Improving Urban Literacy Instruction: Learning from Successful Schools

Ten “success indicators” point the way toward effective literacy instruction in schools that serve diverse populations.

Almost weekly I come across articles or newspaper columns, often written by authors with little experience in schools, with ideas on “narrowing the gap”—suggestions to help teachers and other educators, especially those in urban areas, attack the learning achievement difference we see between our most economically lucky students and their less fortunate counterparts. These usually are aimed at our city schools, but they also deal with issues observed in poor rural communities. Too often, however, there is one “quick fix” suggested: teach more phonics, for example, or use motivational tools, as if a single magic bullet can “cure” the problem. My reaction, like those of most of the teachers, principals, specialists, and other experienced educators with whom I work, is a fairly underwhelmed, “Oh, yeah, right….”

Teachers know that just as there is no “free lunch,” there also is no “quick fix” for what is a pervasive and deeply important concern. No single approach or single focus is going to provide an easy answer to everyone’s questions. Luckily, however, the last decade has produced some solid research-based evidence for what works to help schools improve the literacy instruction they conceptualize and deliver to students from diverse backgrounds. Most of these studies, unlike some of the “quick and dirty” research of yore, are long-term, detailed, richly described looks at sets of schools that beat the odds—schools in which students who might normally be considered at-risk outperform expectations and often are outliers in systems where many other students struggle.

The studies range from an early report from the Council on Basic Education that looked at four schools that outperformed their surrounding schools (Weber, 1971) to a study of 13 schools in the eastern, midwestern, and western parts of the United States that began intervention programs and had higher-than-expected results (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole, 2000), and on to a survey of 256 schools representing city schools, suburban schools, and rural schools (Lipson, Mosenthal, Mekkelsen, and Russ, 2004). This research has proven invaluable to our own work in an urban system with more than 600 elementary schools where we developed models of professional development for teachers that helped move their schools forward (Teale, 2008; Blachowicz, Buhle, Frost, and Bates, 2007).
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All of the researchers studied schools in which each educational program adapted to its own local context; no one curriculum, program, or approach always worked the same way in all circumstances. But what is amazing about these studies, and others done by different researchers in different eras with differing methodologies in different parts of the country, is the convergence of results. While I will skip over the well-established findings about schools needing high expectations and an organized atmosphere, I would like to highlight ten “success indicators” for literacy instruction in schools that serve diverse populations:

1. **Curricular Commitment:** Whether the educators implemented a homegrown curriculum or one developed externally, teachers in successful urban schools were committed to their curriculum and determined to offer strong literacy instruction. They could articulate school literacy goals and knew what was expected in their grade, as well as across the grades, and they were prepared to do their part. The power of commitment was especially striking across the research studies, as no one type of curriculum was successful for all schools. Each successful school community chose a curriculum as suitable for the local school context, and the teachers were supportive and enthusiastic. They stood behind their curriculum (Lipson, Mosenthal, Mekkelsen, and Russ, 2004).

2. **Enough Time:** Successful urban schools gave students enough time to read and write and teachers enough time to teach. In our schools, two hours of reading and writing per day were scheduled for primary grades, with ninety minutes per day in middle and upper elementary grades (Chicago Literacy Framework, 2005). To facilitate an efficient use of time, block scheduling often was used to allow the teachers to integrate the literacy areas (Lipson, Mosenthal, Mekkelsen, and Russ, 2004). In the upper grades, reading and writing often were integrated with social studies and science to develop models of inquiry. In our own work, thematic teaching allowed greater integration of literacy and content, which allowed us more effective use of time (Frost, Buhle, and Blachowicz, 2009).

3. **Opportunities to Read and Write:** Time is one thing; using that time well is another. Teachers in successful schools understood evidence-based instructional strategies and built a repertoire of key strategies for their students across their school years. Teachers understood that reading and writing time should be used for reading and writing, and they emphasized textual reading and textual writing. One large-scale study (Mosenthal, Lipson, Tornelco, Russ, and Mekkelsen, 2004) documented that primary students spent twenty minutes per day in textual reading and discussion; this was increased to fifty minutes per day in the upper elementary grades.

4. **Powerful Materials:** If you furnish the time and want students to read and write, you need powerful materials. Powerful reading materials provide a variety of genres and lots to read. The materials must be interesting, rich, and attractive to students and teachers alike, with enough content to foster deep and critical thinking and discussion so essential to developing students’ comprehension abilities (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole, 2000).
We believe thematic organization also is critical, particularly to students for whom English is not their home language. This pedagogical notion now is supported by research and practice (Thames, Reeves, Kazelskis, York, Boling, Newell, and Wang, 2008; Hadaway, 2009). Reading several selections and books across a topic or theme helps children develop the background and vocabulary they need to deal with more challenging topical or thematic issues (Blachowicz and Obrochta, 2007). Having companion read-aloud pieces also helps us develop the knowledge base for young readers to succeed in their own reading. If students read, or have read to them, five discrete selections about unrelated topics, the only vocabulary you are sure of seeing (or hearing) repeatedly consists of *a, and, and the*. If you read five pieces about weather, however, you are sure to see many instances of words such as *temperature, highs, humidity, sleet,* and other weather-related words.

