroom.

In addition to field notes, a fieldwork journal was also kept. This allowed the researcher to record experiences, ideas, feelings, and problems that arose and/or developed throughout this study. It was the intended goal of the researcher to use the fieldwork journal as a means of taking into account any personal biases and feelings that may have arisen in order to understand their influences on the research.

Descriptive Observation

The basic unit of inquiry of this study was the question-observation method. The questions that emerged/developed stemmed from the following nine dimensions, as outlined by Spradley (1980):

Space (the physical place or places); *actor* (the people involved); *activity* (a set of related acts people do); *object* (the physical things that are present); *act* (single actions that people do); *event* (a set of related activities that people carry out); *time* (the sequencing that takes place over time); *goal* (the things people are trying to accomplish); *feeling* (the emotions felt and expressed)" (p. 78).

The dimensions served as a guide for the researcher in asking questions during the grand tour and mini-tour observations and provided a more explicit scope of detailed descriptive

observations. They also served to help thoroughly depict the descriptions of the classroom environments.

Ethnographic (Domain) Analysis

Analysis of any kind is a way of thinking, of examining something to determine its parts, the relationship among parts, and their relationship to the whole (Spradley, 1980). The ethnographic analysis is a method by which the researcher sorted through the field notes and observations to look for patterns between and among the classrooms. It was during this stage that the researcher began to look for categories, or domains, among the field notes.

Social situation refers to the behaviors (activities) exhibited by the people (actors) in a particular location (place). In this case, the classroom interactions of the students and the teachers in each classroom defined the social situation. Culture is referring to the patterns of behaviors among artifacts, behaviors, and knowledge obtained. According to Spradley (1980), culture cannot be observed directly. Rather, as observers culture is learned by making inferences. Making inferences, therefore, involves reasoning from evidence (what we perceive) or from premises (what we assume). Much of the cultural knowledge is communicated by language and making inferences is done with ease. However, a lot of culture consists of *tacit knowledge* (information that one cannot talk about or express in direct ways). As an outsider, the researcher participated, observed, and asked questions to discover the cultural meanings known to the insiders. It was the hope of the researcher to acquire the teachers' true opinions regarding the chosen method of reading instruction at their schools.

Focused Observations

Once patterns begin to emerge among the field notes, a focus must then be established to narrow the scope of the observations for the researcher. A focus pertains to a "single cultural

domain or a few related domains and the relationship of such domains to the rest of the cultural scene” (Spradley, 1980). A focus, or targeted areas, allows for more in-depth observations while still attempting to gain understanding of the cultural scene as a whole.

Structural questions were developed from the initial analysis of the field notes. These became the guide for the focused observations into more targeted areas which allowed the researcher to remain cognizant of the purpose of this study: to find out the impact basal readers and balanced literacy had on classroom instruction. It was during the focused observations that the structural questions were posed to the teachers.

Taxonomic Analysis

After establishing the domains, or patterns, from which the focused observations will stem, cultural meaning will also begin to arise. A taxonomic analysis was conducted in order for relationships among the domains to be revealed. This entailed looking through the field notes and observations to compare and contrast the classrooms and teachers. Even though four different classrooms were observed, some similarities among them were expected, especially between the two basal approach classes and the two balanced literacy ones.

The taxonomic analysis involved the domains that were used within each classroom to constitute the beliefs and perceptions of each teacher. The analysis allowed the researcher to form subsets from the main categories in order to further deepen the study.

Spradley (1980) claims that “taxonomy, then differs in one respect: it shows the relationship among all the included terms in the domain. Taxonomy reveals subsets and the way they are related to the whole” (p. 113).

Selected Observations

Selective observations represent the smallest focus of the study. They involve going to the social situation (the classrooms) and *looking for differences among the specific cultural categories* and using the interview process to *discover the cultural meanings people have learned* (Spradley, 1980). Descriptive, structural, and contrast questions were developed for both formal and informal interview settings. Informal interviews arose as a result of questions asked during the course of a participant observation. For this study, these questions developed in casual conversations between the researcher and participants during classroom visits and were sometimes planned and sometimes not pre-determined. Formal interviews, in contrast, usually occur at an appointed time from a specific request to hold the interview. This study followed the same guidelines and scheduled formal “sit down” interviews at a designated time that was convenient for all involved parties.

Another type of questioning that was utilized during selected observations, were *dyadic contrast questions*. A dyadic contrast question involves the contrasting between two members of the same domain and asking; “In what ways are these two things different?” is an example of a *dyadic contrast question*. These types of questions led to the discovery of new data. The dyadic contrast question process also became useful when the researcher compared the interview process with teaching interactions in the classroom.

Componential Analysis

“Componential analysis is the systematic search for the attributes (components of meaning) associated with cultural categories” (Spradley, 1980, p. 131). The process consists of searching for contrasts, sorting them out, grouping them together, and entering the information onto a chart known as a paradigm, which systematically outlines each category.

Cultural Themes

Part of the ethnographer's challenge is to understand that research simultaneously proceeds on two levels: examining small details of a culture and noting the broader features of the cultural landscape. The concept of theme has its roots in the general idea that cultures are more than bits and pieces of custom. Rather, it consists of a system of meaning that is integrated into some kind of larger pattern. Spradley (1980) defines cultural theme as "any principle recurrent in a number of domains, tacit or explicit, and serving as a relationship among subsystems of cultural meanings" (p. 141). Cultural themes are patterns within a culture that are assertions based on "what people know." They apply to numerous situations, recur in two or more domains, and connect different subsystems of a culture. Spradley also contends that by "listening to informants hour on end, by participating in the cultural scene, and by allowing one's mental life to be taken over by the new culture, themes often emerge" (p. 145). The researcher hoped to discover cultural themes through immersion into the four chosen classrooms and through writing an ethnographic description of the scenes. New insights and ideas did emerge which warrants the need for further research to fill in the gaps in the data and test new hypotheses about cultural themes.

Cultural Inventory

A cultural inventory is the last step of the Developmental Research Sequence Method. This is a process where the researcher organized all field notes, audio tapes, sketch maps, the fieldwork journal, and any other miscellaneous data that was collected. By taking the time to review all acquired notes, possible gaps in the research will be discovered that can be filled. This was also an opportunity for the researcher to develop an outline which was be used in the later sections of the study.

Participant Sampling

The intent in a qualitative study is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2005). To best achieve this, a researcher purposefully or intentionally selects the individuals and sites that will participate in a study. The participants are chosen because they can best help the researcher to understanding the central phenomenon. This understanding emerges as the researcher engages as a participant observer at the sites.

For the purpose of this exploration, participants and sites were chosen employing a purposeful sampling technique. The researcher has intentionally chosen the schools and teachers based upon their known use of the reading programs being studied.

Biases

Qualitative researchers have faced the impending challenge of allowing their own prejudices and attitudes to bias the data. Researchers, as well as participants, bring to studies biases, beliefs, and assumptions. The worry of subjectivity arises, especially since the data must “go through” the researcher’s mind before it is put on paper (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). A question to consider is, “Does the observer record only what he or she wants to see rather than what is actually happening?”

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) offer suggestions to the researcher to aid in trying to remain objective during the study process. First, realize that “qualitative studies are not impressionistic essays made after a quick visit to a setting or after some conversations with a few subjects” (p. 37). Instead, a researcher spends a considerable amount of time in the empirical setting collecting and reviewing lots of detailed data that must he or she must then interpret. This poses a constant challenge to any opinions or prejudices that may develop within the ethnographer. Second,

understand that the researcher's primary goal is to add to knowledge, not pass judgment or take personal stances on a setting. The worth of a study is the "degree to which it generates theory, description, or understanding" (p. 38). The aim of this study was to not bring forth negative implications toward any one particular reading program, but instead to recognize critical issues and experiences that will emerge. The final suggestion offered by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) to thwart against bias is to record thorough field notes that include subjective reflections. Strauss and Corbin (1998) profess that it is not possible to be completely free of bias. However, in order to give participants of a study a proper "voice," a researcher must be able to examine the data from a *somewhat* objective standpoint.

Trustworthiness

The concept of trustworthiness, also described as validity, rigor, quality, or authenticity, is "a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects" (Winter, 2000, p. 1). Creswell (2007) maintains that "validation" in qualitative research is an attempt to "assess the accuracy of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants" (pp. 206-207). He also contends that trustworthiness, or validation, in qualitative research is a strength and the extensive time spent in the field and the detailed field notes acquired add to the value or accuracy of the study.

To ensure trustworthiness in a naturalistic setting, the following techniques, as suggested by Creswell (2007), will be adhered to:

- Prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field – this includes building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking for possible misinformation. In the field, the researcher makes decisions regarding what is relevant to the purpose of the study. Fetterman (1998) contends that "working with people day in and day

out, for long periods of time, is what gives ethnographic research its validation and vitality” (p. 46).

- Triangulation – this is the process of obtaining evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research (Creswell, 2005). The researcher examines each information source to find evidence to support a theme. Creswell (2005) further contends triangulation “ensures that the study will be accurate because the information draws on multiple sources of information, individuals, or processes” (p. 252).
- Clarifying researcher bias – this is done at the outset of the study so that the reader understands the researcher’s position and any biases or assumptions that may impact or shape the inquiry (Merriam, 1988).
- Rich, thick description – this allows the reader to make decisions regarding transferability. In a naturalistic paradigm, the researcher cannot specify the transferability of findings; he or she can only provide sufficient information that can then be used by the reader to determine whether the findings are applicable to other settings because of “shared characteristics” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 32).

Summary

Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their classic text *Discovery of Grounded Theory*, describe what they believe to be the essential goal of qualitative research: the generation of theory, rather than theory testing or mere description. Johnson (1995) suggests that qualitative research methodology can be a significant tool for enhancing our understanding of teaching and learning. It provides a sense of vision and the techniques and procedures furnish the means for bringing

that vision into reality (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The value of this research design lies in its ability not only to generate theory but also to ground that theory in data.

The importance of this study was to provide the reader with collected data and research in order to discover the impact certain reading programs have on instruction in first-grade classrooms. It was intended to contribute to the knowledge of best practices in reading education by bringing awareness and insight to the cooperating school districts and teachers which may, in turn, facilitate reform.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings for this study were obtained through teacher and principal interviews, field notes from classroom observations, and scores from the current school year of the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) measures. Observations of the four teacher participants were conducted in the classrooms' natural settings during the reading instructional block. The principal interviews were conducted via email correspondence and in the offices of the principals' schools. Teacher interviews were held in the classrooms during each teacher's planning period. The results provided insight as to the focus of this inquiry.

Pine Grove Elementary Principal Interview

Background/Education

Anne Edwards, principal of Pine Grove Elementary, has been in education for 13 years; the past seven, as an administrator. Her motto is simple: Expect the Best. Ms. Edwards says that parents and students can expect the best from the dedicated teachers at the school while teachers can expect the best from students and can expect the parents to support the learning of their children. As the administrator, she expects the best from teachers and parents while she supports the collaborative efforts to support the students. Ms. Edwards also expects the best from the district who she believes their main business to be teaching and learning, and states that her greatest reward as an administrator "would have to be seeing the students and teachers grow as learners. I get extremely excited when I see the progress the students are making and when they want to share what they have written or read with me. I also get excited when I see teachers trying out the suggestions I gave them in their classrooms."

Ms. Edwards expressed that she "expects the best" from her teachers. When prompted to elaborate more on what she means by this, Ms. Edwards professed that she expects her teachers to always give 100% to her students, every day. In her estimation, there are no "bad days." Ms.

Edwards claims that her teachers have to always be mentally prepared to face the challenge that each day brings and to not let anything else interfere with that.

Instructional Philosophy

Ms. Edwards expressed that she motivates students to learn by “showing students that you care about them and want them to succeed; they will try because of this.” To motivate her teachers, Ms. Edwards acknowledged that she “listens to them and their ideas and respects them as professionals.”

To Ms. Edwards, effective literacy teachers are ones that know their kids; they know their levels and where to take them. According to Ms. Edwards, these teachers know the students’ problems and address them. In her estimation, the biggest thing for teachers is really learning the kids.

Reading Instruction

Employing a balanced literacy approach, not only across the district, but in her school, really allows the teachers to teach the students in more meaningful ways with better resources, as claimed by Anne Edwards. She further expressed, that with this approach, the students are more engaged and have a love of reading.

Ms. Edwards expressed that, to her, the reading/literacy skills most important to children are being “able to comprehend, use context clues, infer, use informational resources, and visualize.”

Assessment

Several factors are important when observing a reading lesson. Ms. Edwards postulated what is significant to her “I am looking to see if the teacher is using engaging texts, teaching the students strategies to use while they independently read, and also is conferencing with the

students to see how well they are using the strategies. I want the students to be engaged and also to have sacred independent reading time.”

To evaluate her own leadership performance, Ms. Edwards “looks at how well the students are doing academically because this is an indication of how well the teachers are responding to me and my expectations.”

Other

Ms. Edwards was also asked about the impact becoming Nationally Board Certified had on Ms. Adams as a teacher. Her response was that she is more reflective and is always examining what she needs to do. She claimed that Ms. Adams always questions everything. Ms. Edwards elaborated by saying that if a child in Ms. Adams’ class doesn’t get something, Ms. Adams will ask, “What do I need to do?” Ms. Edwards said she doesn’t ever say “what about the child” or “what about the parents”; she looks at herself in trying to resolve the issues with the child.

According to Ms. Edwards, the “expect the best” motto is held throughout the school in their monthly events that are sponsored by various clubs and grade levels. Ms. Edwards was eager when asked to elaborate on the activities specifically geared toward reading and/or literacy. The events she mentioned from the previous month included a Reading Prime Time and Family Literacy Night. Reading Prime Time consisted of second- and third- grade students and their parents attending an evening program filled with reading activities. Students also brought sleeping bags to this event! The Family Literacy Night targeted the Kindergarten and first- grade children with reading activities centered on particular themes. This year’s book themes were “Mother Goose on the Loose” for Kindergarten and “We’re Hooked on Books” for first grade.

Ms. Edwards further elaborated that the school librarian also has a monthly reading incentive program in the library. Classes and individual students reading the most number of books for each particular month receive certificates and prizes. This, Ms. Edwards attests, is to encourage all of the children to read.

