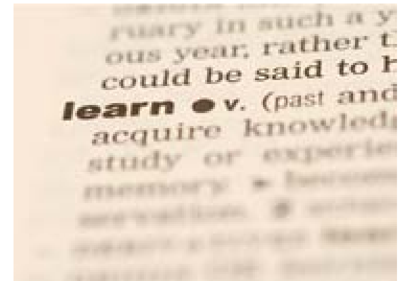
Diversity and Reading Instruction



Embracing Our Differences:

What Teaching Reading Is All About

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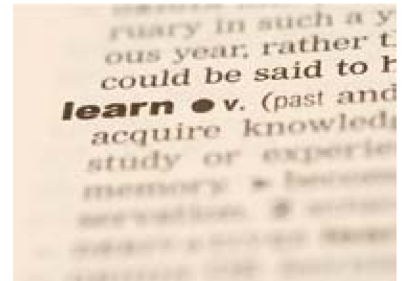

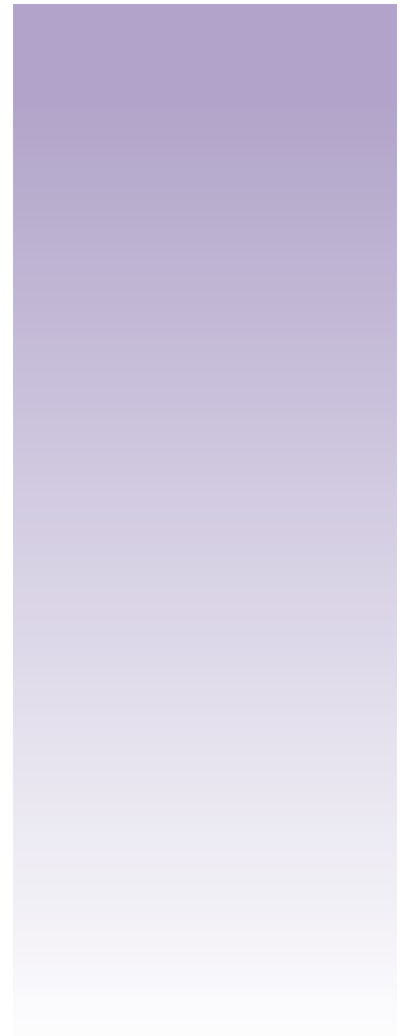

Today's Classrooms

Teaching reading in our schools is a rewarding and exciting experience. Today, as in years past, teaching reading is also a major challenge and a complex process. Our classrooms have always been diverse, but now they are changing at a more rapid pace than ever before. Students represent countless racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, and an increasing number of children are poor. The major premises of this book are twofold: The first is the firm belief that all children in our diverse communities can become skillful and motivated readers, and the second is that you, the teacher, have a significant impact on whether or not children in your class are successful in learning to read. Regardless of your students' background, what you teach, how you teach, and how you treat students will have lasting effects on every student in the classroom.

Children in our classrooms today truly exemplify the fact that we live in a diverse society. Capitalizing on and embracing this diversity are what make teaching in today's schools so enjoyable and at times painful. Even though we share many more similarities than differences, children are wonderfully different. Teaching children to read requires you to realize this fact and to embrace the wide range of differences and needs found in classrooms. Teachers of reading must recognize that capitalizing on differences is an indispensable aspect of their profession. Recognizing differences, accepting them, embracing and celebrating them, and then planning sound reading instruction based on this knowledge is what separates teachers who attempt to meet individual needs from those who do not. If all reading instruction could be the same for all children in each grade, teaching reading would be easy and relatively boring.

While children from all backgrounds can experience difficulties in learning to read, it is widely documented that low reading achievement is highest among poor children, ethnic minority children, and children who speak languages other than English at home (Donahue et al., 1999; Anderson, 1994). The common characteristic linking all of these groups is poverty, not the color of their skin. Rosenshine (2002), noted researcher on teacher effectiveness, reviewed the research literature on teaching students from low-income homes and concludes:

> Since 1963, a great deal of time, money, and effort has been devoted to closing the gap in reading scores and bringing children who are on free and reduced lunch (FRL) to grade level on standardized tests at Grade 3 and above. To date, we have not been very successful. There have only been a few schools with 70% or more of FRL students and where students are reading at grade level, at the end of third grade, on a standardized test. (p. 273)

