

## Characteristics of Exemplary Teachers

- Characteristic #1: Coherent and Thorough Integration of Skills with High Quality Reading and Writing Experiences.
- Characteristic #2: A High Density of Instruction.
- Characteristic #3: Extensive Use of Scaffolding.
- Characteristic #4: Encouragement of Student Self-Regulation.
- Characteristic #5: A Thorough Integration of Reading and Writing Activities.
- Characteristic #6: High Expectations for All Students.
- Characteristic #7: Masterful Classroom Management.
- Characteristic #8: An Awareness of their Practices and the Goals Underlying Them.

**Characteristic #1: Coherent and Thorough Integration of Skills with High Quality Reading and Writing Experiences.** When surveyed almost all exemplary primary teachers indicated that they used some combination of skills instruction with real reading and writing experiences; however, in high achieving classrooms that combination was better integrated, more balanced and had a greater sense of deliberate decisions. Instead of seeing balance in terms of a scale in which one chooses a handful of strategies from more traditional skill-based reading programs and an equal number of activities from more holistic reading programs; these teachers worked to bring a view of balance more like the balance in nature in which parts worked harmoniously together with wholes to achieve a sense of integration in their classroom programs. These teachers did teach decoding explicitly through the effective use of ongoing skill mini-lessons, but they also provided opportunities for students to engage in authentic reading and writing activities. In no high achieving classroom did a teacher exclusively focus on the teaching of skills to the exclusion of meaningful reading and writing opportunities. On the other hand, in no high achieving classroom did a teacher simply provide opportunities for reading and writing without providing critical instruction about strategies and skills. Their instruction reflected fluid transitions as they moved from wholes to parts and from parts to wholes. Teaching was a dialectical process in which teachers were able to envision instruction at two levels simultaneously -- always seeing the parts within wholes and the wholes formed by parts. This type of instructional balance was one critical factor that set apart the instruction of high-achieving exemplary primary teachers from the instruction of others.

**What would this mean for the reading program?** Time should be set aside for meaningful reading and writing experiences. Teachers should read aloud on a daily basis. Students should have opportunities for independent reading and writing on a daily basis. Skills should evolve out of meaningful reading and writing experiences. Lessons focused on skills and strategies should be based on information collected from the students and considered in light of district expectations. Careful observations of journal entries and/or rough drafts during writing workshop provide insights into what skills and strategies need to be addressed in whole group and small group instruction and through individual conferences. Careful monitoring of oral reading and written responses provide additional insights into what skills and strategies lesson need to be developed and implemented by the teacher. Shared and guided reading experiences should provide meaningful ways for students to access whole texts, but the teacher must always be able to see the parts within those whole. A friendly, familiar core poem once in the heads and oral language of all children can be looked at in terms of its potential for exploring sounds, letters, word parts, words, syntax patterns and semantic cues. Daily routines like writing and reading a morning message together through interactive writing also become an opportunity for teachers to address instructional needs related to concepts of print, letter naming, phonemic awareness, word identification, vocabulary, comprehension and writing mechanics. A teacher must take the time to clearly identify what “parts” they are responsible for teaching and intentionally use that information as a frame for considering how to move

instruction from wholes to parts or from parts to wholes. This instructional balance could not be achieved as effectively by a program planned and scripted by an outside publisher unfamiliar with the teacher, the children in the classroom and the expectations of the local school district.

**Characteristic #2: A High Density of Instruction.** In the classrooms of high-achieving exemplary primary teachers, instruction was dense. Instructional density was defined as designing and conducting lessons in which multiple goals were embedded. More holistic reading and writing activities were tightened up so that more instructional value could be gained from the activities especially for those students most in need of the instruction. In other words, these teachers were able to turn up the heat in their instruction so that more students benefited from the instruction. This often required rethinking whole class instructional lessons differentiating instruction at multiple levels to meet the diverse needs of students within their classrooms. These teachers were observed to be quick thinking -- able to seize teachable moments with a sense of intentionality. They knew when to follow the lead of the children especially when it suggested a direction in which the children needed to head. Again their skilled ability to insert appropriate mini-lessons throughout their instruction was one way in which they were able to intensify instruction.