A final question asked to Ms. Edwards was regarding the allocation of monies from being a Title I school; specifically, whether any of it was allotted to literacy. Ms. Edwards responded that this was Pine Grove Elementary's first year to be given the Title I funding and with the extra money an additional Reading Recovery teacher was added to the faculty and a family center was enacted. The family center is a place where pre-school aged children and their parents come for play groups and literacy activities.

Reading Recovery Teacher Interview

Claire Stephens has been a teacher for 24 years; the past 16 as the role of a Reading Recovery teacher. Reading Recovery is a short-term intervention of one-to-one tutoring for low-achieving first graders (http://www.readingrecovery.org/reading_recovery/facts/index.asp). Ms. Stephens holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education and has received Reading Recovery training by the district.

In her Reading Recovery class, Ms. Stephens works with four first-grade students for 30 minutes a day per child. Because she works with the at-risk (reading below-level) students, Ms. Stephens emphasized that her main goal is to try to bring them up to the average level. Some of the components of the 30 minute lesson include: familiar re-reading, running records (taken on a new book read from the previous lesson), letter and word work (with magnetic letters on a white board), writing, and reading a new book.

Ms. Stephens also pulls targeted first- and second- graders for literacy groups. These children have been identified by the teachers (through a series of Directed Reading Activities, phonemic awareness tests, looking through cumulative folders, and talking with Kindergarten teachers) and receive focused lessons with a small group of students five times per week for 30 minutes a day. Ms. Stephens expressed that some of her instruction is on teaching reading strategies and comprehension skills. She further attested that children at these ages are often so focused on decoding unknown words they encounter, that meaning is often lost. A writing component, which consists of activities correlated to stories that are read, is also included.

Ms. Stephens believes that effective reading teachers are those that use a variety of approaches such as phonics, using meaning, story sense to problem solve. She also says that effective teachers give their students many opportunities to practice the strategies on a level appropriate to them. According to Ms. Stephens, wherever students' levels are, effective reading teachers know how to build on that knowledge and scaffold them so that they can reach their full potential.

Olivia Adams Teacher Interview

Background/Education

Ms. Adams holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education and has been teaching for 10 years. In 2009, she received recognition for becoming a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT). Ms. Adams decided to become a teacher because she wanted to make a difference in children's lives. Her original intention was to become a social worker, but there were too many things about that line of work that she did not agree with. Remembering several teachers from her high school days and the impact they had on her life caused her to want to give that back to students.

The biggest reward as a teacher for Ms. Adams is just being with the kids every day. She says that every day is a new day and you never know what to expect except to expect the unexpected. Another reward noted by Ms. Adams is getting to see where the individual students grow, change, and blossom into things that they never thought was possible. She also adds that it is amazing to see the change in the kids from August to May. A challenge to teaching for Ms. Adams is reaching each and every student. She contends that it is hard to meet the needs of everyone both high and low and to really see the growth in all of them. In addition, Ms. Adams states that all of her students do indeed grow, but she sometimes wonders if there was more she could do.

Instructional Philosophy

To Ms. Adams, an effective reading teacher needs to be flexible and observant. She communicated:

I know that I watch and take notes on every little thing that I notice with my students. I need to see what the students' needs are and figure out how to fit them into the lessons or guided reading groups daily. I change reading groups often based on reading ability and also comprehension strategies. The students meet with me on things that they really need, not what they already know. A reading teacher needs to teach a variety of skills and strategies to be effective as well. In reading, we have to teach learn-to-read strategies because students don't know what to do to help themselves as readers or how to self monitor themselves when reading. At the same time, though, the students need to learn and be taught what to do with the information that they are reading – comprehension strategies. I am a strong believer that these need to be taught hand-in-hand so that the students are comprehending things read and are able to talk or explain his or her thinking about their reading. I also think an effective teacher listens to her students. When a student shares thinking about a story, I tell them if I never thought of it that way and I probe to understand their thinking. When teaching reading, I have come to understand that not all things are black and white. Students think outside-of the-box at times and they surprise you when you give them the chance to think and speak. I think an effective reading teacher gives her students time to practice reading in meaningful contexts. We have a 20-30 minute independent reading time daily in which the students read books chosen from our own class libraries. This allows the students to practice what we are learning and respond to books that are meaningful to them. Now, effective teachers also teach students that may not like everything that they read, but sometimes you just have to

read it. I also think there is time for guided reading and independent conferencing as needed to be an effective teacher.

Ms. Adams differentiates her students by the reading groups. She elaborated by saying that the groups are either based on reading levels or the needs of the students in regard to a particular comprehension strategy. She also stated that she meets with her students one-on-one for conferencing and when needed, offers individual interventions with students on focus areas.

Parents are a vital part of Ms. Adams' classroom. One activity that is sent home consists of a weekly reading book with a log sheet. Parents are given a skill (i.e., inferring characters' feelings) to work on that corresponds to the particular book being sent home and the log sheet is provided to write comments regarding who read with the child, how successful was the skill activity, etcetera.

Reading Instruction

A typical reading class in Ms. Adams class starts with the students joining her on the carpet. Ms. Adams elaborated by stating:

We use the Gradual Release of Responsibility in which I explicitly teach the students a given skill or strategy and then we work in a shared setting. This is where the students turn and talk often to share their thinking and help to work through things. Then once the students move through shared, we go to guided practice where the students have-at-it and I still facilitate. Then they move to independent work. Students can move in and out of these phases of the gradual release with me providing more or less support as needed. We use lots of trade books to teach the skills and strategies. We also use the basal every now and then when the occasion allows. After the lesson, the students go into Happy Reading/independent reading. This is when I meet with small groups or one-on-one in a conference. The students are reading books chosen by them and responding to the literature that they have picked. I also have two students working on Lexia, which is a program provided by the district.

When asked how balanced literacy impacts instruction, Ms. Adams responded:

My instruction is impacted by balanced literacy because I have the flexibility to read enriching and engaging literature that the students can enjoy and think about. I am not strapped down to a basal. I can use the basal for activities that my students may need or pull from the basal stories that we can read as a class. I like using rich literature that fits

with the strategies that I am teaching. I can make the literature fit into my curriculum, not the curriculum fit into the basal that I have to follow. My students are allowed to enjoy literature and play with it. They are encouraged to challenge each other's thinking as long as there is proof. I think balanced literacy also leads to differentiation. My students don't all have to read the same stories at the same time and proceed with the same skills. Some basal programs are very basic and easy with little content or meaning in the text. Literature that I pull allows the students to enjoy, respond, and learn from not only me, but others in the class.

Ms. Adams finds that the biggest struggle for first graders is that they "always want to be right." She continued with, "In some instances, there's no right or wrong answers; as long as you can explain the clues that come from the book. Some students think there's a right answer the teacher is looking for." Another issue mentioned by Ms. Adams is vocabulary. "Kids can read them, but they don't know what it is," commented Ms. Adams in regards to students' vocabulary comprehension.

Free choice in book selection is a favorable component in Ms. Adams' classroom. There is a daily independent reading time in which students are allowed to choose their own books to read. Ms. Adams holds a strong opinion about supplying a purpose for reading. She feels it depends on the child and that some students need a purpose established before they read and others do not. She further postulated:

Some of these kids never get the chance to read independently. So, I feel if you give them a purpose every single day, they get beat down with the fact that I just can't read. And I think I do a really good job when I introduce different strategies that the whole purpose is to ultimately understand what you're reading. So I think by the way I teach it, when they're off on their own, they already know the purpose; it's there, it's in them already.

Comprehension is the focus in Ms. Adams' classroom. She highlighted that in order to teach comprehension strategies in her classroom, she models everything she wants her students to do. She extended this by stating, "I model exactly what to do and I think-aloud and practice the strategies. I model each of them separately and then we start to bring them together as the

year progresses. We spend a lot of time just on thinking through it on our own, then we work with kids together, then they try it with a buddy.”

Ms. Adams shared that learning-to-read strategies are the most important skills students in first grade need to possess. Ms. Adams elaborated on this by stating that students need “strategies in place other than sounding it out to be able to read and comprehend stories.” Another ability imperative for early readers is word work. Ms. Adams says that students “have to understand words and how they’re made and how they go together because if you don’t understand that, you cannot read at a higher level. The words start to get more difficult.” Ms. Adams also feels that comprehension strategies and learn-to-read strategies need to be taught together “so that there is a balance. The kids should not just learn how to read; they need to learn why they’re learning to read because they have to understand the text.”

Classroom Management

Pine Grove Elementary, along with the entire River City School District, follows the Responsive Classroom approach. The Responsive Classroom approach is a way of teaching that emphasizes social, emotional, and academic growth in a strong and safe school community. It focuses on the belief that a child’s social curriculum is as important as the academic one (www.responsiveclassroom.org). Ms. Adams further asserts that setting up routines and having structure so that the students know what to expect is an important aspect of classroom management. Sometimes, if a discipline problem does arise, Ms. Adams first gives “the look” or she will re-direct the student. Ms. Adams described a “control spot” located in the back of her room where students are sent if there is an issue happening during instruction time. While there, students are supposed to “get in control and then they can re-join the group.” Ms. Adams does admit that the control spot has to be a serious situation, “I usually talk to the kid.” To set up her

classroom guidelines, Ms. Adams commented, “At the beginning of the year there’s a lot of modeling that goes into routines and expectations. It’s a game. “Here we go everybody; Go crazy!” We practice. You think it’s funny, but the kids really enjoy it.”

Ms. Adams revealed how just the tone in a teacher’s voice can be an effective form of management. She elaborated with the following:

My kids know when I’m upset. Their eyes get big and they all just look down and it’s just one little change in your tone and they know. Sometimes it’s not even talking. We had a guest teacher a couple of weeks ago and all I had to do was sit in that chair and say, “Ms. Smith had to call me on Friday and she told me everything.” They all looked down and I told them to go write on a sticky note what choices you made that were bad and they all did because the truth shall set you free! I think it’s just the set-up.

For Ms. Adams, motivating her students to learn means showing them that learning can be fun. To elaborate, Ms. Adams acknowledged that:

It (learning) doesn’t have to be monotonous like the Charlie Brown teacher. I think that motivating comes from them learning that this is you. I tell them all the time that I’ve been in first grade and I know all of these things, but you have to show me what you know because if you don’t show it to me, then I don’t know what you know. And when you go to second grade, your teacher is not going to know. So, I think it’s one of those things that we’re just making them know; validate who they are. And tell them you need to be proud of who you are and you need to share what you know because no one is ever going to know who you are. So I think motivating comes from learning; getting them to be that intrinsic learner.

Ms. Adams also related that she praises her students a lot and believes regardless of how little the “victory” accomplished, a student deserves, and is given, verbal acknowledgement in the form of praise.

Assessment

Observations; parish assessments at the end of each theme; anecdotal notes; informal running records in small groups; formal running records at the end of each grading period are the main forms of assessment in Ms. Adams’ classroom. However, she emphasized that observations and anecdotal notes are used on a daily basis.

When evaluating her performance as a teacher, Ms. Adams stated the following:

It's not the kids' fault if they don't get it. What am I not doing that I need to do? So, I think it's a reflective process. We (referring to herself and Ms. Smith) talk all the time about what our kids are doing. If I don't know what else to do, we'll throw back ideas. But I think it's really truly looking at what you're doing compared to what your kids know. It's not their fault they're not getting it. I'm not doing something to get them there. So I need to figure it out. So, I think it's talking to colleagues and reading books.

Being a National Board Certified Teacher

Ms. Adams became a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) largely for the monetary incentive. When asked why she pursued NBCT and not a Master's degree, she admitted that the National Board process was a shorter time-frame than a higher degree. And her district provided a portion of the fees required to becoming a national board candidate.

Regarding the difference in her teaching practices after becoming a NBCT, Ms. Adams supplied:

I don't think that being a NBCT has changed anything about the way that I teach. I think that it has made me tune into the importance of meeting the needs of all students. I did this before, but after going through the process, I realize that little things can meet the needs of students – a change in wording, a short-answer response, and activities with different outcomes. I knew the importance of differentiation prior to NBCT, but I think the process made me more aware of other options and helped me to understand differentiation a little better. I am more reflective of myself and how things work or don't work in my room. I think about what I am comfortable teaching but also what and how my students learn best and I merge the two. Overall, though, I don't think that it has changed my teaching at all. It just made me more reflective of myself, my students, and ways that I teach.

Description of the Classroom and Students

Student desks in Ms. Adams' class are flat-top in style and are arranged in three sets of two rows. At each four-desk configuration, a colored (light blue, dark blue, or green) desk caddy sits which houses pencils, dry-erase markers, glue, scissors, sticky notes, individual-sized dry-erase boards, a "My Personal Dictionary" (one for each child) and a laminated card with math computation rules and reminders on it. There are a total of 24 student desks.

In front of the class is a large carpeted open area with a chart stand and rocking chair. To the right, sits a reading corner with a small-sized couch, bean bag chairs, bookshelves, pillows, and a small circle table with four individual chairs. In the front of the room to the left, is a four-shelf rolling cart with a computer on the top shelf. In the center wall of the class, is a SMART board screen.

Outlining three of the four walls are bookshelves with tubs, baskets, and containers of books; each one is labeled by genre with a large index card. Some of the categories of books include: Henry and Madge, Frog and Toad, sports, Clifford, Biscuit, holiday, seasons, American books, body parts, Jan Brett, fiction with real people, science, all about school, fake animal books, counting books. Two storage cabinets and a teacher's desk flank the wall adjacent to the reading corner. Next to the teacher's desk, is a small trapezoid-shaped table that has a dual purpose: first, it serves as an area for students to go to when in the writing process and second, it is also used when students would like to listen to a story on a compact disc (in the center of the table is a black tub with individual plastic bags containing headphones; there are audiobooks next to the tub).