Diversity

Our public schools in America reflect two continuing and growing realities: the diversity of students and the increasing number of poor children. We live in the most diverse country in the world. Not surprisingly, diversity has always been a reality in our schools and in the teaching of reading. Students are different in a multitude of ways—cultural history, race, social awareness, emotional maturity, psychological well-being, cognitive abilities, physical maturity, thinking abilities, creativity, preferred learning style, learning rate, language facility, socioeconomic level, and personal interests, to name a few. Speaking of the rich diversity in human characteristics, Brown and Kysilka (2002) state:

> The wide variety found in even a small handful of students offers exciting possibilities to the teacher who knows how to take advantage of these differences. In multicultural and global education, the diversity of humans is seen as a richness to be enjoyed, treasured, and protected. Teachers and students must not see diversity as a problem. The challenge is not the diversity itself but tapping into the diversity in a positive way. (pp. 16–17)

In today's schools, many students speak a dialect other than Standard English, and many are learning English as a second language (ESL). There are many dialects in the United States, and each dialect is logical and governed by a set of internal rules. As teachers, you must show respect for a nonstandard dialect, while at the same time modeling Standard English. Furthermore, a student's competence is unrelated to his or her use of dialect. Dialectal errors made in reading may or may not interfere with a student's progress. It is important not to penalize students for dialectal errors in reading as long as comprehension is unaffected.

A large percentage of students have a native language other than English. It is not uncommon to have students whose native language is Spanish, Haitian-Creole, Polish, Navajo, or Vietnamese, to name just a few in your classroom. The census of 2000 shows that nearly one-fifth of school-age children in the United States speak a language other than English at home. Hispanic students constitute a majority of non-English speakers in U.S. schools. Recent U.S. Census Bureau reports indicate that one of every seven people in the United States is Hispanic, and this number is rising due to immigration and birthrates. The population growth for Asians is second in the United States and is growing as well for the same reasons. Additionally, most immigrants to the United States are young and in their 20s and thus at the age when people have children.

Many students whose native language is not English may experience difficulties learning to read in English. Many of these students have not had an abundance of oral language experiences in English in the home, do not understand spoken English, and know little written English. Sound reading instruction in both the student's native language and English is recommended. In addition to detailing language competencies for ESL students, the *ESL Standards for Pre-K–12 Students* (1997) exposes three myths with regard to second language learning:

Myth 1: ESL students learn English easily and quickly simply by being exposed to and surrounded by native English speakers.

Myth 2: When ESL learners are able to converse comfortably in English, they have developed proficiency in the language.

Myth 3: In earlier times, immigrant children learned English rapidly and assimilated into American life. (p. 3)

More cultures are represented in our classrooms today because the United States is continuing to become more culturally diverse. Driving the growing diversity is the continuous flow of immigrants. One very important reality in teaching today is that *you will teach students with cultural backgrounds different from your own.* This one fact is what makes teaching so intrinsically satisfying and at the same time so complex. As a member of the teaching profession, you have the responsibility to value and embrace students from diverse linguistic, racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds.

Cultural differences influence student performance and should influence classroom instruction (Brooks, 2006). For example, students' understanding of text will be better

if they are reading and interacting with materials that are familiar to their culture and background experiences. Bottom line, it's important to pay attention to culture. Accepting this realization and making adjustments in your instruction is the hallmark of an effective teacher in diverse communities. Au (1993) labels this type of teaching as "culturally responsive instruction" and defines it as being "consistent with the values of students' own cultures and aimed at improving academic learning" (p. 13). Thus, classroom teachers need to adjust or differentiate their reading instruction to meet the natural strengths of the cultures represented in their classrooms. Diller (1999) emphasizes the importance of knowing a student's culture and its relationship to providing sound instruction:

> We must realize that culture is a viable teaching tool. We must seek first to get to know each child as an individual, including understanding the child's background. If the culture is unfamiliar, we must find help through children's literature, colleagues who know about that culture, and the children and parents themselves. Essentially, we find a guide into the culture. (p. 827)

Poverty

In addition to diversity, the second reality facing teachers and our schools is the increasing number of children living in poverty in the United States. Poverty exists in all areas—rural, suburban, and urban—and occurs in all races. Harold Hodgkinson (1999), a noted demographer, labels poverty as the "universal handicap," with social class more important than race.