**What would this mean in a reading program?** Almost every classroom routine can be reexamined to see how it could be made denser. Even when classroom practices have great value in and of themselves -- reading aloud from picture books or chapter books -- teachers can consider how to extend those opportunities so that additional instructional goals can be addressed. In one classroom, the reading aloud of a strong narrative story from a picture book was sometimes followed with story grammar analysis using a simple frame: "Somebody...Wanted...But...So." Using a large laminated chart with those elements clearly identified on it, the classroom teacher invited the class to contribute their analysis of the story structure in response to the book. Information from that chart is transferred to another laminated chart that recorded those elements from a series of stories read aloud in the class over time. This chart allowed for additional discussion of connections between texts, authors and genres.

The ongoing reading of chapter books provided another opportunity to address additional instructional goals. An ongoing record of the content of a chapter was developed by inviting students to summarize the main things that happen in the part of the story read aloud that day. Students were systematically assigned to add a visual image to the summary recorded by the teacher. These individual pages were collected and shared each day before reading the next section of the story. Once the book had been completed, all of the illustrated summaries were bound together and placed in the reading corner creating an abridged version which students could reread in their own language.

Examining classroom routines in which one person does something while everyone else watches is particularly critical especially when the one person is the teacher. Shifting students out of a more passive learning mode is one way to increase the density of instruction. For example, in a making words lesson in which the teacher typically builds word families on an overhead projector while students watch and chorally call out responses, the addition of a simple box grid given to each student in which they are invited to write down the words one word per box as they are generated increases the density of the lesson. Inviting students to go back and add illustrations for each of the words generated makes the lesson denser. Inviting students to generate additional examples on their own extends the lesson further.

Similarly the addition of a simple graphic organizer for each student during a large group shared reading in which the teacher typically reads aloud while students watch and interact chorally can increase the density of the instruction. Students can be invited to stop and process the information in the shared reading long the way -- make predictions, take guesses, reveal world knowledge -- on simple graphic organizers which encourages more active participation and creates a paper trail to review to assess students' levels of involvement.

**Characteristic #3: Extensive Use of Scaffolding.** Scaffolding is simply defined as the process by which the teacher monitors students' learning carefully and steps in to provide assistance on an as needed basis. Scaffolding was used extensively by exemplary primary teachers in high-achieving primary classrooms. These teachers were able to identify where a student was at, where a student needed to be and the kind of temporary instructional structures that needed to be implemented to help the student build a bridge between those two points. These teachers were focused on students, not lessons, activities or materials. They shifted their focus from teaching to learning by monitoring student's thought processes and performances while they were teaching. In other classrooms where the focus seemed to be more on teaching, there was often an apparent lack of awareness or concern about whether the students were learning. High-achieving exemplary teachers responded to students through the effective use of questioning which assisted students in constructing new knowledge and information about reading and writing.

**What would this mean in a reading program?** This characteristic is seen in the differentiation of instruction as teachers attempt to meet the needs of all students. This happens in whole class routines which are inherently individualized such as process-oriented reader and writer workshop formats. In reader's workshop, students are guided in their selection of appropriate texts, supported in their reading of those texts and instructed through the use of small group and individual conferences tailored to their needs and curriculum demands. In writer's workshop, students are guided in their selection of writing topics and tasks, supported in the writing process and instructed through the use of small groups and individual conferences focused on the writing they are producing. Small group and individual meetings with students allow for scaffolded instruction that begins with the text read or written by the students and demands specific responses from the teacher through strategic questioning. This assists the student to build on what they know and make bridges to things that are new. The closer the teacher response is tailored to the student's performance, the more effective the scaffold is built. In reading, this means teacher response needs to be based on the individual miscues and self-corrections of the reading observed during the conference. In writing, teacher response needs to be based on the individual written entry of the student.