Decorating the walls of Ms. Adams' classroom is a wide array of class-made charts. Some of her charts include: *During Happy Reading, I Am Reading and Thinking! Big and Bold Text; Bold the Important Words; We Are Learning Strategies That Readers Use To: Before Reading, What Do You Know About Spiders? What Do You Do When You Think You Are Finished Writing a Story? Ways to Publish; How Are our Rubrics the Same? First-Grade Writing Checklist.*

The classroom rules for Ms. Adams' classroom are located on the right front wall above the reading corner and read: *Take Care of Yourself; Take Care of Others; and Take Care of the*

Environment. Below the class rules is the following class pledge: *We will try our best so that our brains can grow to be the smartest in 1st-grade. By being good listeners and staying in control, I will help myself and my friends. If I make mistakes, it's okay! Try, try again. Let's work together to have a great year!* To the left of the pledge is another chart that explains the types of books students “shop” for on Fridays. This chart reads as follows:

Challenging Books:	Vacation Books:	Just-Right Books:
	What to look for?	
* hard words	* you know all the words	* you know most words
* can't use my strategies	* you already read it	* familiar book
* confusing		* can use strategies
	Why read them?	
* practice reading	* you like the story	* practice fluency
* learn from the pictures	* to practice fluency	* because you like it

Currently, there are 20 students in Ms. Adams' class. The ethnic orientations are as follows: 14 white students; five African-American students; and one Japanese-American student. Seven of the children receive free or reduced lunch in Ms. Adams' class. Reading levels range from above- grade level to on-grade level.

Hannah Smith Teacher Interview

Background/Education

Hannah Smith has been a first-grade teacher for the past eight years. Her highest certification is a Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education. Ms. Smith chose to become a teacher because she wanted the opportunity to make a difference in children's lives. Being able to see a child grow, the excitement in their eyes when they learn something new, and the ability to push them when they think they cannot do things is very rewarding to Ms. Smith. Another reward to Ms. Smith is when she is able to look at a student, regardless of his academic ability,

and see him using strategies and skills that she has taught him. A challenge Ms. Smith faces and continually works on improving is being able to meet the needs of all students while staying in the timelines set by the district. By this, she explains, that certain Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) need to be taught and mastered within a nine-week period.

Instructional Philosophy

Ms. Smith feels that an effective teacher is “one who understands the internal processes you do when reading (asking questions, making connections, re-reading, finding meaning) and being able to teach these processes to the students.” She also believes that an effective teacher is able to take students to a deeper level of thinking and that” no matter the subject is one who reflects on her practices and teaching and strives to make it better.”

In her classroom, one form of differentiation is seen in small group instruction. Her groups are based on “whatever their needs are; whether it’s their reading level or their strategies they need.” She shared a specific example of a grouping situation in her classroom, “Right now I still have a group that’s doing learning-to-read strategies. So, they’re very different than my level that’s doing inferencing and questioning.” Ms. Smith has daily conferences with students to discuss the book(s) they are reading. Sometimes, she admits, the book is not on an appropriate level for a particular student and she will help the child pick a new one. This, she voiced, is usually in conjunction with her lower-ability students. On the other hand, Ms. Smith advocated that conferencing with a higher-level child affords her the opportunity to see what kind of questions the student is asking about the book and how the book is helping him become a better reader. Another way differentiation is prevalent in Ms. Smith’s classroom is in the weekly “shopping” of books. Ms. Smith explained:

Every Friday, the kids pick five books out of our classroom library. They can pick three just right, one challenging, and one vacation. The only time I ever guide their choosing is

when they're not picking books to their needs. You have lower students that want to pick chapter books and all chapter books and they can't read those. So, then I'll guide them to keep one chapter book so that they can enjoy it and I'll help them pick books that are more on their level so that during Happy Reading time, they can read.

Parents are an integral part of Ms. Smith's classroom. At the beginning of the school year, Ms. Smith sent home a letter with *Ways to Talk About Books* and *Activities to Do With Books*. Some of the suggestions included making inferences, asking questions, making connections, taking turns reading pages, reading and leaving out certain words for the child to guess. So the guidelines are established and parents know each week when the weekly "take-home reader" is sent, how to work with their child at home. The take-home reader correlates to whatever book each student read during small group instruction or from Happy Reading and serves to reinforce the fluency and skill(s) instruction.

Reading Instruction

A reading lesson in Ms. Smith's class usually lasts 10-20 minutes. Ms. Smith articulated:

I typically only teach in one or two steps of the Gradual Release. Depending on the skill or strategy being taught I will do my explicit teaching and spend the majority of my teaching time on shared/collaborative or guided practice. The rest of the reading class students spend in Happy Reading. This is their independent daily reading time. I will use lots of text from the library or in my classroom library. I use Rigby PM Readers as well to meet the needs of the different levels of students during guided or independent reading. Depending on the skill or strategy, I may use the story from the basal reader if I need students to have the same text, or to have the text at home.

Ms. Smith described that the use of a balanced literacy program impacts her instruction "by allowing me to teach the skills or strategies that fit in several different types of text (fiction, non-fiction, poetry). Using a balanced literacy program gives the students daily time to read for enjoyment and practice the skills and strategies taught in books that are interesting to them."

Ms. Smith feels that one of the skills first-graders struggle with are the:

Learning-to-read strategies; they want to go to their default – sounding it out and looking at the picture. Parents know those strategies; they don't know all the other strategies. So

it's really hard to break kids of that habit. We have to spend a lot of time teaching the kids how to self-monitor and if it doesn't make sense, how to go back and do something else. So I think that's one of the biggest things our readers are struggling with; showing us what they're thinking about and making meaning of their stories while they read.

Ms. Smith confessed that sometimes setting a purpose for reading is needed, but most of the time, it is not. She elaborated on this by sharing that in her small group instruction time, if a particular strategy needs reinforcing (i.e., re-telling), then she will establish it as the purpose for reading a particular story. But during Happy Reading, as Ms. Smith explains, "The purpose is to read for enjoyment; to read to enjoy the story." Ms. Smith further expands on this concept in the area of non-fiction reading. As Ms. Smith noted:

A situation came up with kids reading non-fiction and I said, "What are you thinking today? Show me your thinking." And it was just facts that they had copied out of the book. So I happened to have read about this one particular football player a few weeks ago with another student so when I started asking him other questions about this football player (i.e., what college did he go to?), the little boy looked at me like deer in headlights because he was just literally copying two or three sentences out of the books to show me. He knew he had to have some kind of thinking to show me at the end of the week for reading. I had a discussion with him to tell him that you don't just have to jot down sentences. Maybe you want to know why he picked one college over the other; so, it doesn't have to be just facts if it's a non-fiction book. You can still ask questions. You can still make predictions while you're reading. I wonder if he was a good football player when he got drafted into the NFL, or I wonder why he only played three years in college and not four. So, I tried to show him that copying facts out of the book doesn't show me that you understand that story or what you're learning about. The student was just thrown back because he didn't think I knew about this football player.

Ms. Smith voiced how she also has students on the opposite end of the spectrum with this example, "The title of the book is *The Big, Brown Bear* and a child would ask the question, I wonder if the bear is big and brown?" Ms. Smith explained that often students have a hard time going beyond the "surface stuff."

Daily reading instruction in Ms. Smith's classroom follows the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model. The Gradual Release Model has four components: teacher demonstration;

guided practice; independent practice; and application (Reutzel & Cooter, 2005). Ms. Smith expanded on this notion:

We go through the whole gradual release with each component individually first. We teach asking questions and when it gets to the independent part, that's when it starts to get a little tricky because they may not be ready for independent practice on a particular day. It depends on the student, so that may be where small group comes in or individual conferencing. The asking questions skill might be posed there or a week or two later because they weren't ready or I might not make them do it all. I feel like I gauge the kids enough.

There are several technology components incorporated in Ms. Smith's reading class. iPods with books and making words activities are used during center time. Ms. Smith shared that her students use the computers in the classroom to access websites to play educational games; specifically Brain Pop and Brain Pop Jr. are two more frequently visited sites. Another computer program used district-wide is the Lexia Reading program. In favor of the program, Ms. Smith accentuated, "I have kids that are reversing b's and d's and they have games just on that so that helps me because I don't have to spend as much instructional time teaching that because Lexia does a really good job with that." Ms. Smith reflected that the use of the flex camera is integral in the beginning of the year. "We use it a lot at the beginning of the year when we're showing the learning-to-read strategies. We put the text under the flex cam with words covered up to where they have to look at the picture" described Ms. Smith.

When asked to tell what the most important reading skills students need to possess are, Ms. Smith revealed the learning-to-read strategies. And she felt that of those, the most important is self-monitoring. Ms. Smith elaborated by stating:

If the kids can do all of the other strategies but it's not making sense and they're not self monitoring, they can't self-correct. So, I think self-monitoring is the most important of the learning-to-read strategies. And I think that of the comprehension strategies, inferring is one of the biggest ones for kids to know because it goes with making new predictions. It's asking questions and being able to go back and answer those questions at a higher level. If the kids can make inferences, then I think they understand the story better. So, I

think the learning-to read strategies with self-monitoring being the top of those and then the comprehension strategies. These have to be taught side-by-side. Because we see too many kids coming in to first grade that can read any level text you give them, but they can't understand or comprehend anything. And they don't understand how to inference. They can read, read, read, but they can't stop and think about the story.

Classroom Management

Ms. Smith employs techniques conducive to the Responsive Classroom Approach. She stated that she gives a lot of non-verbal cues or makes eye contact with students as first options. Sometimes changing her voice inflection will be enough of a warning to cue students to get “back-to-business.” If the whole class is getting a little loud, Ms. Smith will use a clap signal. She admitted to trying the “raising one hand in the air” signal, but that resulted in her students responding back and not actually getting quiet. On the other hand, the clap signal alerts them to stop and look at Ms. Smith. Ms. Smith noted that before giving verbal directions to assignments, she waits until everyone is quiet and all attention is on her. Ms. Smith also utilizes the same “control spot” feature as described by Ms. Adams. However, Ms. Smith commented that the use of the control spot is a last resort, “If they've had reminders; they've gone to their desk where they're told to come back when you're ready to be a first-grader and you're ready to think like a first-grader and you're ready to act like a first-grader, then they'll go to the control spot.”

For extreme situations that arise in her classroom, described by Ms. Smith as a student “disturbing everyone else like if they're touching people or if they're making so much noise that no one else can concentrate,” she says she will send the child to Ms. Adams' room for a period of time. Upon entering Ms. Adams' room they receive “a look that is not the most pleasant because they need to know they are not coming here to play. Ms. Adams won't say anything typically; just give a look of almost like a disappointment that you had to come in here to get control.” Ms. Smith finished with sharing that if she ever sends a child out of her room, it is for

“something bad, and most of the time, I tell the kids, you cannot come back into this room until I can come talk to you about it.”

Parental communication regarding discipline and classroom management is utilized in Ms. Smith’s classroom by several means. Ms. Smith elaborated on one such measure, a daily communication sheet, by articulating:

We have a daily communication log that goes in their blue homework folder and it’s for every day of the week. At the bottom, there’s actually some number correspondence to things that are on the report card; that’s not all the report card indicators for behavior, but those are the ones we pull out. So basically if your child gets a number that day, that’s something they’ve had issues with. My parents know from Open House if I have to put a number down, it’s a serious action. Smiley faces indicate it’s a great day. We ask parents to initial it every day. And it’s also really easy to see at a glance what kind of day a child is having.

Ms. Smith also mentioned that she communicates to her parents via email or phone because she has found those two modes more accommodating for her parents that work outside of the home.

To motivate her students, Ms. Smith acknowledged that she shows her love for learning; showing her students ways to enjoy reading. She continued:

Like making mental images in reading – how fun that can be! And how fun poetry can be! I pull out my homework that I do for literacy and I will tell them, “Look, there’s sticky notes. Look at this book. Ms. Smith doesn’t like this book because it doesn’t have fun pictures and graphs and it has really teeny tiny print. But look at the thinking I had to do to understand it.” So showing them that I do the same things they do and showing them that the things I’m teaching them are life-long skills. On one part of the book, I put a big question mark and circled the whole paragraph and I said, “Boys and girls, what do you think about this? What do you think Ms. Smith was thinking?” And they were like “you didn’t know anything.” So I told them, “I didn’t, so I had to go back and re-read it and look, I took some notes.” So, I think it’s motivating to show them that it’s stuff that I do as an adult, not just because you’re in first grade.

But I also think the ways we present our lessons are very exciting for kids in first-grade. We try to do things that engage them from start-to-finish; there’s really not a lot of down time in my room.

Another way Ms. Smith feels motivation is used in her room is by not restricting her students to certain books based on reading levels. As she explained, “the levels don’t matter all that much. I’ve read chapter books, wordless books; we just taught fairy tales and fables and I used a wordless book (*The Lion and the Mouse*) and I told the kids how much I enjoyed the story because of the pictures – I got to make up my own story. So we use a variety of books so the kids are not stuck on this level, this level, this level. It can be anything that I want.”

Finally, Ms. Smith revealed her use of praise as a motivation tool with her students. She extended this thought and shared a story about one particular little boy:

I think we praise our kids when they do anything wonderful. Yes, no matter how little; my little boy who just made the connection that he has a *d* in his name and his name is *Adam*...and how he has the short /*a*/ because it’s a vowel. At this time of the year, he finally realized that. We made a huge deal out of it, just today, because we’re learning long /*a*/ and he told me he had a short /*a*/ in his name, so it’s not a long /*a*/ word (teacher got teary-eyed as she relayed this story). But we praised it and wrote it in our circle. But those are the things that I don’t think some teachers would even recognize. That is so important. He finally made that connection! “YAY, Adam! You’re right!” And we wrote his name on the board and we wrote the short *u* over the *a*. And Adam said, “And it’s *d*, not *b*.” He just went to his desk, smiling from ear-to-ear and he kept on writing all his long /*a*/ words. Maybe he’ll remember it tomorrow!

Assessment

Anecdotal notes are the main form of informal assessment used in Ms. Smith’s classroom. Others include conferencing, teacher-made quizzes, and independent practice. She also gives informal running records several times a year and a Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) at the end of each school year. Formal assessments are mandated by the district and consist of a reading assessment given six times throughout the school year. Students also take the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) measure three times a year.

To evaluate her teaching performance, Ms. Smith indicated that she and Ms. Adams talk a lot to each other to discuss how lessons went, specifically, “what was done differently than what was on the plan because we felt like it was a necessity at the time.” Ms. Smith further indicated, “It’s always our fault if they don’t get it. You have to be willing to say that what I did today didn’t work and being able to be ok with that. If something doesn’t work in my classroom, I usually go to Ms. Adams and ask her if her kids got it.”