Teachers also need books about the same topics on many levels to help students develop reading stamina and to help them move from independent-to-instructional-level materials. Building background knowledge, concepts, and vocabulary is much easier when you have a shared theme.

5. **Balanced Programs:** Schools that achieved had a strong commitment to word study, from primary phonics to the development of meaning vocabulary. They also emphasized higher-order comprehension questions and processes that allowed students to critically interact around text. In our work, rich discussion, book clubs, and PRC2—informational Partner Reading in the Content Areas (Ogle, in press)—all work to challenge our students to become deep thinkers. Too often students in at-risk schools are fed a steady diet of “back to basics,” which never includes rich, conceptual work. An important part of the instructional programs in successful urban schools is that teachers coach students to use these developing strategies while they read everyday text. Introducing key comprehension strategies that develop across the grade level helps build great readers.

6. **Thoughtful Assessment:** Successful city schools have teachers who know where their students are and how they are developing. They carefully monitor students over the course of each year with tools related to their curricular goals. Such ongoing measures as fluency snapshots, running records, comprehension scans, written responses, and many other strategies are used to keep track of students and their learning. Teachers use these data in assessment walls or data-mining sessions to analyze their class progress and plan future instruction. Teachers also cooperatively develop shared assessment systems to show growth over the school years (Buhle and Blachowicz, 2008).

7. **Differentiated Instruction:** Teachers in successful schools work with students in ways that address their individual development as readers and writers. This doesn’t mean the teachers instruct individually, but it does mean that they thoughtfully group students for different types of literacy instruction. While there is a place for whole-class work, each of the major studies noted that small-group instruction predominates in successful urban schools. These grouping options can vary—by interest, by reading level or fluency, by task—but each is designed so that the students in each group are able to fully participate at their instructional level, the level at which they can be most successful with the
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support of a teacher or other scaffolds. Most of the effective schools also offer intervention options in small groups or sometimes in 1:1 instruction.

As we noted above, the teachers also continuously monitor their students’ learning with instructionally relevant assessments and monitor their own instructional effectiveness.

8. Professional Development for a Professional Learning Community:
Teachers in successful schools see themselves as part of a professional learning community. They work in teams to monitor curriculum and assessment, and they form study groups to keep up on the newest research, strategies, and materials. They make their work public by sharing with one another and by group problem solving. Their administrators and special service educators also are committed to the professional development of teachers.

Like good company executives, good principals realize the need for excellent professional development for their schools. But this does not come without expense, nor is it easy. They understand, as does business, that a significant amount of budgetary priorities must be dedicated to continuous professional development. In business this can range from five to fifteen percent of budget or more (American Society for Training and Development, 2002). And, as the recent report of the National Staff Development Council advises, it takes eight to ten years for schools to achieve excellence through that staff development. So ongoing, consistent, long-term work is a priority (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos, 2009).

9. Strong, Supportive Leadership:
City schools that excel have principals who are knowledgeable about literacy and who work to support their teachers. But principal leadership is not enough. They also have reading specialists, reading coaches, and special service personnel and lead literacy teachers who are knowledgeable about reading, who collaborate among themselves as well as with teachers, and who share the curricular commitment of the school. Leaders who pull together with their teachers are leaders who help their schools achieve (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole, 2000).

10. Strong Links to Parents:
Urban schools that do well with literacy vitally build and maintain strong links to parents. This can be particularly challenging in communities where both parents work multiple jobs to support their family and have very little time to interact with the school. It also is difficult where parents and guardians are not accessible or are uncomfortable in the school context.
Each local context can suggest different approaches.

- A common tool is the service of Language Ombudspersons, local community members who work with the school to communicate with different sets of parents and make sure that all communications are translated appropriately.
- Schools engage local community members as classroom aides and guides.
- Schools provide home literacy bags and appropriately schedule family literacy events (the right times, places, and activities), providing child care, snacks, and take-home materials.
- Schools sometimes offer literacy events in community centers, libraries, and other locations outside the school to build a comfort zone for parents.

This poses a challenge that is met in many ways with many creative approaches now documented so others can try them (Paratore, Melzi, and Krol-Sinclair, 1999).

**A Final Word**

One teacher who read a draft of this paper said, “Why, the things you listed here can apply to all schools, not just schools in urban settings.” She was correct. But these guidelines are especially critical for our schools working to close achievement gaps. Each day there are thousands of schools and teachers dealing creatively with the challenge of teaching students who represent increasingly diverse populations. They build rich environments for literacy, enact challenging and appropriate curricula, and deliver masterful instruction; their schools are havens of literacy. They live what Vygotsky declared, “Children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (Vygotsky, 1978). It’s our duty to provide the richest intellectual environment we can for all of our students if we want excellence from all. Our students deserve the very best we can offer, and we can be teachers and schools that offer the best.
REFERENCES