Since individualization is not always possible given the constraints on teaching and learning in most classrooms, differentiation is also seen in modifications made in whole group instruction. For example, classroom instruction which often involves all students in the same task at the same time needs to become sensitive to the diversity of needs of the learners. A making words lesson that involves all students in building word families to develop and practice the use of analogy as a word identification strategy may not be needed by some students. If the anchor word "bug" is use to help develop the -ug family, some students might be involved separately in the creation of a semantic word map using the word "bug" as an anchor and exploring semantic connections to the words (insects, annoying behaviors, surveillance devices, etc.) which may be more appropriate to their needs. Another group of students might be involved in building a family of words based on the chunk "bug" exploring how affixes

might be attached to the word (bugs, bugged, bugging, buggy, buggies, etc.). The basic making words lesson can now be focused on those students who most need to work on graphophonemic clues. Everyone can benefit from the additional work by students to explore the word at semantic and syntactic levels as well.

Similarly if a classroom teacher has used a simple graphic organizer to engage students in organizing their response to a shared reading; not all students need teacher support during the rereading of the text to review information on the graphic organizer. Some students may be better challenged to use their copy of the text to check responses on their own. Some students may be able to work with partners in reviewing the same material. Those students who most need teacher support during a rereading and review would then become the primary focus of the teacher.

**Characteristic #4: Encouragement of Student Self-Regulation.** In high-achieving primary classrooms, teachers placed a strong emphasis on self-regulation in their students. They encouraged their students to monitor their own progress. They taught the students strategies for what to do when they encountered difficult aspects of the reading and writing process. They promoted independence in their students through their selection of classroom activities, routines and structures.

**What would this mean in a reading program?** The evidence of a classroom committed to encouraging student self-regulation would be observed in the level of independence exhibited by the students. In these classrooms, readers are equipped with a repertoire of strategies which they can articulate and use to help themselves during the reading process. Instruction is focused on strategies not just the transmission of information. Students are taught how to figure out words and their meanings, not just what are certain words and their meanings. Instruction for comprehension goes beyond a guided parade through literal level questions. Students are taught how to monitor their levels of understanding, recognize when meaning has broken down and fix up the reading so that it makes sense.

Independent behavior in students is also critical so that a teacher can be assured that the learning opportunities that take place away from the teacher -- while the teacher is usually working with small groups or individuals -- are as valuable as the learning opportunities that take place with the teacher. In these classrooms learning opportunities are created which provide students with additional opportunities to engage in learning about print away from the teacher. Students know what those learning opportunities are and provided simple structures that foster their independence away from the teacher. A teacher developed a punch card format which identified eight response activities on which students could work independently: discussion group, reading corner, writing corner, puppets and drama, art, oral presentation, buddy reading and special project. For each category of response, the student has the possibility of completing the activity three times "punching out" one number in a category each time they complete an activity. The card is a concrete visual reminder of what students can do independently and the format encourages students to try and keep track of a variety of activities completed independently.

Another teacher developed a folder based on poems that were shared in the large group setting. Each student had a hard copy of the poem in their folder. Each student created a set of flashcards based on the words from the poem. Each student had a word list based on the poem. When students were in need of independent activity, they would turn to their poetry folder. They could practice their poems trying to read them accurately and quickly. They could use their word cards for a variety of independent activities including reconstructing the poem, making innovations and other flashcard games. They practice their word lists to increase their recognition of the words. Each of the activities was designed to provide students with additional independent opportunities to practice with print.

**Characteristic #5: A Thorough Integration of Reading and Writing Activities.** In high-achieving primary classrooms, reading and writing were interwoven. Writing was seen as an integral part of reading development. Instead of being an activity or subject in and of itself, writing was seen as a critical way for students to learn about print. Effective use of writing conferences were a critical tool for teaching about both reading and writing. Not only were reading and writing thoroughly integrated, reading and writing were integrated effectively in content areas. This type of thorough integration was the other critical difference observed in the instruction in high-achieving classroom when compared to other classrooms where the impact was not as great.

**What would this mean in a reading program?** If writing was seen as a vehicle for learning about print, a classroom routine like journal writing would become a central force in the reading program. The teacher would use large group focus lessons that would further develop both reading and writing skills and strategies based on input from the reading and writing samples of the students. Students would learn about print by writing entries each day in their journals. The teacher would use conferencing time with the students as additional time to teach more directly about the reading and writing strategies individual and small groups of students need. Sharing time becomes a time for students to practice their reading and learn from each other. Each entry provides an opportunity for a written response from the teacher individually tailored to the student's reading level. The written response from the teacher provides another opportunity for the students to practice their reading and learn more about print structures.