Description of the Classroom and Students

Walking into Ms. Smith’s classroom, one immediately notices the walls. Large chart papers with various writings, sayings, student drawings, rules for math computations, and class goals affix all four of them. The charts are not commercially-made; rather they all have a teacher-written strategy on top and an individual response written on a sticky note by each child below. Examples include: *When We Understand and Remember the Story, We Can Retell Important Details; How Can I Show My Thinking When I Read? We Read Weather...Here Are Some Interesting Details; The Main Idea Is.*

Displayed on the front walls of the classroom are Ms. Smith’s classroom rules. They are: *Take Care of Yourself, Take Care of Others, and Take Care of the Environment.* Another chart announces the class pledge: *We Promise to Follow Our Classroom Rules. We Promise to Try Our Best in Everything We Do. We Will All Work Together To Make Sure We Have a Safe and Happy Classroom of Great Learners.* Below it, all of the children have signed their names acknowledging agreement.

To the right of the class pledge, the Working Rules chart reads: *Eyes On Your Work. Quiet Feet. Quiet Lips. Brains Thinking. Working Hands.* To the left of the pledge is the same *Challenging Books, Vacation Books, and Just-Right Books* chart that is in Ms. Adams’ class.

Directly below the types of book chart are the *Read and Relax* rules: *Sit Criss/Cross*; *Hands to Myself*; *Stay Still*; *Eyes on the Speaker*; *Lips Quiet*; *Brains Thinking and Working*; *Ears are Listening*.

Along the perimeter of each wall are bookshelves with tubs and baskets of books; each is labeled according to genre. Some include: monsters and dinosaurs, people fiction, songs, vacation, Dr. Seuss, books by Eric Carle, sports, bears, Non-fiction, water, animal fiction, plants, books by David Shannon, books by Jan Brett, weather.

In the front of the class is a SMART board screen and chart stand that sits directly in front of it. Next to the chart stand, there is one computer sitting on top of a rolling four-shelf cart. Also in the front of the classroom is a large open area that is carpeted. Individual flat-top desks are arranged in groups of twos on each side of the open area to form two rows. There are a total of 20 student desks. Toward the center of each 4-desk configuration sits a desk caddy for pencils, scissors, glue, sticky notes, and highlighters.

In back of the open area, is a large-sized circle table with six chairs surrounding it. In the back corner of the room, opposite to where the SMART board screen is, sits a small teacher's desk with a filing cabinet to its left. Drawers under the teacher's desk house markers, sticky note paper of various sizes, blank flashcards, crayons, stickers, loose-leaf paper, and blank sentence strips that are readily available and easily accessible for students to use.

There are 20 students in Ms. Smith's first-grade classroom. Ethnic orientations of the students are: ten Native American students; nine African-American students; and one Indian student. The class also consists of two students with special needs and three students with 504 accommodations. Eight of the children receive free or reduced lunch.

Classroom Observation of Pine Grove Elementary

The school-wide reading instructional program utilized at Pine Grove Elementary is that of a balanced literacy approach. An outline of a day's lesson includes a whole-class instruction time on the carpet where a skill or strategy is discussed in a shared setting; guided practice follows with the students (usually in groups) using trade books to reinforce the skills; independent practice is next while the teacher facilitates and helps when needed proceeded by independent reading time/guided reading groups (referred to as Happy Reading). Teachers use trade books and chart paper to teach lessons. Students reinforce the skills by independently reading books on their levels each day. Although a basal series has been purchased by the district, both Ms. Adams and Ms. Smith admit to only using the stories for a "take-home" fluency practice. Both teachers also make use of the leveled readers that are an additional resource of the reading series. The observation is that of a general overview of a typical lesson for both classrooms.

It is 9:00 a.m. and Reading is about to begin. All of the students are seated Indian-style in a circle in front of the room. The atmosphere in the room is lively as both children and teacher are singing the following vowel rhyming song and clapping their hands: "Down by the riverside, a hanky panky, where the bullfrogs jumped from bank to bank – I said a, e, i, o, u, bam, boo!" The song proceeds for approximately three minutes and then the children are directed to turn and face the chart stand that is positioned near the SMART board screen. Written on the first page is the day's morning message: Today is Friday, January 27, 2012. Today we will read Big Smelly Bear and discuss plot and the Big Idea. In Social Studies, we will finish our reports. Let's have a great day. Below the message is another line that reads: Write a spelling word. The day's objectives are briefly discussed with the students before the lesson begins.

The whole-class instruction starts with the children seated in front of the room for a carpet-area discussion. The teacher focuses the students to the chart stand where this particular day's chart paper is displayed. The skill for this lesson is problem and solution in stories. On the chart paper are three shapes that are drawn vertically. There is a triangle with a C, S, and P on top; a rectangle with the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 written in the middle of each of the corners; and an oval with the word SOLUTION written across the bottom. Even though this is the “teacher-led” part of the Gradual Release model, the children are actively engaged and focused. Each shape is explained: C inside of the triangle is for the characters, the S is for the setting, and the P is for the problem; the numbers in the rectangle constitute the details from the story; and the SOLUTION is the solution learned. The eliciting of higher-order thinking questions (i.e., What does it mean? What do you think? Tell me more? Where's the proof? How do you think...? Why do you think...? Did you infer...?) are asked throughout the lesson with opportunities for the children to discuss between and amongst themselves in a “turn and talk” style forum. Lots of positive verbal praise and recognition is also used (i.e., kiss your brain).

A read-aloud of the chosen book for the day is next with the teacher modeling proper fluency techniques while reading and stopping frequently to ask comprehension and higher-order thinking questions. For this lesson on problem and solution, the book chosen was *Three Billy Goats Gruff*. After listening to the story, students are once again directed to the chart paper. It is now time to discuss the day's skill – problem and solution. As a group, they went over the triangle part of the chart paper – the characters, the problem, and the setting – and the oval part of the chart paper – the solution of the story.

Guided practice follows the read-aloud, or carpet-area instruction, and is in the form of students working in pairs or groups of three or four. It is an extension of the whole-class

instruction and students can work either at their desks or in some other part of the room. In the lesson on problem and solution, the students' guided practice assignment was to figure out the details from the story. Each group is given sticky notes to write their details and is instructed to place them inside the rectangle on the chart paper once finished. They are also asked to come up with a possible theme for *Three Billy Goats Gruff*.

A brief whole-class gathering occurs to discuss the guided practice activity. The teacher reads the sticky notes that were placed inside of the rectangle, asks students to explain their thinking, and then moves on to the theme of the story.

Independent reading, or Happy Reading, is next. This is a daily block of free reading time. Students read books of their choosing and practice skills and strategies from previous lessons. On this particular visit, before students could proceed with Happy Reading, they had to “shop” for their books for the week. Each student has a clear plastic “Book Buddy Bag” and has to choose books from among the hundreds of choices displayed throughout the classroom. The types of book students can choose are as follows: one “challenge” book; one “vacation” book; and three “just-right” books.

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Skills (DIBELS)

The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Skills (DIBELS) are a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade (Good & Kaminski, 2009). They are designed to be short (one minute) fluency measures used to regularly (three times per school year) monitor early literacy and early reading skills.

DIBELS consists of seven measures designed to function as indicators of phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, accuracy and fluency with connected text, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. The premise behind DIBELS is to identify children

experiencing difficulty with basic early literacy skills in order to provide early support and thwart against later reading proficiencies (Good & Kaminski, 2009).

For this study, beginning and middle DIBELS test results were collected and analyzed. In the beginning DIBELS tests, the measures used were the following: Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF); Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) and Letter Naming Fluency (LNF). The Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF) measure is a standardized, individually administered test of phonological awareness (University of Oregon, n.d.). The PSF assesses a student's ability to fluently segment three- and four- phoneme words into their individual phonemes. This test begins with the examiner presenting the student with words of three to four phonemes. The student then has to verbally produce the individual phonemes that make up each word. For example, if the examiner says "sat," and the student would say "/s/ /a/ /t/" to receive three possible points for the word. The Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) measure is a standardized, individually administered test of the alphabetic principle – including letter-sound correspondence in which letters represent their most common sounds. The NWF also measures a student's ability to blend letters into words in which letters represent their most common sounds (University of Oregon, n.d.). The intent of the NWF is that students are able to read unfamiliar words as whole words, not just name letter sounds as fast as they can. Students are given a sheet of paper with randomly ordered vowel consonant (VC) and consonant vowel consonant (CVC) nonsense words (i.e., sig, rav, ov) and asked to verbally produce each individual sound of each letter or to verbally produce, or read, the whole nonsense word. Students are given one minute to produce as many letter sounds as he or she can. The intent of this measure is that students are able to read unfamiliar words as whole words, not just name letter sounds as fast as they can. And the Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) is a standardized, individually administered test that provides a measure

of risk. For this test, students are presented with a page of upper- and lower- case letters arranged in random order and are asked to name as many as they can in one minute. The score is based on the number of letters the child names correctly in one minute.

Middle of the year DIBELS testing is comprised of the Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) measure along with both a DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) and Retell Fluency (RTF) components. The ORF is a standardized, individually administered test of accuracy and fluency with connected text. ORF is a standardized set of passages administration procedures designed to (a) identify children who may need additional instructional support, and (b) monitor progress toward instructional goals (University of Oregon, n.d.). Student performance is measured by having students read a passage for one minute, while the examiner marks miscues. The RTF is intended to provide a comprehension check for the ORF assessment. The purpose of the RTF measure is to (a) prevent inadvertently learning or practicing a misrule (reading without attending to meaning), (b) identify children whose comprehension is not consistent with their fluency, (c) provide an explicit linkage to the core components of reading (phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency), and (d) increase the face validity of the ORF (University of Oregon, n.d.).

For this study, composite totals were reported. The DIBELS Composite Score is a combination of multiple DIBELS scores and provides the best overall estimate of the student's early literacy skills and/or reading proficiency (University of Oregon, n.d.). Students falling in the "red" level are considered those likely to need intensive support. Intensive support refers to interventions that incorporate something more or something different from the core curriculum or supplemental support. Intensive support might entail: delivering instruction in a smaller group; providing more instructional time or more practice; presenting smaller skill steps in the

instructional hierarchy; providing more explicit modeling and instruction; and/or providing greater scaffolding and practice (University of Oregon, n.d.).

Composite totals for beginning of the year testing for Pine Grove Elementary showed that Ms. Adams' twenty students ranked as follows: one was considered "yellow" or "below benchmark/likely to need strategic support"; and 19 were in the "green" or "at or above benchmark/likely to need core support" level. Ms. Smith's composite totals indicated four students were in the "yellow" or "below benchmark/likely to need support"; and 16 were at the "benchmark" or "green" range.

Composite totals for mid-year results for Ms. Adams' class indicate that of the 20 students that were tested, 19 were in the "green" or "at or above benchmark/likely to need core support" range and one student was in the "yellow" or "below benchmark/likely to need strategic support" range. Ms. Smith also tested 20 students and her results were as follows: 15 students were in the "green" range; two were in "yellow"; and three fell in the "red" or "well-below benchmark/likely to need intensive support."

Whispering Forest Elementary Principal Interview

Background/Education

Susan Miller has been in education for 21 years. For the past five, she has been the principal at Whispering Forest Elementary. Having been a former student and teacher at Whispering Forest, as well as a life-long resident of Central City, Ms. Miller takes great pride in serving as principal of her school. Ms. Miller says that all teachers have high expectations for all learners and they seek opportunities for students to be successful each day. Ms. Miller further contends that at Whispering Forest the importance of the teacher/parent relationship is recognized and encouraged.

Ms. Miller attests that her greatest reward as a principal is “seeing the growth, progress, and successes of the students.” She continued by stating that at Whispering Forest, “we strive to build relationships with students in a trusting environment. This year especially has been most rewarding in seeing the overall progress of the students.” When questioned about the challenges facing an administrator, Ms. Miller noted:

It is very challenging when certain students do not have parental support from home. Many of the student challenges educators are faced with daily are because of the environmental exposures in the home setting. Because of this, there is a “hidden curriculum” that educators address in classrooms more and more today...social and emotional lessons...which so often hinder academic success.

Instructional Philosophy

Regarding student motivation, Ms. Miller commented:

We have many classroom and school-wide incentives to assist in motivating students to be engaged in learning daily. The greatest influence over a student’s motivation to learn is the classroom teacher. It is her/his job to plan meaningful and effective lessons. The teacher must also be compassionate and want to make a difference in a young learner’s life. As the educational leader, it is my job to ensure effective lessons are created and that the students are being successful. I am in and out of the classrooms frequently each week. I meet with teachers regularly to discuss data, what is working/not working in the classroom, what materials or supports they need to be successful in the classroom, and determine professional development needs. I am also the “head cheerleader” and look for opportunities to congratulate students and teachers on their accomplishments.

Ms. Miller also related how she motivates her teachers at Whispering Forest Elementary. She believes, “A huge part of motivating teachers is to be a good listener. So often, teachers don’t see the ‘whole picture’; they are focused on what is happening in their own classrooms. By listening and problem-solving with teachers, they hopefully feel they are supported.” Ms. Miller extended this by adding, “Effective teachers are those who possess ‘self-motivation’; those educators that truly possess a passion for teaching and learning and strive daily to meet the students’ needs in the classroom.”

Ms. Miller was asked what she thinks defines or makes an effective reading teacher and why? Her response was as follows:

An effective reading teaching must utilize a variety of research-based strategies aimed specifically at each student's learning needs. A variety of approaches must be utilized within the educational setting; specifically, whole group, small group, and individually. Instruction must be differentiated and repeated if necessary in order to meet needs of each specific learner. Effective teachers must be knowledgeable in analysis of student data, goal setting, and collaboration with other teachers, reading coaches, and administrators concerning strategies in the classroom. Effective reading teachers must be willing to accept new ideas, take risks, celebrate successes, learn from mistakes, set goals, know there will be setbacks, never give up, always look for the positive, ensure high levels of effective student engagement are always taking place, ensure student growth is always occurring, give students a purpose to read, allow them opportunities to read, read to students.

Reading Instruction

When asked about the impact the reading series has on instruction in her school, Ms. Miller responded that, "The reading series is just a tool; the teacher himself/herself delivering the instruction is a greater impact on instruction than the reading series."