Twenty-one percent of all children under the age of 18 in the United States live in poverty, and this percentage increases to 43% for African American children and to 41% for Hispanic children (*Youth Indicators 1996*, 1996). Fifty-three percent of children raised by single mothers live in poverty. Sixty-three percent of African American children and 68% of Hispanic children of single-mother households live in poverty in the United States. Hewson and Kahle (2003) report that large urban districts educate 35% of all students living in poverty, 30% of all English language learners, and nearly 50% of minority children. A recent study of the Washington-based Tax Policy Center (Burman & Wheaton, 2005) found that more than 25% of American children (consisting of 19.5 million children, of whom nearly 50% are African American and 46% are Hispanic) belong to families that are too poor to fully qualify for the $1,000-a-year child-tax credit.

Sadly, inequalities in the quality of our public schools are all too evident just by driving by schools in poor neighborhoods and schools in affluent neighborhoods. It is not only differences in the physical buildings and facilities themselves; the quality of the curriculum and of the human and material resources available to children in poor districts in many instances is not equal to that available to their more-affluent counterparts. The quality of life in many of our schools is not in keeping with our American ideals. In Jonathan Kozol's book *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1991), he chooses the correct word—"savage"—in the title to characterize the inequalities in our public schools.

Poverty is a vicious condition that can, among other things, rob children of the numerous opportunities to learn that are afforded to their more-affluent peers. The variable "opportunity to learn" is perhaps the most powerful variable in education. Many low-income children are not given the opportunity to experience the wide range

of background experiences, crucial opportunities, and type and quality of interactions with language and books that will foster achievement in our schools, and this relates specifically to reading development. Thus, many low-income children are more likely to be at a disadvantage in terms of "reading" opportunities than other children.

Poverty directly affects student achievement. Without a doubt, there is an achievement gap between poor and affluent children (Closing the Achievement Gap Section, 2004. Furthermore, this gap is established even before children begin school. Denton and West (2002) of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted a national study of children entering kindergarten and found that poor children, on average, are significantly behind other children in the areas of health, social skills, and academic achievement. Furthermore, poor children, unlike their more-affluent counterparts, actually fall back in achievement and lose ground during the summer months (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003). It is of particular interest that in relation to school achievement, the strongest effects of poverty are felt when poverty is viewed as a collective unit, such as a school or neighborhood, rather than as an indicator of the low-income status of an individual child. Snow, Burns, & Griffin (1998) provide the following summary of research on socioeconomic level (i.e., SES) and reading achievement:

> We are not saying here that SES is not an important risk marker. What we are saying is that its effects are strongest when it is used to indicate the status of a school or a community or a district, not the status of individuals. A low-status child in a generally moderate or upper status school or community is far less at risk than that same child in a whole school or community of low-status students. (p. 127)

Lyon (2001) agrees, and in his statement to the Subcommittee on Education Reform of the Committee on Education and the Workforce in the U.S. House of Representatives, he comments:

> Unfortunately, reading failure is disproportionately prevalent among children living in poverty. Specifically, in 1998, 64% of African American and 60% of Hispanic students in the U.S. (two groups that experience disproportionate rates of poverty) read below the basic level. Indeed, in many urban districts the percentage of students in the fourth grade who cannot read at basic level approaches 70%. (pp. 3–4)

Thus, this achievement gap is also between racial and ethnic minority and majority students, as well as poor and affluent students. Yet, it must be emphasized that difficulties affecting school performance are present among all children—urban, suburban, or rural—regardless of whether they are rich or poor. Still, the realities children of poverty must face each day are many and complex. We can no longer ignore poverty and its effects not only on U.S. society as a whole but especially on the children. Political, economic, educational, health, and social realities, and corresponding pressures, are realized and heightened for children in low-income areas of the United States.

The problems associated with being poor and living in a poor neighborhood that affect school performance and this achievement gap include:

- Many low-income children are part of families who lead very stressful lives.
- Many parents work two or three jobs at minimum wage to try and satisfy the needs of their families, leaving little extra time for helping their children with schoolwork.