In the best classroom programs, the reading and writing is not only well-integrated, it is integrated well into the content of subject areas. This is often seen in the development of effective thematic instruction. It begins with a focus on inquiry into a subject area like research on plants in a science program. The teacher uses inquiry questions as a basis for planning authentic uses of reading and writing to learn more about the content. Six core experiences are planned. First, it begins with the teacher creating a number of stimulating hands-on inquiry activities -- interesting experiments and simulations, field trips, guest speakers. These activities generate interest in the content causing the students to talk about the topic and become more motivated to read and write in researching their inquiries. In the reading aloud experience, the teacher selects a number of appropriate titles that can be read aloud to assist students in learning more about plants and to introduce titles which can be subsequently used for independent reading. In the shared writing experience, large group writing activities can be used to collectively explore and record what is being learned about the content modeling writing that can be done more independently. In the independent reading experience, the teacher assembles a number of thematic related titles at many different levels which students are invited to read as a part of their independent reading opportunities. In the independent writing experience, the teacher provides a number of invitations for students to select to write about the content. Keeping a learning log in which students describe what they are learning about plants may be one vehicle teachers use to foster independent writing that is

content related. Finally, the teacher can structure a sharing experience in which students can talk about what it is they are reading, writing and learning about the content.

**Characteristic #6: High Expectations for All Students.** Exemplary teachers in high-achieving primary classrooms began with the view that all of their students were capable for becoming readers and writers. They were seldom heard adjusting their expectations for a student based on variables within the child's background but not within their control. While they acknowledged maturational differences between children, they also adjusted their instructional efforts to try to influence those maturational differences. In a period in which teachers often are quick to label and sort children as a frontline intervention when things weren't working, these teachers always returned to adjusting their instruction as they tried to meet the needs of the children in their classrooms.

**What would this mean in a reading program?** The first difference might not be readily observable because it is really reflected in a shift of thinking. Teachers in these programs have shifted their way of looking at children from the more common deficit model (i.e., what it is a child can't do) to an asset model (what it is a child can do). This shift in thinking should, however be observable in the way teachers talk about their children. Descriptions would focus on what all children bring to the classroom and what it is all children can do in these classrooms. Every child would be seen as a reader and writer somewhere on the development continuum without allowing conventional behaviors to define a child as capable or not. This would be true no matter what obstacles and hurdles they might be trying to overcome. This shift to an asset model would also be seen in the way those teachers assess children carefully watching and noting what it is children are doing when provided reading and writing opportunities. One would also observe greater equity in terms of all children receiving access to quality instruction. Instead of differentiating instruction in such a way that some children would have a qualitatively different type of instruction, these teachers know that it is primarily the level of support which needs to be adjusted. Quality instruction is still accessible because it is provided in smaller groups or individually with greater frequency and intensity. The impact of this shift would be most noticeable in talking to the students. Even though who have experienced some struggles with reading and writing will still see themselves as capable and efforts continue as long as the students see reading and writing within their reach. And if these teachers begin to sense that classroom instruction is not having the impact it should have on some children, the first recourse of these teachers is to adjust their instruction. They avoid the tendency to shift blame especially to factors beyond the school's control and they delay the tendency to seek outside assistance as the primary way to address the struggles a child might be having.

**Related Resources:**

**Characteristic #7: Masterful Classroom Management.** Exemplary teachers in high-achieving primary classrooms were well-prepared. Their organization provided a good model for their students. Classroom routines were used effectively to manage the potential chaos in primary classrooms though routines were not used in a rigid manner. These teachers also conveyed a clear, coherent set of expectations and

consequences for the students. They were good managers of not only student behaviors, but they also maximized the use of time in their classrooms as it related to activities, student interactions and outside resource people. High-achieving classrooms maintained a better sense of instructional flow.