The top five most important reading/literacy skills deemed most important by Ms. Miller are phonemic awareness, reading with accuracy, reading with fluency, knowledge of vocabulary, and comprehension of reading passages/stories. Ms. Miller noted that, "Good readers become good writers. Students must be allowed the opportunity to read and write daily."

Assessment

To monitor student progress at Whispering Forest, Ms. Miller alluded that she regularly looks at student data to see how well students are performing. She expressed that she listens to suggestions from teachers and parents through surveys conducted twice per school year. Through classroom observations, Ms. Miller related what she looks for in a reading lesson. She stated, "When observing a reading lesson, I look to see that all students are engaged in a relevant

reading activity, that high levels of student engagement are taking place, and that the teacher is actively involved in the lesson in some manner.”

On evaluating her own leadership performance, Ms. Miller communicated, “A good leader is only as good as his/her leadership team. I have a very effective administrative team to work with me. I also look at teacher strengths and utilize their strengths for the betterment of the students and school.”

Other

Ms. Miller commented that other literacy resources at her school included Headsprout, Splash into Phonics, Accelerated Reader, Project Read and Read Naturally. Both Headsprout Early Reading™ and Splash into Phonics are computer reading programs that emphasize phonics practice. Accelerated Reader (AR) is a computer reading program that allows students to choose from a wide selection of books based on a point value and then given a multiple-choice test on the book once it has been read. Project Read is a comprehensive language arts program designed to provide explicit instruction in a structured reading curriculum with the goal of the program to help the students become thoughtful, purposeful, and independent readers (<http://www.fcrr.org>). Read Naturally is a computer program that has passages for students to read that aid in fluency.

Ms. Miller was also questioned about the allocation of Title I monies; specifically, if any was spent on literacy or reading. Her reply was that, “Currently, Title I money funds two para-professional positions. In the morning, the two paras spend two hours on a rotating schedule assisting teachers with literacy during differentiated instruction. For the remainder of the day, the paras manage two Headsprout computer labs. Each classroom of students visits the labs twice during the week.”

Tana Griffin Teacher Interview

Background/Education

Tana Griffin has taught eighth grade for two years and her current grade level of first for the past five years. Ms. Griffin has a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education and a Masters of Education degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Her biggest reason for wanting to become a teacher stemmed from the trouble her brother faced in school and the negative impact it had on him. Because of that, she decided she wanted to make a difference in the way students viewed school. She also says that having summers off is a big plus! Ms. Griffin's greatest reward as a teacher is seeing her students enjoy learning to read and building their self-esteem. However, her biggest challenges are first, being able to reach each student's needs in order for them to achieve and second, helping students being able to find success in school.

Instructional Philosophy

Ms. Griffin believes that her environment and support make an effective reading teacher, but most times, because she is "instructed to assist students to pass an assessment and not really teach my students" Ms. Griffin does not feel that she is very effective. She elaborated that her most pleasurable time is when she is able to teach to each of her students' strengths and weaknesses (to this she was referring to the thirty minutes of daily "differentiated instruction"). Ms. Griffin adds that to be an effective reading teacher, students need more support at home as well as in school and she further emphasized that "data is taking over our way of teaching; they want everything to look great on paper, but not necessarily for the betterment of the students."

Ms. Griffin groups her students according to their level, which depends on their needs for each particular week. She shared that the grouping of her students does not necessarily coincide

with their reading level abilities; if students are weak in other areas (i.e., high-frequency words or language skills), then they will be grouped accordingly.

Parental involvement is not very successful, as related by Ms. Griffin. She reflected, “I do my best, but they don’t show up” (this is referring to parent conferences, open-house, or any other activity which involves the parents coming to the school). Weekly communication includes a homework packet sent home containing all of the skills and tests for each particular week.

Reading Instruction

The reading program at Whispering Forest Elementary is that of the reading series, *Storytown*, by Harcourt School Publishers. A typical lesson starts with a Question of the Day, followed by phonics instruction. A brief discussion of the reading focus and grammar skills, a choral reading of the story, and a review of the robust vocabulary words follow. Students complete independent practice book pages before breaking into thirty minutes of center time and Differentiated Instruction. Technology is a big component in the reading curriculum as most of the daily lessons are displayed via the SMART board. Ms. Griffin communicated that the “basal has our hands tied!” She further claimed that:

The program lacks phonics and does not allow our students to problem-solve while reading. The basal has so much packed into a lesson that many students get left behind. I do enjoy our DI (Differentiated Instruction) instruction, and get to work with many students to help their weaknesses. The basal chosen for us does not allow any teacher creativity and takes away from a lot of our effectiveness as a reading teacher.

To Ms. Griffin, the area she finds students struggle most with is not applying previously learned skills. For example, if students are reading a word, they will naturally assume it is a short vowel and not look at the whole word to see if there is an *e* at the end to make it a long vowel. Or they do not apply the endings, -ed, -ing, -s, to words. Ms. Griffin estimates that this “is a lazy group; they want to hurry up and get it done.” Ms. Griffin expressed that the most important

reading skills students at this age need to possess are phonics and knowing high-frequency words; skills, in her estimation, are lacking in the *Storytown* basal.

During reading instruction, Ms. Griffin attested that she does not do a lot of picture walks prior to reading a story because she does not want them to look at the pictures before they read to guess what is going to happen. Instead, she wants them to be able to look at the pictures while reading to make predictions or “work through an unknown word.” Ms. Griffin was asked to explain how comprehension strategies are used in her reading class. She expressed that what helps her class with comprehension are the questions asked during the reading of a story (i.e. “What do you think they’re going to do next?” “How do you think they’re going to do it?”). When asked if the students read the stories independently, Ms. Griffin answered (she was referring to a recent example of a reading test):

The students have five minutes to read the paragraph and I tell them that if they have trouble with a word, to underline it and skip it for the moment. After five minutes, I still have students that can’t read it. So, do I mark off for comprehension because they can’t read it? No, I don’t. Because I want them to feel some sort of success. No, I don’t read it to them anymore; they read it together, they help each other out, they are a team.

Classroom Management

Ms. Griffin employs a “clothespin pulling” technique” in regard to classroom management. Students “move” their clothespin when small infractions occur within the classroom. “I just have to stay on them. With this group, it’s very consistent and no boundaries,” commented Ms. Griffin. If the problem is severe enough, students will be immediately sent to the office. Ms. Griffin did admit to having to call the office a lot this school year. She shared that one student in her class threw a pair of scissors across the room, another flipped a desk over, and still another threw a shelf. Ms. Griffin has admitted to calling parents during class and “nipping the problem in the bud right away.”

As attested earlier, Ms. Griffin struggles with trying to involve parents in their child's education; however, she does feel like communication with parents is important. At the beginning of the school year, Ms. Griffin spends a considerable amount of time on the phone contacting parents to inform them of behavior issues. Ms. Griffin finds it much easier to reach parents via the phone because a lot of them are working and cannot come to the school regularly for conferences. Ms. Griffin further related that parents do not always like hearing from her when she does call, but her philosophy is simply, "if your child bothers my day and my work, I'm going to bother you at your work. That's honestly the way I feel; they're inconveniencing everybody else's workday and you get to sit at work and be happy-go-lucky because you don't have to deal with your kid. I will continue to call and aggravate you until you handle it."

To motivate students, Ms. Griffin uses a lot of extrinsic rewards in the form of candy, golden tickets, and "brain food" (a mixture of various cereals). "They will work for food," claims Ms. Griffin.

Assessment

Testing in Ms. Griffin's classroom consists of weekly tests that are correlated with the reading series and a test after completion of each unit. Once per grading period, an oral reading fluency test is also given to each student. Information obtained from test results is used for grouping of students for center time and/or re-teaching of material. As noted by Ms. Griffin, "I don't go back and re-test, I mean, I'll go back and re-test when it comes time for the unit test, but I don't re-test at the moment. I do re-teach it to them." Informally, Ms. Griffin relates that she is constantly walking around monitoring during instructional time and listening to her students reading.

Ms. Griffin evaluates her own teaching performance based on how her students fared on a test. She elaborated by stating that sometimes she will look at the results of a particular test and think, “I didn’t teach that right. I need to throw that whole test in the garbage because obviously I didn’t teach it the way they needed to learn it.” She also offered that her performance is evaluated by the administrator through a yearly observation.

Description of the Classroom and Students

Ms. Griffin’s first-grade classroom is adorned with brightly-colored instructional posters and bulletin boards. The desks are flat-top in style and are arranged in groups of twos. There are a total of 26 desks. Along the wall of the left side of the room are three large bulletin boards: one is a word wall (with only the letter cards displayed); a calendar and *Countdown to 100* posters make up the middle bulletin board; and student work is hung on the last board. Below these bulletin boards are two tables: one is a trapezoid-shaped listening station with headphones and a “Listen and Learn Phonics” program on top of it; and a small rectangular-shaped table that has a *Writing Center* poster affixed to it.

The back wall has a row of wooden cubbies that are used by the children to house their schoolbags, lunchboxes, jackets, sweaters, and other personal belongings. On top of the cubbies are storage bins that are concealed with a blue curtain. In front of the cubbies is a semi-circle-shaped table with six chairs. To the left of this table is a small reading corner with one shelf containing baskets of books. There is a worn blue carpet and a stack of practice books from the reading series lying on the floor. A poster reading, *3 Simple Steps to Good Reading*, is hung on the wall. Also in the back of the room is a round table which holds six computers. The teacher’s desk and filing cabinet are in back of the computer station.

The right side of the room is a wall of windows that are covered with blinds. Decorating the blinds are ten posters depicting each of the primary colors (blue, green, red, brown, yellow, pink, white, black, purple, and orange); *1st Graders Are Fantastic* poster; A-Z alphabet cards; the days of the week; and the months of the year. Below the wall are shelves containing pink and light green plastic containers with the following games and materials: file folders (Reading), file folders (Math), Number Line Fun, Fact Practice, Hot Dots Math, Reading Games, White Boards, clip boards, Writing, Word Work, Sums to 5, Sums to 10, Sums to 18, Unifix Cubes, and Dominoes. On top of the shelf is a wooden book holder.

The front of the room has a SMART board screen in the center, a bulletin board to the left, and a dry-erase board to the right. On the bulletin board are two pocket charts: one is blue and has star-shaped note paper with *our, mouse, surprise, pretty, three, and over* written on them; it also has pencil-shaped note paper with *bulged, jostled, argue, command, labored, and wary* written on them. The other pocket chart is apple-shaped and has “Spelling Words” written on it, but no words are included. Affixed on the dry-erase board are a *Daily Objectives* poster, another small whiteboard, and another small bulletin board that has the behavior chart. It is a “doghouse” theme with four “paw-prints” representing each level of the behavior plan. A small picture of a doghouse sits in the corner and there is a row of wooden clothespins with each student’s name on them hanging along the bottom of a sign marked, “Paw-fect”. If a student is told to “move” his clothespin for a behavior violation, these are the infractions: “paw-print” 1, *warning*; “paw-print” 2, *lose 5 minutes of recess*; “paw-print” 3, *lose 10 minutes of recess*; “paw-print” 4, *note home/referral*.

Above the SMART board screen, the following posters are displayed: *Shapes; Numbers 1-100; Ordinal Numbers; Daily Practice (Full Name, Date – long way, Date – short way, Day of*

the week, Time, Money, Tens & Ones, Number Word, Problem of the Day); and The Pledge of Allegiance.

The classroom rules for Ms. Griffin's class are as follows: *Listen and follow directions; Take turns talking; Keep hands, feet, and objects to yourself; Be kind and respectful to everyone; Be prepared for learning each day.* The consequences for not following the classroom rules are: 1st offense – warning, verbal feedback, re-teach, and clarify; 2nd offense – intervention, lose 1st recess; 3rd offense – intervention, lose 2nd recess; 4th offense – contact parents. And the rewards for following the classroom rules are: verbal praise, note home, visits to teacher, stickers, golden tickets, and free time.

There are 26 students in Ms. Griffin's class. These consist of 18 Native Americans, seven African-American, and one Hispanic. 13 of the children receive free or reduced lunch.

Carrie McDonald Teacher Interview

Background/Education

Carrie McDonald has been teaching first grade for 10 years. She holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Elementary Education. When asked why she wanted to be a teacher, Ms. McDonald said that at first she went to college for three years and did not know what she wanted to major in. She did not grow up thinking that teaching was something she thought she would do or even wanted to do. But then one day she decided to try an education class and found she really enjoyed it. So, she decided to pursue a degree in education. Ms. McDonald attests that her greatest reward as a teacher is to watch her students succeed and to give them guidance which she says they do not have. Ms. McDonald finds the greatest challenge of being a teacher is dealing with behavior problems.

Instructional Philosophy

To Ms. McDonald, being an effective reading teacher means having a genuine sense of wanting your students to succeed. She elaborates by stating:

As a teacher, you have to be able to recognize each student's strengths and weaknesses and know how to address them. You have to be able to use a variety of strategies such as small groups or guided reading for students until you find what works for that child or a group of children. Small groups are a great way to reach each individual student's needs and I have found it to be very successful. I think that an effective reading teacher has to keep their students engaged by using a variety of reading materials on different levels so they can become independent readers. They should also be reading and writing throughout most of a lesson. I think as a reading teacher you have to push your students and get them excited and make them feel successful. Teaching students to read can be very rewarding yet very challenging. But being able to reach every child no matter if there are academic or behavioral problems is an effective reading teacher.

Determining groups for small-group reading instruction and center time, according to Ms. McDonald, is based on DIBELS scores. "It is during the center time that the lowest students work on nonsense words and oral reading fluency with me; some will do Headsprout (computer games that reinforce phonics skills) on the computers; and a small group will work on extra skill instruction with the help of the para-professional", noted Ms. McDonald.

Parental communication is in the form of a weekly letter sent home on Mondays. It outlines the homework for the week and any other pertinent information parents need to know as well as nightly homework. Ms. McDonald expressed that she also sends a weekly oral fluency practice passage for parents to read to their child. "Whether they do it or not, I don't know," claims Ms. McDonald.