- Many parents lack information concerning community institutions.
- Many of the children's neighborhoods are still segregated from positive health and educational opportunities that other children readily access.
- Many low-income children are exposed to a "different print environment" than their more-affluent counterparts; that is, low-income neighborhoods are many times characterized by having fewer libraries and bookstores, and in the home, there is less exposure to computers, the Internet, interactive videos, books, daily newspapers, and magazines. Implications for teachers regarding these differences in print environment among children include considerably less opportunity for these children to be aware of the concept of a word, print awareness, individual phonemes in words, letter and sound recognition, and word learning (all critical qualities of successful beginning readers).
- Children may get too little sleep, and poor nutrition may be present.
- Many times, children's health, educational, social, and emotional needs do not receive adequate attention because basic survival needs are a priority.
- For many children living in poverty, there is no tomorrow (time occurs only now, not in the future), little goal-setting (i.e., deferring pleasure for a future goal), and only survival in the present.
- The children's neighborhoods often have disproportionate percentages of crime, drug abuse, unemployment, reported child/neglect cases, juvenile arrests, and homeless shelters. Home ownership rates and median household income are low.
- Many of the children's parents face economic insecurity that forces them to make impossible choices daily (for example, should I stay at home to take care of my sick child and miss a day's pay, or leave my child at home alone? Should I pay the car loan this month or put dinner on the table? Should I pay for utilities or food? Should I pay the rent or mortgage or food? Should I pay for health costs or food?).
- Many children and their parents face language and immigration barriers each day that makes successful living complex.
- Many children live in housing projects where tight living quarters increase stress and the likelihood for violence. School is a safe place for many children because they receive healthy meals and spend the day in a heated environment during the winter months.
- Tight living conditions in the home oftentimes are disorganized, and this quality spills over into the classroom environment.
- Many children have poor self-esteem and unmet emotional needs. Often, unmet emotional needs are tied to undesirable behavior in school, as children attempt to satisfy their unmet emotional needs in the classroom rather than attend to the curriculum at hand.
- Many times, parents (and their parents) did not have positive experiences in school, and this attitude is passed on to the children. Because of this one reality, some children may be indifferent to school and actually resist your efforts to teach them.
- Many parents don't know how to help their children in school or to be advocates for them.

- Many children come to school with many difficulties that they do not wish to share with their teachers. Of course, there are exceptions: Many first-grade teachers will attest to the fact that first-graders will tell their teachers much of the happenings in the home.
- Many poor children begin kindergarten behind in formal oral language development and possess limited vocabularies, factors that are directly related to future success in reading. These children often did not have quality preschool experiences and were not given the opportunity to play with language (i.e., they spent little time talking with adults, singing songs, playing word and language games, and having books read to them orally). Thus, many children had different experiences with language that did not prepare them for success in our present school curriculum.

Most importantly, however, even though many children and their parents must overcome tremendously distracting hurdles on a daily basis, *low-income parents do value literacy, and low-income children can and do learn to read at high levels, given quality instruction that is responsive to their needs. Poor children are surprisingly resilient, want to learn, and are just as smart as affluent children!*

Importance of Reading

Children who experience success in learning to read not only are successful throughout their school experience but also in life. The ability to read enables children to open up a whole new world of imagination, wonder, information, and excitement. Successful students use reading as a tool to satisfy a variety of purposes, ranging from reading for specific information to satisfy a job requirement to reading fine literary works for pure enjoyment. These students learn the "how" of reading and develop the desire to read and learn on their own. Low-income children who struggle in learning to read often fail in school and are more likely to drop out of school than other children. These children also are at greater risk of experiencing various social and economic concerns, including continuing in the poverty cycle, low-paying jobs, and crime. Yet, despite these realities, many low-income students become literate and lead successful, productive lives. This is because these students received high-quality reading instruction.

Effective Reading Programs in Diverse Settings

It is unacceptable that a large number of low-income and minority children fail to learn to read. Stressing how poverty is such a powerful predictor of reading performance, Pearson (1997) boldly states, "The irony is that we seem best able to help those students who need our help the least." All children can and do become successful readers when they participate in a high-quality reading program. The key term in this statement is *high quality.* Unfortunately, there is a history of major differences in the educational experiences afforded to low-income children versus their more-affluent peers. After reviewing numerous studies on the subject, Hiebert (1996) observes:

> …we can conclude that access to high-quality reading instruction is not guaranteed for all children. This statement is most true for those students who depend on schools for that access: the children of low-income families. (p. 15)