**What would this mean in a reading program?** The outwardly evidence of a well-managed classroom is the engagement level of the learners. In high-achieving classrooms, outside observers were able to document a 90/90 level of student engagement -- ninety percent of the students on task ninety percent of the time. Engagement was promoted by classroom preparation which minimized down time. Teachers were masterful at even using relatively small blocks of time for instructional purposes. In one classroom, even transitions between activities were teachable moments. When a large group activity at the carpet had finished, the teacher dismissed children to return to their desks to read messages waiting in their journals by silently flashing names written on index cards. This technique allowed for a more orderly transition and seized the teachable moment to further expose students to print. In these classrooms, routines were used daily as a way to organize the school week. Children could anticipate regular events and prepare themselves ahead a time to maximize the value of opportunities to read and write. Routines were often introduced, guided and practiced in large group settings before gradually releasing responsibility to students working in small groups or individually. Routines were set up so they offered the possibility of variability in activity to gradually shift the focus to activities of increasing sophistication.

In these classrooms, there were relatively few times when large numbers of students were sitting passively while a few others were actively engaged. As discussed previously, simple tools were used to increase the engagement of all students particularly in large group settings. When ever the classroom teacher found a time when one person was doing while most were watching -- especially when that one person was the teacher -- those times were closely examined to see how the number of students doing the activity could be increased. Overall, these were classrooms in which significant effort was made to see that all students were actively engaged in learning every possible moment of the day.

**Characteristic #8: An Awareness of their Practices and the Goals Underlying Them.** Exemplary teachers in high-achieving primary classrooms were able to articulate their practices and their reasons for why they used them. Instructional practices were grounded in current theory and research. Instructional decisions were based on knowledge of reading and writing and their understanding of the students in their classrooms. Instructional decisions were also considered within the external expectations from within and beyond the local school district.

**What would this mean in a reading program?** In these classrooms, it is clear that teachers are acting with a sense of intentionality. It is obvious that the instructional decisions teachers are making are based on their knowledge of reading and writing, knowledge of the children who happen to be their responsibility this year and knowledge of the external standards to which they are being held accountable.

Knowledge of reading and writing is obtained through a well-conceived plan of professional development that integrates efforts within the school district with self-initiated efforts outside of the school district. These teachers are actively involved in professional organizations like the Wisconsin State Reading Association, the Wisconsin Council for English Language Arts, Wisconsin Education Association Council and Wisconsin Early Childhood Association that readily make available professional development opportunities and experiences. This allows them to make decisions about reading and writing instruction which can be grounded in the best research, theory and expert opinion. Such experiences might include regular attendance at the statewide conventions and conferences of professional organizations, educational agencies and universities; participation in graduate programs for advance licensure and professional development; contributions to teacher as reader groups or other support networks to stay connected to other professionals who can inform one thinking and improve one practice; and self-studies through the frequent use of reading resources and journals like the *WSRA Journal*, *The Reading Teacher*, *Language Arts*, *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *Reading Research Quarterly*, *The Journal of Literacy Behaviors*, *Childhood Education*, *Young Children*, *Phi Delta Kappan* and *Educational Leadership*.

Knowledge of students is obtain through intense efforts to “roam the known” at the beginning of every school year using a variety of informal and formal assessment techniques to really get a sense of where learners are at as they enter a classroom. Knowledge of students is also seen in the ongoing assessment of students throughout the school year by seizing every instructional experience with the learners as an opportunity to learn more about them. In these classrooms, we would see teachers never separated from their class lists on clip boards, comment grids or index card flipcharts so that they can always record important anecdotal information about the learners with whom they are working.

Knowledge of external standards are seen in classrooms where teachers have a well-internalized sense of what it is their students are suppose to know and be able to do before moving on to other classrooms. Documents like the district curriculum guides, textbook series scope and sequences and the Standards for English /Language Arts are not hidden away. They are easily accessible. These resources have been consulted to create frameworks in which to make instructional decisions. Some teachers use these resources to create checklists and grids to assist the monitoring of

individual student progress and the evaluation of classroom practices.

What could benefit children more than having a professional who is well-grounded in the research, theory and expert opinion in the field, who is knowledgeable about the children with whom he or she works and who is knowledgeable about the identified expectations of the school, district or state.