Reading Instruction

Ms. McDonald expressed that for her reading instruction she is required to use the basal. Currently, her school is using *Storytown*, by Harcourt Publishers and has been for the past four years. For the first two years of implementation, Ms. McDonald added, that the teachers had to

follow the basal word-for-word and could not supplement with other materials and activities. This was largely due to a grant the school was under. The school is no longer receiving monies from that particular grant, so as Ms. McDonald expressed “we are now able to supplement materials.” “I do supplement materials during my differentiated instruction time,” as highlighted by Ms. McDonald. She elaborated that during this time she can use “any materials I want in order to meet my students’ needs.” Her description of a typical reading lesson is as follows:

I integrate my SMART board for my reading lesson each day. A typical reading class would start off with reviewing high-frequency words. There is usually a poem or big book that I read and discuss with the students. Then we will move into building words on whatever phonics skill we are working on for that week. I use the SMART board to build words and the students use their dry-erase boards every day. We usually complete one to two workbook pages each day. We may also complete a teacher-made skills sheet. We read our story orally every day. High-frequency words and robust words are introduced and reviewed each day. We also use our reading book to read the story for the week.

Ms. McDonald further elaborated that “time is a factor when teaching and covering skills from the basal and it doesn’t leave much extra time. There are so many skills and a requirement that we are supposed to be teaching to cover the entire curriculum that using the basal has just become comfortable.” Ms. McDonald also commented that:

I think my students do get bored with the activities from the reading basal. It is a repetition each day so they know what is expected; they are sometimes uninterested. Because of the time that I have and the reading ability of my class, it is hard to fit in the “extra fun” activities as a whole group. Center time is usually their favorite time of the day. They are still covering the skills they need, but we can get away from the basal.

In Ms. McDonald’s class, students struggle the most with oral reading fluency. She emphasized that her students are not applying previously-taught skills. When asked what she felt were the most important reading skills students needed to know, Ms. McDonald replied, “They have to know phonics; the different skills and how to sound out. They also have to know the rules to be able to sound out the words and know how to blend words.” Ms. McDonald was also

asked about comprehension strategies that are employed and/or modeled in the class; to which, her response was, “Like what, what do you mean?”

Classroom Management

Ms. McDonald acknowledges that overall, her students are well-managed; however, she emphasized that she has to be circulating at all times. “If I’m not standing literally in the middle (of them), they can’t handle just sitting on their own. They’re just a talkative group,” stated Ms. McDonald. The use of attention-getters and the clothespin method are also used in Ms. McDonald’s class as part of the behavior-management system. Students are grouped according to personality traits to try and help with classroom management. When a problem does occur, Ms. McDonald voiced that she tries to handle as much as possible within the classroom by moving clothespins, talking with students, re-directing and re-teaching students to make better choices, and removing students from recess. Sometimes, though, the behavior continues and Ms. McDonald will issue an office referral, call a parent, or send a note home. Parental communication, in Ms. McDonald’s estimation, is important but she articulated that, “you have the same five, six, or seven kids’ parents who communicate and then they’ll be parents who I don’t know. Some you hear from at first; they’ll come for Open House and then we never hear from them. Their kids are failing, you send notes home and they don’t even worry about it.” For the parents that she does have to contact, Ms. McDonald explained, “they’re usually pretty supportive. I’ve never had a parent be irate. I don’t call too often; they’re usually ok. If they do have a problem, they’ll send a note back.”

To motivate her students, Ms. McDonald tries to make the lessons as fun as possible by singing songs. Ms. McDonald continued with, “That helps; they like it; it gets them excited. I just try and make it interesting, fun, and exciting because when they’re bored, they don’t learn,

they don't want to do anything and you lose them. Because this reading series we have is repetitive, you try and add stuff in there to keep it exciting.”

Assessment

Ms. McDonald feels that walking around and monitoring allows her to “know who’s doing what they’re supposed to be doing and understanding.” She asks questions to informally assess and formal assessments are in the form of weekly tests that are correlated with the reading series. Other testing includes unit tests after every six lessons of the basal, an oral reading fluency test after every unit, DIBELS testing three times per school year, and progress monitoring once per month.

Ms. McDonald was asked to share how she evaluates her own teaching performance. Her reply was, “It’s hard. I mean when they’re not getting something and you think you did it right and they take their test and fail (like the high-frequency part), you have to question if I’m doing enough. If they’re not getting it, I look at those red, green, and yellow (referring to the DIBELS scores) kids and think, oh, I’m not doing enough.”

Description of the Classroom and Students

The basic outline of Ms. McDonald’s room is the same as Ms. Smith’s; however the decorations are suited for her taste. Ms. McDonald’s flat-top desks are arranged in groups of sixes to form two large rows. The left wall has bulletin boards containing the following posters: calendar, *Today Is...*, *Tomorrow Will Be...*, *Yesterday Was...*; *Telling Time* (with a picture of an analog clock with movable hands); *Happy Birthday*. The bulletin boards also contain an apple pocket chart with *High Frequency Words* listed on top and surprise, three, pretty, our, mouse, and over written on large flashcards in each of the slots on the chart. Next the High Frequency Words is another pocket chart labeled, *Spelling Words*, but there are no words displayed. The last

section of the bulletin board has various dittos of children's work posted. Below the bulletin boards are red-painted wooden shelves with colored (lime-green, royal blue) containers and tubs holding various games and other supplies. Toward the end of the wall is a long rectangular-shaped table housing six computers.

The back wall of the classroom has wooden cubbies for the children's belongings and a top section of storage area for the teacher (It is concealed by a plaid-colored curtain.). In front of the cubbies is a semi-circled table with six chairs. *Good Manners: Use Positive Words, Be Respectful, Use Healthy Habits, Be Kind, Pay Attention; Count By 2s (2, 4,...20), Count By 5s (5, 10,...50), Count By 10s (10, 20,...100)* are posters lining the wall above the cubbies. The table also has a small square-shaped easel-styled dry-erase board sitting to the left corner. The teacher's desk and filing cabinets are also situated in the back of the room.

Flanked on the right wall is a shelving unit with books (six colored baskets of assorted types of trade books) and baskets of games (Math games, Phonics games, Vowels/Spelling, Upper & Lower Case Letters, Colors/Shapes, ABCs, Shape Shuffle, Rhymes). A single divided bookshelf with approximately two dozen trade books sits on top of the shelf. Also along the wall is a rectangular-shaped table containing headphones and audiotapes. A rolling cart with a computer and television is seated near the front of the wall. The entire right wall are windows with blinds covering them. Enhancing the blinds are the following posters: *Long Vowels; Short Vowels; Days of the Week; Months of the Year; A-Z alphabet cards; A, E, I, O, U individual posters*. The following classroom rules are also included: *Listen and follow directions; Take turns before talking; Keep hands, feet, and objects to yourself; Be prepared for learning each day. Warning, Re-teach & clarify consequences; Lose 5 minutes of recess/intervention; Lose 10 minutes of recess/intervention; Classroom referral/contact parent* are the consequences listed

and *verbal praise, positive notes home, treasure chest, stickers, golden tickets, and free time* are listed as rewards.

A SMART board screen and dry-erase whiteboard adorn the front wall of the room. Above this wall are individual posters depicting bears which are dressed in each of the primary colors (yellow, brown, blue, white, red, green, black, purple, orange, pink). On the inside of the door is a multi-colored “caterpillar” representing the behavior system. Each segment of the caterpillar has a consequence: green – *warning*; yellow – *lose 5 minutes of recess*; red – *lose 10 minutes of recess*; blue – *class referral and contact parents*. A “*We’re Buggy About Behavior*” card with wooden clothespins (one for each student) is affixed next to the caterpillar.

Ms. McDonald’s class consists of 26 students; 18 are Native Americans and eight are African-Americans. Five of her students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for Speech services and one student is currently going through the School Building Level Committee (SBLC) screening process for possible classroom modifications and/or accommodations. 20 of the children receive free lunch; one qualifies for reduced lunch; and five pay full prices.

Classroom Observation of Whispering Forest Elementary

The school-wide reading program utilized at Whispering Forest Elementary is that of a basal series. *Storytown*, by Harcourt School Publishers is the chosen series and is considered an explicit, systematic type of teaching instruction. Components of the program include: Oral Language, Read Aloud, Word Wall, Phonemic Awareness, Connect Letter to Sound, Word Blending, Word Building, High-Frequency Words, Reading, Comprehension, Robust Vocabulary, and Language Arts. Ms. Griffin and Ms. McDonald (as well as the other first-grade teachers at the school) follow the outline of the basal, with little diversity; therefore, the observation reported is that of a composite view of both classrooms.

Mornings start with routine procedures; students enter the classrooms, proceed to their desks, and begin to unpack their schoolbags. Ms. McDonald's students have a journal waiting for them with a "bell ringer" activity displayed on the SMART board screen. Each bell ringer is similar to the following: First and Last Name; March 7, 2012; 3-7-12; Today is Wednesday; Time ____:____; ____ o'clock; Money: ____ ____¢. When the bell ringer is finished, students can choose a book to read from the basket that is located on each table group. Other housekeeping activities occurring simultaneously include sharpening of pencils; hanging schoolbags on back hooks located in the cubbies; turning in notes and homework folders; taking a restroom break; and standing for the pledge and announcements that are broadcasted over the intercom. Ms. Griffin's students do not have a bell ringer assignment to do. Instead, it is a mass of chaos with some students heading to the back of the classroom to hang up schoolbags; several line up to sharpen pencils; a few head to the computers to work on Headsprout phonics programs; and the remainder sit at their desks with reading books (most are closed, but some have them opened). Ms. McDonald begins calling groups to go to the restroom while waiting for morning announcements to begin.

Classroom instruction in both classes is the same format each day and follows the lessons outlined in the Reading basal. It begins with the Oral Language component which entails a "Question of the Day." The objective, as written in the basal, is "*to listen attentively*" and "*to respond appropriately to oral communication.*" A question (i.e., Think about a time when you were walking outside. What interesting things did you see?) is displayed on the SMART board projector with a sentence frame underneath (i.e., I saw one _____. I saw many _____). Several students are called upon to answer.

Next is a short Read Aloud by the teacher. A poem, or short story, is read aloud by the teacher and then chorally read by the class. Instead of fluent reading being modeled, word-by-word reading is exhibited, thus that is how the students read. The basal notes the objective of this activity as “*listening for a purpose*” and “*using picture and context clues to develop vocabulary*”; however, there are no pictures associated with the poems being read in either classes and instead of vocabulary being discussed, the focus is on phonics skills.

A game called Random Word Chooser is a daily review of previously learned high-frequency words. The SMART board screen displays 30 words and randomly begins highlighting them about every five seconds. Students read aloud the word. This continues until all 30 words have been recognized.

The lesson proceeds with phonemic awareness. The teacher advances the next slide (What’s My New Word?) onto the SMART board screen and begins to segment a series of words that the children must blend together and call out. The teacher also asks students to tell how many sounds they hear in each word. Some of the words include: five, tree, clean, bugs, sing, sting, sky, nest, stick, and bring. Students are now directed to take out their dry-erase board, marker, and eraser from their desks and wait for the first word of the Making Words lesson to begin. On the SMART board screen are various letters; consonants are in black, vowels are in red. The objectives of this activity are for students to “*build and blend words with known letter-sounds*” and “*to use known letter-sounds to spell words.*” The phonics skill for the week (i.e. diphthong /ng/ng; initial blends with r; short vowel /u/u) determines what words the students are asked to “make”. The teacher will give a command (i.e., “Use four of your letters to make a word that that has a short vowel /u/ and a blend.”); students must use the provided letters to make a word onto their boards and then hold the board up for the teacher to check for accuracy while a

student volunteer is called to the SMART board to demonstrate how to make the word on the screen.

Reading Words in Context comes next and constitutes a set of sentences written on the SMART board screen that students practice reading aloud. The sentences (i.e., Sam had a plan. He cut up some paper. He taped wings on. He made a plane! Can the plane fly? Yes, it can! Sam is glad.) consist of words applying the skill(s) of the week. The teacher reads each sentence, pointing to each word, while the students read with her. Again, word-by-word reading is modeled.

Independent practice, in the form of workbook pages from the accompanying practice book, are assigned for children to complete; however, it is more group work as the whole class reads each sentence together for each numbered question.

About an hour into the Reading block, a para-professional enters the classroom for center time. This is a 30-minute rotation period where homogenous groups of children are sent to established centers throughout the class. Centers consist of: skill work (students sit at desks and work on phonics worksheets); games and reading books (students play various educational games and/or read from the books on the shelf); computer work (some students are working on the Headsprout phonics program); listening center (students use the headphones to listen to the audio recordings of selected tapes and answer multiple-choice type questions relating to check for comprehension). The para-professional works directly with average- to high- ability students on writing and review skills while the teacher is seated at the back table with the lowest children reinforcing concepts including phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, high-frequency words, and oral reading practice. It is called “differentiated instruction”, but it is not differentiated instruction in its true sense: modifying the content, process, or product of instruction, but rather it

is the teacher's way of working with a smaller group of low-level students since the regular reading lesson is strictly whole-class. Students rotate among each center every 15 minutes.

At the end of center time, students are dismissed back to their seats for more independent work. Once again, the practice books are retrieved and students are given pages to complete. The pages are to emphasize more phonics skills from the day's lesson. Students are also called by groups for a restroom break. After about ten minutes, the workbook pages are displayed on the SMART board so that the correct answers can be given. The reading lesson ends when the recess bell rings.

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Skills (DIBELS)

Beginning and mid-year results for Ms. Griffin's class presented similar findings. In all, 26 students were tested and composite totals for beginning displayed 12 students in the "green" or "at or above benchmark/likely to need core support" level; five students in the "yellow" or "below benchmark/likely to need strategic support" level; and nine "red" or "well-below benchmark/likely to need intensive support" level. Middle of the year produced 10 green level students; four yellow; and 10 at the red level.

For Ms. McDonald's class, composite totals for the beginning of the year acknowledged seven green level students; seven yellow; and 12 red. Mid-year testing indicated no change from the beginning results.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to compare two approaches to first-grade reading instruction: the basal program and balanced literacy. By referring back to the original research questions, a framework was developed for the summary of the findings.

The multi-case studies presented in this observation (which utilized four first-grade teachers) helped provide awareness and understandings as each of the following questions were examined:

1. How does the use of the basal reading approach impact instruction in first-grade classrooms?
2. How does the use of balanced literacy impact instruction in first-grade classrooms?
3. How has being a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) changed/impacted instruction in a first-grade literacy classroom?