Richard Allington has reported on these differences for a number of years (Allington, 1977, 1983, 2006; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989). Speaking directly to the instructional differences, Allington and Walmsley (1995) state:

> Low-achieving readers are more likely to be asked to read aloud rather than silently, to have their attention focused on word recognition rather than comprehension, to spend more time working alone on low-level work sheets than on reading authentic texts, and to experience more fragmentation in their instructional activities. Instructional tasks then differentiate the experiences of children who have little difficulty acquiring reading and writing abilities and those who have some or much difficulty. Much of the difference in reading strategy between high- and low-achievement readers can be explained by the differences in the instructional tasks emphasized. (p. 29)

Reading programs in diverse settings that beat the odds and are successful have the following seven emphases:

1. ***A balanced and differentiated program of reading instruction based on an assessment of student strengths and weaknesses is provided.*** "Balanced reading instruction" combines both teacher-directed explanation and modeling of essential reading skills and strategies and student-directed independent reading activities. "Differentiated reading instruction" is adapted or modified to suit a student's current performance level and specific skill needs in reading, taking into account his or her emotional, personal, and cultural needs.

   Your reading instruction must have a blend of both explicit/direct instruction and independent learning activities, and must take into account each student's interests, needs, and culture. The focus here is on matching exactly your instruction to what students need in terms of the five components of the reading process—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000)—as well as students' emotional, personal, and cultural needs. Each of the five components of the reading process is fostered through instruction and an abundance of practice in meaningful text. This includes both placing students in reading materials at an appropriate level of difficulty and teaching them exactly what they need to advance their reading abilities.

2. ***Teachers and administrators model the elements of the teacher effectiveness literature, especially the procedures related to opportunity to learn, explicit/direct instruction, and academic engaged time.*** "Opportunity to learn" refers to teaching the content that students are expected to know and providing sufficient practice for students to learn the content. "Explicit/direct instruction" is instruction in which the teacher directly explains, demonstrates, or models new learnings to students, followed by sufficient guided and independent practice to ensure student mastery. "Academic engaged time" is time in which students are actively working on the objective of the lesson at hand, sometimes called time-on-task or on-task behavior.

   These three elements of teacher effectiveness are implemented with an emphasis on small-group instruction, specific goal setting, daily monitoring of student progress, and a highly interactive, collaborative style of classroom learning. It is essential that important reading objectives are "covered" (i.e., taught and practiced) and that a high amount of student time-on-task or engagement is maintained to ensure student mastery and learning. Of particular note is the recommendation to teach

the specific components of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension through the explicit/direct model of instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). This instructional model lends itself to nurturing the other two elements: opportunity to learn and academic engaged time. Teachers who use this teaching model for specific learning objectives consistently produce higher-than-average achievement in their classes (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1995). Appendix B presents an expanded explanation of this approach. At the heart of this teaching approach is the direct explanation, modeling, or demonstration of a given skill or strategy by the teacher. In some classrooms, this ingredient is notably absent, with little explicit/direct instruction on how to read. Delpit (1991) presents an illustrative example of this condition in recounting an experience of observing a child in a literature-based reading program:

> In California, I saw a black child who was in a class where the kids were supposed to read a piece of literature and then respond to it. The child clearly couldn't read the selection. When asked about the situation, the teachers said, "Oh, he can't read it, but he'll get it in the discussion." Perhaps it's good that he will be able to get it in the discussion, but at the same time nobody is spending time teaching him what he also needs to learn—how to read for himself. (p. 545)

3. ***Students' culture, language, and background experiences are accepted and celebrated in teaching reading.*** Culture affects how children learn in the classroom. Teachers of reading who recognize this fact take advantage of their students' family and culture, including their language, background knowledge, and experiences, in designing effective learning experiences (Edwards, 2004). Many times, diverse students have extensive background knowledge and experiences in areas different from their suburban counterparts. Successful teachers of diverse students pay attention to and learn from what their students say and encourage students to ask questions and give their opinions.