Because Whispering Forest Elementary utilizes a basal approach to reading instruction, findings for Question 1 directly related to that school. Hence, Pine Grove Elementary embraces a balanced literacy method of reading; therefore, Question 2 focused on it. It should also be noted that Ms. Adams, a NBCT teacher at Pine Grove Elementary, is the subject of Question 3.

Although there were unique and numerous factors that impacted reading instruction in both settings, specific characteristics were sorted into four main categories: Instructional Style, Assessment, Parental Involvement, and Classroom Environment.

Findings

Research Question 1

Instructional Style. In both classrooms at Whispering Forest Elementary, the use of the basal was the primary way reading was taught each day. Although some differences between the teachers regarding personality styles were noted, the instructional delivery and quality were relatively the same; systematic, direct, and routine with little or no deviation from the prescribed outline of the basal. A strong emphasis was on phonics and skill instruction. There were daily drills of phonemic awareness, phonics workbook practice, a making words activity, computer games that focused on phonics, and rote sentence reading with targeted skills as the focus.

No evidence was seen of daily independent reading by the students or read-alouds by the teachers. Field notes from classroom observations revealed students only read the basal story once per week and this was done whole-class with students “tracking the print” as they read. In fact, Ms. Griffin was asked about the time her students spend reading. Her response was, “Oh, we read the story on Tuesdays; sometimes, we’ll review the story on other days.” Research suggests that some of the benefits of reading aloud to children are an increase in vocabulary and comprehension skills; a promotion of syntactic development; and an increase in the ability to recognize words (Lane & Wright, 2007). Further, Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (2006), claims that the purpose of literature is to provide meaning in our lives and that it is the most important medium because it “brings us closest to the human heart.” Trelease (2006) also states that reading aloud serves to “reassure, entertain, inform, explain, arouse curiosity, and inspire our kids.” The IRA (2000b) notes that “regular periods need to be set aside in school for independent reading” (p. 1). The reading that did take place was minimal (a short paragraph or several sentences) and was done so as a whole-group process with everyone reading

together in a word-by-word manner. All students orally read the same passage at the same pace. Fluent reading was not modeled or encouraged.

The materials used were those supplied by the reading series; there were no supplemental or additional resources used during observed classroom visits even though both Ms. Griffin and Ms. McDonald voiced negative feelings about the basal reading program (i.e., “it’s not as fun as it used to be,” “this is what I hate about the book; it just keeps going on and on,” “we’re back to the manual mambo,” “the basal has our hands tied”). Whole-class seating was the predominant format for reading instruction; small grouping only occurred during daily center time.

Classroom libraries in each room consisted of a small shelf of assorted trade books. The International Reading Association (2000b) postulates that “children who have access to books are more likely to read for enjoyment, and thus increase their reading skills and their desire to read to learn” (p. 1). Students were permitted to read the books during center time; however, reading books was a “possible choice” during the rotation period - playing games, putting together puzzles, or listening to audio tapes were other options. It was also during center time that Ms. Griffin and Ms. McDonald worked with a group of children in what was called “differentiated instruction.” Students in these groups were in the “red” level as indicated by the DIBELS report. Instruction consisted of a reinforcement of skills from the daily lesson or a review of spelling, or high-frequency words.

A daily component of instruction for all classes at Whispering Forest was the non-certified para-professionals that assisted during the reading period. Observations showed that these individuals arrived during center time each day and worked with groups of children on various activities (i.e., worksheets, reinforcement of vocabulary, listens to previously read story).

Assessment. During observations and as revealed in interviews, DIBELS was a strong focus of assessment means. Ms. Griffin and Ms. McDonald talked frequently about her “red” children or her “kids that aren’t benchmarked.” Comments such as “this is a lazy group” and “it’s this group of kids” were also made during interviews when discussing student progress. Results were used to group students for center time. Another assessment tool used was the weekly tests supplied from the reading series. Components of a typical test consisted of a “Reading Comprehension” passage with several multiple-choice questions; “Phonics/Spelling”; “High-Frequency” and “Robust Vocabulary” sections; and lastly, a “Grammar” part. The administering of the weekly test was also done in a drill-type manner: passages were read aloud by the whole class (in a non-fluent style), and then questions were read by the teacher with time allotted in between each one for completion.

Informally, questioning was used by both teachers during the whole-group portion of the reading lesson. These questions were observed to be typically literal, or surface-level; no higher-order thinking questions were asked during the researcher’s visits.

Parental Involvement. For both teachers, parental involvement posed a challenge. Ms. Griffin and Ms. McDonald both sent home weekly folders with conduct grades, tests, and a “homework sheet” which outlined skills, homework, spelling words, and announcements. To Ms. Griffin, data from the interview showed that she had tried in the past to include parents, but this year, “I have not as much because they just don’t care.” Ms. Griffin did admit that she does involve the parents (via phone calls or notes home) when a discipline issue arises.

Classroom Environment. The way a classroom is organized can significantly contribute to learning and behavior goals (Charles & Senter, 2008). Lots of publisher-made posters and charts decorated the walls of Ms. Griffin’s and Ms. McDonald’s classrooms, but very little

student work was displayed. Putting student work for all to see is positive for several reasons: it gives students a sense of ownership in their classroom; it gives students a sense of accomplishment; it gives students the understanding that others care about their performance; and it builds self-esteem (Charles & Senter, 2008).

Monitoring throughout the reading lesson was observed in Ms. McDonald's room; however, it was not as prevalent in Ms. Griffin's. Instead, during whole-class instruction, Ms. Griffin stood in front of the classroom near the SMART board. Students were seldom inattentive and off-task. Ms. McDonald, on the other hand, frequently walked up and down the rows trying to keep students on-task. As a result, Ms. McDonald's room had less discipline issues, although there were several students that had to "pull their clip" during observation periods. Ms. Griffin handled management problems in a not-so-discreet fashion. It was witnessed on numerous occasions the stopping of the whole-class instruction to deal with students who were disruptive. During one visit, 30 minutes of instructional time was wasted while Ms. Griffin dealt with one student. Verbal praise was used sporadically, but there was a lot of use of negative comments that sometime had a sarcastic undertone to them.

Research Question 2

Instructional Style. Ms. Adams and Ms. Smith embraced balanced literacy as their method of teaching reading. Classroom observations and interviews verified the daily use of trade books, chart paper, and sticky notes for instruction. Both teachers acknowledged an emphasis on reading for meaning and teaching comprehension strategies. Pressley (2000) related that "despite the improvements in fluency and knowledge permitted by extensive reading, the 'read, read, read' approach does not lead to as active meaning construction during reading as occurs when students are taught explicitly to use and articulate comprehension strategies when

they read” (p. 554). This philosophy became evident when first entering the classrooms and seeing all of the charts displayed on the walls coupled with the shelves of baskets, boxes, and tubs of genre-categorized books. A morning meeting was the initial start to each lesson and began with students seated on the carpet in the center of each room. Morning meetings sometimes started with a song to welcome students or simply they would just begin with a greeting by the teacher. For each morning meeting students were seated in a circle in the center of the room. The chart stand displayed the welcome message that was sometimes read by the teacher and sometimes read by a particular student volunteer.

Whole-class instruction proceeded and included a focused lesson that consisted of a particular comprehension strategy, or “reading-for-meaning” strategy (i.e., inferring; identifying the “big idea”; locating details; making connections). Modeling of strategies was also visible by each teacher. The use of higher-order questioning was apparent during each observed lesson, as revealed by classroom observations. Some examples included: How do you know? Tell me more. Add more to that. What do you think? Tell me why. Students were given multiple opportunities to “turn and talk” with a friend to discuss certain questions/topics. The teachers were witnessed getting onto the carpet and participating in these sessions as well.

A daily read-aloud by each teacher was also part of the routine. The read-aloud book served two purposes: first, the book was used for developing the skill/strategy; and second, it modeled fluency (pacing, accuracy and prosody) because both teachers were very expressive and animated while reading. An initial discussion of the book followed. This included the characters, problem, setting, and solution. Then, students were given opportunities for reinforcement of the addressed skill by way of small-groups of two or three students. An example of one such activity

was the following: groups were given sticky notes and had to come up with details from the read-aloud story and possible themes.

Thirty minutes of independent, or “Happy Reading”, followed each lesson. It was during this time that students used books from their weekly “shopping” spree to read. As expressed by Ms. Adams and Ms. Smith, this reading time is important for students to be able to practice skills taught in class and it allows them to be able to monitor their selection of book choice. This is a time when students were able to sit in various locations of the classrooms to read their self-selected book(s). In its position statement, the International Reading Association (IRA) (2000) notes that “children who are allowed to self-select to read and who have access to varied sources of print materials in their classrooms, school libraries, town libraries, and at home, read more and read more widely, both for pleasure and for information” (p. 2). The IRA also contend that “frequent reading is related to the development of sophisticated language structures, higher levels of comprehension, improved word analysis skills, and fluency” (2000b, p. 2). Ms. Adams and Ms. Smith were constantly walking around, monitoring, and conferencing with students.

Once a week, fourth-grade students from the neighboring school visit Ms. Adams’ and Ms. Smith’s classrooms to partake in “Reading Buddies.” This is a thirty-minute free-reading block of time where pairs of students read together for enjoyment.

Another noteworthy aspect of instruction at Pine Grove Elementary, was the use of full-time Reading Recovery teachers. The school currently has four, which are all certified teachers and have had extensive training in the Reading Recovery program. Students participating in Reading Recovery receive extra help in reading comprehension and strategies; word decoding; and writing mechanics.

Assessment. There was a strong indication by both Ms. Adams and Ms. Smith that instructional decisions in their classrooms revolved around their students' needs (i.e., the focused strategy lessons; small-group instruction; book selections). Reflecting on lessons was a daily component for both Ms. Adams and Ms. Smith. Interview data revealed questions such as, "How do I feel this lesson went?" and "What didn't work?" are two examples of questions they would frequently ask of themselves regarding a particular lesson.

Informal assessments – mainly anecdotal notes – were the primary means Ms. Adams and Ms. Smith recorded daily information on student progress. Others included: questioning; conferencing; and the use of running records. The use of higher-order-thinking questions was used frequently during classroom observations. Formal assessments were teacher-made tests that consisted of a story for students to read and short-answer type questions (i.e., What was Grandfather's problem? What do you think Grandfather will do with the giant carrot?). Even though the district does mandate DIBELS testing three times a year, both teachers did not discuss the use of this in any detail.

Parental Involvement. Parental involvement was a vital component to Ms. Adams and Ms. Smith. Interview data showed that both teachers send home a weekly book with an accompanying practice strategy as well as a daily reading log to document reading at home. Charles and Senter (2008) asserts that "alliances with caregivers – teachers working with parents or guardians in a collaborative effort – further the goal of supporting the student. It is further voiced by Charles and Senter (2008) that "teachers who communicate well with caregivers often find that they enjoy increased home support in matters of discipline and curriculum" (p. 67). It should also be noted that during interviews both Ms. Adams and Ms. Smith spoke highly of their parents and the support they receive. They acknowledged the fact that not all of their parents

were as active and willing to help as most of them, but that did not discourage or allay their efforts in trying.

Classroom Environment. Classroom walls were brightly-covered with teacher- and student- made charts outlining various reading comprehension strategies. Supplies were readily-available and accessible for the children's use. Student work was eminently displayed in both classrooms. The classes' rules and pledges were constructed using the "our" pronoun – *Our Pledge, Our Class Rules*. Under each rule were student-drawn pictures depicting what they thought each one meant. This created a sense of classroom community and gave students a sense of ownership of the room. Although personality styles existed between teachers, their demeanor in the classrooms was always warm, welcoming, and enthusiastic. They were very positive with the children as was shown by the abundant use of verbal praise.

There were a couple of witnessed classroom management incidents that were handled with redirection and verbal reminders, but they were done so in a subtle manner. For the most part, transitioning between activities was a smooth process with students knowing exactly what to do. Teachers provided activities so that all students were on-task the entire observed periods of instruction. This is indicative of a classroom with effective procedures in place.

Research Question 3

Like board-certified doctors, accountants, and architects, teachers who achieve National Board Certification have met rigorous criteria through intensive study, self-assessment, evaluation, and peer review (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2007). Since its inception, numerous studies have emerged regarding the effectiveness of National Board Certified Teachers. Just as in any research, there were reports indicating mixed results regarding

National Board Certification. However, for the purpose of this study, the focus was on the positive inquiries.

Key findings from one research sampling, specifically in the area of teacher practice, revealed that the National Board Certification is a “transformative experience” and the certification process itself improves teachers’ ability to improve student learning (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2007). NBCTs demonstrate in-depth knowledge of teaching skills and subject content, and routinely seek educational strategies and materials that better meet students’ needs (Dagenhart, 2002; Petty, 2002; & Ralph, 2003). It was learned through one conversation with Ms. Adams that she is always reading professional books, talking with colleagues, attending conferences and workshops, and visiting websites to stay abreast to current and best practices in reading/literacy. Classroom observations showed Ms. Adams used a variety of teaching materials during instruction including chart paper, trade books, sentence strips, and sticky notes.

Another way National Board Certification improves teacher performance is the amount of “reflecting and collaborating on teacher practice” these teachers engage in (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2007). Data gathered during the interviews concluded that Ms. Adams reflects on her teaching practices on a daily basis with Ms. Smith to discuss how lessons went and share ideas for future planning. Data also highlighted the fact that Ms. Adams uses the reflection process as a personal means of assessing herself as a teacher.