4. ***The focus in the reading program is on students' strength—what they already know, their comprehension of ideas—while at the same time, teaching word identification or decoding skills.*** Being sensitive to and learning about students' culture, community, and background knowledge will help in making educational decisions. Teaching must be based (you have no other choice!) on what students already know. Next, the teaching of reading is concerned with two broad categories: word identification and comprehension. Both areas are interrelated and interdependent. Yet, for purposes of placing students in appropriate reading materials for instruction, it is especially important to favor the comprehension ability over word identification accuracy in determining the appropriate level at which the students need to receive instruction. The primary reason is that many students of diverse backgrounds speak a different dialect and/or are learning English as a second language. It must be remembered that language itself is culturally grounded, and as such, diverse students may be at a disadvantage in communicating effectively in the language used in schools. Students' word identification skills and formal oral language abilities will probably be weaker than their comprehension abilities. Thus, if word identification is given equal weight, many students will be placed at a much lower instructional level. Placing students in reading materials based on their

comprehension abilities, while at the same time providing explicit, concentrated instruction on their word identification weaknesses, is recommended.

5. ***Both instruction and extensive authentic practice are planned for in the area of oral language development in standard or mainstreamed dialect.*** Many students from diverse backgrounds come to school behind in language development without having extensive modeling and practice in the oral language used in our schools. Comparing three-year-olds in both high socioeconomic status (SES) families and low SES families, Hart and Risley (1995) found that the children in high SES families had vocabularies as much as five times greater than low SES children. Because reading ability is closely linked to oral reading facility, it is recommended that students receive concentrated instruction and practice in oral language development, including planned interactive talk experiences.

6. ***A cognitively challenging curriculum, including instruction on critical thinking abilities, is designed and implemented.*** Many reading programs in low-achieving schools emphasize word identification over comprehension instruction, and the comprehension instruction frequently centers on literal or factual comprehension. Critical comprehension or the teaching of thinking strategies is often given little time in the curriculum (Haberman, 1996, 2005). All students need opportunities to think at higher levels to become strategic readers and truly literate.

7. ***Teachers and administrators take personal responsibility for delivering a high-quality instructional program, spending time getting to know every student personally, emphasizing positive behavior, and communicating high teacher expectations, knowing that this will pay off with more student effort and more positive attitudes toward learning.*** Expectations are so powerful that we still don't know all the facets of this trait. Many students do not come from environments where they are told they are bright and can succeed. Successful reading programs are characterized by having teachers and administrators who are totally committed to every child, assume that all children will be successful, realize it is their responsibility to carry out a high-quality program, and in effect say, "These children will learn and be successful—no excuses." In addition, successful teachers and administrators continually hold and communicate high expectations to students and continually expect and communicate to their students that they will put forth a high degree of effort in their classroom activities. Illustrating these points is the following observation by Bonnie Flanagan (1997), a new fourth-grade teacher in a poor urban Chicago elementary school:

> As a white teacher in an African American school, I needed to gain the acceptance of the students, parents, and other teachers. . . . The children are accustomed to a learning environment that focuses on discipline. . . . I put more emphasis on goal-setting and tend to set high expectations for my students. (p. 1)

The preceding seven program emphases require much time, effort, and knowledge on the part of the teacher and the entire school administrative team. It is almost certainly easier to stick with the easy method and be satisfied with the minimal results obtained with minimal effort. *However, successful teachers and administrators take the time and expend the effort necessary in these seven areas, not because they like to work hard, but because they seek satisfying results from their labors.*

Teacher Effort

We know that success in reading depends on the type and quality of instruction. In this sense, teachers need to expend "effort" in specific areas to make a difference in children's learning. However, not all of the hard work and efforts are helpful. Sometimes, hard work and extra efforts serve other purposes: They act as "window dressing"—cosmetic but not really very effective. Since teachers can expend their time and efforts in a variety of ways in teaching reading, it is important that you recognize which efforts are more helpful in teaching, since clearly, not all of them are. Successful teachers work hard and expend a great deal of effort in the seven areas discussed in the previous section (and specific areas and techniques are summarized in Part II of this text). Teachers who exert more effort in these seven areas in teaching reading in diverse classrooms likely will produce significantly higher reading achievement scores in their classes than teachers who exert a lesser amount of effort. The key here is teacher effort—knowing where to put your time and effort in teaching reading.