Bond, Smith, Baker, and Hattie (2000) contend that students with National Board Certified Teachers improve in terms of “deep” learning – the kind of higher-order thinking that policymakers and business officials say is needed for future work and learning in the global economy. Data gathered during the observations indicated an abundant use of higher-order

questioning in Ms. Adams' lessons. It was also reported that students of NBCTs make higher gains on achievement tests than students taught by non-board-certified teachers (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2010). DIBELS scores for Ms. Adams indicated that of her 20 students tested, all but one are in the "at or above benchmark" or "core" range. One student scored in the "yellow – below benchmark" level. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2010) also contends that NBCTs help students find relevance in learning and engage them in the learning process. Field note evidence from classroom observations showed that Ms. Adams' students were actively involved and on-task during instruction time. Data obtained also showed that to make learning more meaningful, Ms. Adams provided real-life examples to connect course content to the students' lives.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the narrow scope of focus, four first-grade teachers in two geographic settings, which prevented the reader from generalizing to a larger population. Thus, a study emphasizing a broader scope to include more grade levels (i.e., first, second, and third grades) could more effectively reveal the impact basal programs and balanced literacy has on reading instruction. Increasing the number of observed teachers would also provide the investigator with a wider range of experiences and views. Additionally, the number of administrators used could also be viewed as a limitation. An administrators' influence can adversely impact how instruction, particularly reading, is taught throughout a school. Therefore, this study could further be enhanced by including other administrators within the school setting (i.e., principal, assistant principal, lead teacher). Their perspectives related to literacy instruction could be used to compare with classroom teachers' philosophies for effectively implementing best practices in reading.

One final limitation of this inquiry is the researcher's acknowledged bias of the type of instructional delivery system deemed appropriate for effective literacy teaching.

Implications for Future Research

Expanding the first two research questions to include other grade levels would offer additional insight into the impact of the basal and balanced literacy approaches to reading instruction. Another research possibility would be to look into how reading strategies are taught across and within other subject areas.

This study focused on the scores obtained through DIBELS, but it would be beneficial to use other means of student data to measure learning. It would also be interesting to study NBCTs implementing a basal approach compared to balanced literacy.

And one final research inquiry would be to see how teacher qualities and characteristics affect student outcome.

Conclusion

Teaching children to read is a challenging, yet rewarding, task. And unfortunately, many students struggle with learning to read. Reading failure has long-term consequences not only on a child's academic performance, but on his self-concept and motivation to learn (National Reading Panel, 2000). Fulfilling the task of teaching children to read requires teachers to be knowledgeable of effective teaching practices and be willing to implement them in their classrooms. As outlined by the National Reading Panel (2000), the five essential areas of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension) must be present in order for children to learn to read. The International Reading Association (1999) also proposes that "different children learn in different ways" and that "the processes of learning to read and reading are more complex than we once thought, and that the issues in reading

instruction are many sided” (p. 1). To become proficient readers, students do need to be taught the skills and strategies of reading in a systematic way. But they also need to be able to practice those skills by being provided the opportunities to read.

In relation to this study, the researcher found that what was most important was not whether the basal reading approach or balanced literacy was being used at each school; rather, what were most important were the children and what is best for the students. “Ultimately, if we are to be successful in promoting reading achievement, we must locate decision making at the point of service to students,” (International Reading Association,1999). It is the researcher’s estimation that all four teachers at the heart of this study are not equal in this regard. To elaborate, both Ms. Adams and Ms. Smith revealed in interviews and in informal conversations that all instructional decisions are made with their students in mind. In fact, it was witnessed several times the two of them conferring between themselves about particular lessons and ways to improve for next time. Every lesson plan is written based on students’ accomplishments; instruction is very-much student-driven. By focusing on their students’ academic needs, Ms. Adams and Ms. Smith are better able to select trade books to use for targeted lessons, group students for reinforcement of skills and strategies, and help students choose leveled books to read for independent reading time.

However, the conversations with Ms. Griffin and Ms. McDonald always seemed to include two main topics: phonics and DIBELS. Another interesting note the researcher observed was that during interviews, both teachers spoke negatively about the basal they were using and even mentioned that other resources could be used, yet neither utilized additional materials during instructional lessons. Lesson planning was centered on the mapped-out curriculum of the

reading series. To the researcher, this resulted in a very rote, predicted style of teaching that led to numerous students being off-task and several incidents of misbehavior.

Sometimes what is truly best for students lie in their physical surroundings. The “psychosocial environment encompasses the overall emotional climate or ‘feeling tone’ that exists in every classroom; this environment is intangible, yet all teachers and students are aware of it” (Charles & Senter, 2008, p. 58). If the environment of a classroom is a place where students feel like they are cared for and supported, it can be a place where they thrive and do well. However, if the classroom has a negative, uncaring tone, children will not do well. It is the researcher’s conclusion that the four classrooms used in this study served as an important emphasis to this. Both Ms. Adams and Ms. Smith had very lively and bubbly personalities. This transcended in their teaching. The way they spoke to the children was always in a warm, positive manner. Lots of verbal praise and recognition was used throughout lessons to acknowledge even the slightest achievement made by the students. Students were referred to as “friends” between and among each other. This solidified the community-feel of the classrooms. Even behavior management was handled by simple verbal re-direction or just a glare from the teacher. Ms. Griffin’s classroom was viewed as chaotic, harsh and sometimes, rude. It is the researcher’s estimation that if routines and procedures were in place (i.e. having something for the children to do upon entering the classroom in the morning, knowing where to turn papers in, having something to do when finished one assignment), the children would be less disruptive because they would know exactly what to expect. There was also a clear lack of respect by both the teacher and the students. One of the classroom rules in Ms. Griffin’s class is, “*Be Kind and Respectful to Everyone.*” Speaking to students in an abrasive and sarcastic way is not modeling this rule.

Another decisive element is the teacher. Children need to feel like they are cared about; whether that's by their parents or their teachers. For when a student truly feels accepted, he or she will want to do well. A teacher's attitude toward a child can have a strong impact on his/her academic, social, and emotional growth. Books do not teach students, teachers do. It is the researcher's estimation that the teachers from Pine Grove Elementary are the epitome of good teachers. Ms. Adams' and Ms. Smith's classrooms are structured in a way that is heavily child-centered. They both have a genuine love for the teaching profession and for the students they teach. The "what's best for the students" sentiment was clearly evident in the planning, lesson execution, assessment, and parental involvement aspects. The teachers at Whispering Forest often refer to certain students as their "red" students or students "not being benchmarked." This is based on results from the DIBELS report. It is the researcher's wonder how this labeling impacts the way these teachers think about these students or if it affects instructional decisions.

This study adds to the current body of literature on reading instruction by providing insight into teachers' perceptions regarding teaching strategies and practices.

Heart of Teacher

The child arrives like a mystery box...

with puzzle pieces inside

some of the pieces are broken or missing...

and others just seem to hide

But the HEART of a teacher can sort them out...

and help the child to see

the potential for greatness he has within...

a picture of what he can be

Her goal isn't just to teach knowledge...

by filling the box with more parts

it's putting the pieces together...

to create a work of art

The process is painfully slow at times...

some need more help than others

each child is a work in progress...

with assorted shapes and colors

First she creates a classroom...

where the child can feel safe in school

where he never feels threatened or afraid to try...

and kindness is always the rule

She knows that a child

can achieve much more

when feels secure inside when he's valued and loved...

and believes in himself...

and he has a sense of pride

She models and teaches good character...

and respect for one another

how to focus on strengths...not weaknesses...

and how to encourage each other

She gives the child the freedom he needs...

to make choices on his own

so he learns to become more responsible...

and is able to stand alone

He's taught to be strong and think for himself

as his soul and spirit heal

and the puzzle that's taking shape inside...

has a much more positive feel

The child discovers the joy that comes

from learning something new...

*and his vision grows as he begins
to see all the things he can do
A picture is framed as more pieces fit...
an image of the child within
with greater strength and confidence...
and a belief that he can win!
All because a hero was there...
in the HEART of a teacher who cared
enabling the child to become much more...
than he ever imagined...or dared
A teacher with a HEART for her children...
knows what teaching is all about
she may not have all the answers...
but on this...she has not doubt
When asked which subjects she loved to teach,
she answered this way and smiled...
“It’s not the subjects that matter...*

it's all about teaching the CHILD."

Paula J. Fox

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION

Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/ projects using living humans as subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

LSU
 Institutional Review Board
 Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair
 131 David Boyd Hall
 Baton Rouge, LA 70803
 P: 225.578.8692
 F: 225.578.6792
 irb@lsu.edu
 lsu.edu/irb

— Applicant, Please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as parts A-E, listed below, when submitting to the IRB. Once the application is completed, please submit two copies of the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at <http://www.lsu.edu/screeningmembers.shtml>

- A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:
 - (A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of part B thru E.
 - (B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1&2)
 - (C) Copies of all Instruments to be used.
 - *If this proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.
 - (D) The consent form that you will use in the study (see part 3 for more information.)
 - (E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB. Training link: (<http://php.nihtaining.com/users/login.php>)
 - (F) IRB Security of Data Agreement: (<http://www.lsu.edu/irb/IRB%20Security%20of%20Data.pdf>)

1) Principal Investigator: Rank:
 Dept: Ph: E-mail:

2) Co Investigator(s): please include department, rank, phone and e-mail for each

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E-5833 LSU Proposal # _____
 Complete Application
 Human Subjects Training

3) Project Title:

Study Exempted By:
 Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
 Institutional Review Board
 Louisiana State University
 203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
 225-578-8692 | www.lsu.edu/irb
 Exemption Expires: 2/7/2016

4) Proposal? (yes or no) If Yes, LSU Proposal Number
 Also, if YES, either This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant
 OR More IRB Applications will be filed later

5) Subject pool (e.g. Psychology students)
 *Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature Date (no per signatures)

** I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changes, I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU institutions in which the study is conducted. I also understand that it is my responsibility to maintain copies of all consent forms at LSU for three years after completion of the study. If I leave LSU before that time the consent forms should be preserved in the Departmental Office.

Screening Committee Action: Exempted <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not Exempted <input type="checkbox"/> Category/Paragraph _____	
Reviewer <input style="width: 100%;" type="text" value="Kristin A. Canale"/>	Signature <input style="width: 100%;" type="text" value="Kristin A. Canale"/>
	Date <input type="text" value="01/24/2012"/>

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM FOR TEACHERS

Title of study: *An Exploration of Reading Methodology in Elementary Studies: Comparing the Basal Approach and Balanced Literacy*

Researcher: Richelle L. Acosta, richelle.acosta@selu.edu; (XXX)XXX-XXXX

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to compare two approaches to reading instruction: a basal program and balanced literacy instruction.

Research Procedures: A multiple case study method will be employed using four first-grade elementary teachers in two elementary schools located in southern Louisiana.

Potential Risks: There are no potential risks to any participants.

Potential Benefits: The main benefit of this study is that it will add to the body of research knowledge about reading strategies that teachers use related to elementary classrooms.

Participation: You may choose not to participate in the study, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Your relationship with the school, researchers, or Louisiana State University will not be damaged in any way if you choose not to participate in the study or if you decide to withdraw from the study.

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Louisiana State University. If you have questions regarding the IRB, please contact:

Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair
131 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, La. 70803
Phone: 225-578-8692
Lsu.edu/irb

Confidentiality: Confidentiality will be ensured. Names will only be released to research team members. Data will be kept in a locked file cabinet when not being gathered.

Signature: *“I have been fully informed of the above-described procedure, the possible benefits and risks, and I am willing to participate in this study.”*

Participant’s Name

Title

Participant’s Signature

Date

APPENDIX C: CLASSROOM TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background/Education:

1. How long have you been teaching? What grades?
2. What is your highest degree? Other certifications?
3. Why did you decide to become a teacher?
4. What is your greatest reward as a teacher? Challenge?

Instructional Philosophy:

5. How do you differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with differing abilities?
6. How do you include parents in their child's education? How often?
7. What do you think defines/makes an effective reading teacher? Why?

Reading Instruction:

8. Describe the reading program in use by your school. How does it impact instruction?
9. What do you find students struggle with most in reading?
10. Do students have free choice in selecting books to read?
11. Is it important to supply a purpose when reading? Why or why not?
12. How do you use modeling/teaching of comprehension strategies to develop independent readers?
13. What types of reading material is available to your students in the classroom?
14. How is technology integrated into the reading curriculum?
15. How does standardized testing affect/impact instruction?
16. What do you think are the top five most important reading/literacy skills students need to possess?

Classroom Management:

17. What techniques do you utilize to ensure effective classroom management?
18. What do you do when a discipline problem arises?
19. How important is communication with parents and/or guardians?
20. How do you motivate your students to learn?

Assessment:

21. How do you evaluate and monitor students' progress?
22. What type(s) of assessment(s) do you use? Is (Are) it (they) primarily informal, formal, or authentic?
23. Explain how you evaluate the learning that is taking place in your classroom.
24. How do you evaluate your own teaching performance?

APPENDIX D: PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background/Education:

1. How long have you been in education? An administrator?
2. What is your highest degree?
3. What are your areas of certification?
4. Why did you decide to become an administrator?
5. What is your greatest reward as a principal? Challenge?

Instructional Philosophy:

6. How do you include parents in their child's education?
7. How do you motivate students to learn?
8. How do you motivate your teachers?
9. In what ways do you provide for professional development for your teachers?
10. What do you think defines/makes an effective reading teacher? Why?

Reading Instruction:

11. Describe the reading program in use by your school. How does it impact instruction?
12. What do you think are the top five most important reading/literacy skills students need to possess?
13. How is technology integrated into the reading curriculum?
14. How does standardized testing affect/impact instruction?

Assessment:

15. How do you monitor students' progress?
16. What type of assessments do your teachers use?
17. Describe what you look for when observing a reading lesson in the teacher. In the students.
18. How do you evaluate your own leadership performance?

Other:

19. Can you describe any other literacy/reading resources that may be available at your school?
20. How has being a National Board Certified Teacher impacted/changed the teacher(s) at your school?

APPENDIX E: COMPARISON CHART FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

School	Pine Grove Elementary		Whispering Forest	
SPS	B-		C-	
Reading Emphasis	Balanced Literacy		Basal Approach	
Teachers	Adams	Smith	Griffin	McDonald
Current Grade Level	1st	1st	1st	1st
Certification	Elem. Educ.	Elem. Educ.	Elem. Educ.	Elem. Educ.
Highest Degree	BA	BA	MA	BS
Other Certification	NBCT			
Total years teaching	10	8	7	10

VITA

Richelle L. Acosta received her Bachelor of Arts and Masters of Education degrees from Nicholls State University. She also holds an Education Specialist Certificate in Gifted Education from Louisiana State University. Ms. Acosta taught in the elementary grades for 14 years before advancing to higher education. She currently is an instructor in the Teaching and Learning Department at Southeastern Louisiana University where she teaches reading methods and supervises student teachers.