The concept of "teacher effort" is helpful in explaining, in part, the difference in student achievement scores across teachers. Blair (1975) found that teachers who exerted more effort in selected areas in teaching reading produced significantly higher reading achievement scores in their classes than did teachers who exerted a lesser amount of effort. Teachers were rated on an instrument evaluating efforts to: (1) secure and utilize a variety of materials, (2) provide differentiated instruction, (3) keep records of student progress, and (4) arrange conferences dealing with an individual student's progress. Results indicated that classes taught by high-effort teachers were associated with higher gains on the achievement measure for primary and intermediate grades. The finding that teacher effort makes a difference at both primary and intermediate grade levels is important in that it implies that hard work in teaching makes a difference at any grade level.

Many reasons or causes for reading difficulties in children are "negative" in nature, such as physical or psychological problems or family background realities, and you have little control over these. However, educational reasons or causes for reading failure over which you have complete control include, for example, your assessment program, the reading strategy you choose to teach, and the particular reading approach you emphasize with your students.

These causes for possible reading failure that *are under the influence of the teacher* are "optimistic" causes. Raths (1975a) introduced this concept of an "optimistic criterion," meaning one that teachers can do something about immediately in the classroom, unlike IQ, which cannot be manipulated by professionals. In speaking about the selection of variables for educational research, Raths states:

> As the explanation advanced in a hypothesis suggests optimistic variables, ones that can be manipulated through policy decisions or through re-training, the importance of research is enhanced beyond measure. (p. 6)

The seven components mentioned in the previous section embody optimistic causes. It is on these optimistic causes that you must develop the disposition to focus your efforts in teaching children to read. The specific instructional areas and teaching procedures are detailed in Part II of the text.

Through research over the past 40 years, both on the reading process and the teaching of reading, we know how to advance children's reading abilities. Teaching

is a decision-making process, and where teachers focus their efforts in the teaching of reading is the real key to the success or failure of their program. Samuels (2002), a member of the National Reading Panel, addresses this topic directly when he states:

> The review of the research literature which we did uncovered definite procedures that teachers ought to be using in the classroom if they want to guarantee that virtually all kids will be able to read if they put the effort into it.

You have control over your instructional practices and classroom climate. Knowing where to place your efforts in teaching children makes the difference. With this power, teachers directly affect the achievement of children in their classrooms. *You are the key to the success or failure of a youngster learning to read. Where you focus your efforts in teaching will have lasting effects on your children.*

Overview: Foundations of Reading Instruction

The past 30 years have produced significant research on the reading process and on the components of effective classroom reading instruction. The following is a summary of these important understandings and areas in the teaching of reading.

The Reading Process

Reading is the communication of ideas through writing. We use written language to express ideas. Each reader must identify and interpret these written symbols based on his or her prior knowledge, and make sense of the author's intended meaning. Thus, reading is an active process of constructing meaning from written text in relation to the experiences and knowledge of the reader. In this view, the reader relates or makes connections between the new information in the text to existing or prior knowledge (what the reader already knows). Reading is also viewed as an interactive process in which reading comprehension is the result of many factors interacting while the reader processes text. From this perspective, reading is the fusion of various factors of the text itself, the context or environment in which reading occurs, and factors associated with the reader. Also, reading is an active communication process in which the reader uses effective strategies to comprehend text. At one time or another, one set of factors (e.g., text) may influence comprehension more than another (e.g., context and reader). In a sense, communication occurs between the author and reader, with the reader ultimately arriving at the text's meaning based on his or her own prior knowledge and experience. To fully achieve this communication and understanding, the effective teaching of reading requires a focus on the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Stages of Reading Development

It is important that teachers of reading realize that learning to read is meaning related and is a developmental process in which learners in their own way proceed to become mature readers. Children progress through four broad phases of reading: (1) emergent literacy, (2) formal reading, (3) wide reading, and (4) independent reading.

Although these phases are discussed separately here, no sharp lines of demarcation separate them. In addition, learning to read is an individual activity, and each child's reading abilities evolve in a unique way. Still, it is helpful in planning instruction to

know the different phases through which most children proceed in acquiring one of the most crucial skills of their lives—reading.

Emergent Literacy

Parents and early childhood programs play vital roles in the earliest phase of the development of a child's reading ability. Learning to read begins at birth, long before formal schooling, and parents are their children's first teachers. This phase is more than just reading readiness. The term *emergent literacy* encompasses interactions in reading and writing from birth to age five or six. Parents can help ensure their child's success in reading by sharing good books and fostering a positive attitude toward reading. Both actions informally teach and reinforce a variety of essential readiness skills and abilities, including oral language development, listening ability, phonemic awareness, letter recognition, print awareness, word awareness, and learning of individual words. Likewise, various preschools and television programs such as *Sesame Street* have similar goals involving the development of proper attitudes and oral and written language abilities.

Formal Reading

Beginning in kindergarten (and in some preschools as well), children usually begin more formal development of their reading abilities through a commercially developed program such as a basal reader, a language arts or language experience program, or a combination of these. Both independent word identification and comprehension abilities are systematically taught and reinforced during this phase. Reading is continually encouraged as leisure-time activity, with text comprehension as the ultimate goal. Toward the end of this phase, readers spend less time on word identification and can concentrate more on comprehension. Readers in this phase are made aware of story structure and are guided to use their background of experiences to anticipate and interpret meaning.

Wide Reading

The wide-reading phase usually corresponds with grades four through six and marks a dramatic shift from reading and learning simple narrative and expository text to more complex narrative and expository text—for example, math, science, and social studies books. Successful reading in these areas demands not only general reading abilities but also specific reading-study skills needed for each content area, knowledge of various expository text structures, and ability to seek out, organize, and evaluate new information from a variety of sources. Mastery of basic skills in reading does not predict the ability to read materials with a particular content for specific purposes. Children need to be taught the skills and strategies necessary to pursue the ever-increasing knowledge in all fields—that is, they must learn how to learn.

Independent Reading

The final phase of reading development is characterized by readers who read a lot, enjoy reading, read different types of text differently depending on their purpose, monitor their own comprehension, and make adjustments while reading to comprehend satisfactorily. In this phase, readers are adept at interpreting both narrative and expository text to fulfill their purpose. In essence, they are able to think critically about, and know how to use, what they read.

The Complete Reading Program

For reading development to proceed in a meaningful fashion, classroom time needs to be balanced with respect to goals, characteristics of students, and the quality of students' reading experience. Although each classroom and grade level will differ because of learner goals and characteristics, an effective reading program spans four areas of learning—*instructional, content, recreational,* and *corrective*—as shown in Table 1-1.

Every grade needs to include experiences in each area; however, time should not be split equally among them. More word-identification instruction and practice and less content instruction are required in the primary grades (1–3). In the intermediate grades (4–6), little time is spent on word identification (except advanced word study), and more time is devoted to fluency, vocabulary, and content reading and studying strategies. In every grade, comprehension-related instruction should be the primary focus.

Personal Observations: Teachers-in-Preparation

How was it beneficial working with students from diverse populations in learning to teach reading?

"I was able to work with an English Language Learner (ELL) student and really was able to implement many of the recommended strategies I learned about in my university class."

"It allowed me to interact with students of different backgrounds than my own. I learned to be sensitive to students' family and cultural backgrounds."

"Each child's own culture is so important—I never realized this until I actually tried to motivate urban students to read a story."

Table 1–1 Components of a Complete Reading Program

Components	Learning Experience	Materials
Instructional	Focused and sequential learning experience in word identification and comprehension strategies	Literature books, basal readers, language experience, teacher-made materials
Content	Focused and sequential learning experience in content reading and study strategies	Content texts, content materials, newspapers, magazines, teacher-made materials
Recreational	Wide independent reading, promoting reading as a leisure-time activity	Library books, magazines, book clubs
Corrective	Focused instruction and practice on weak skills and strategies	Literature books, supplemental materials, computer programs, teacher-made materials

"I learned so much from my students—I heard all the statistics and numbers about low-income students, but now I truly know the academic and emotional struggles many students must face every day."

"My first few lessons were too easy for my children. They looked at me like, 'Are you serious?' I found out that urban students want to be challenged and can learn whatever I expect from them."

"I found that the students struggled over background knowledge I assumed they knew. I had not anticipated or planned for this and had to adjust my teaching. It takes a lot of effort to make learning enjoyable for both the teacher and students."

"I was so unsure of myself and my teaching abilities on the first day. I came away from this experience with confidence in my abilities and so much knowledge about living in an urban area."

"I now realize teachers must be concerned with all children—especially those not as fortunate in our society."

"I realized many of my children were so tired from staying up late at night and were hungry, and learning to read was not the top priority I thought it would be in their lives."

"I learned to capitalize on my students' interests in teaching reading."