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Dorothy J. McGinnis Reading Center and Clinic
College of Education
Western Michigan University



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Reading Horizons

History and Mission of Reading Horizons: *Reading Horizons* began in 1960 as a local newsletter and has developed into an international journal serving major colleges, universities, and individual subscribers across the United States and Canada as well as a host of other countries. The journal serves as a forum for ideas from many schools of thought dedicated to building upon the knowledge base of literacy through research, theoretical essays, opinion pieces, policy studies, and syntheses of best practices. *Reading Horizons* seeks to bring together school professionals, literacy researchers, teacher educators, parents and community leaders as they work collaboratively to widen the horizons of literacy and the language arts.

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There is no more crucial or basic skill in all of education than reading.

READING HORIZONS

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Changing the Face of Reading Instruction: Recommendations of Six National Reading Reports

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In the past several years, a number of reading research reports have been published in an effort to bring an end to the "reading wars" and to inform teachers and administrators about the essential aspects of effective, comprehensive reading instruction. This study analyzes, summarizes, categorizes, and compares the instructional recommendations for providing effective, comprehensive reading instruction from six widely disseminated and influential national reading research reports. It provides a comprehensive listing, identification of themes, and areas of common ground among the more than 231 separate reading instructional recommendations found within the six national reading research reports analyzed.

FRUSTRATION AND CONCERN OVER a widening achievement gap has resulted in an unprecedented national focus on and funding of efforts to improve the efficacy of classroom reading instruction (Neuman, 2001; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2000; Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, and Seidenberg, 2001, 2002). At no time since the 1960s, when it was asserted that *Johnny Can't Read* (Flesch, 1955), has so much national political attention and funding been focused on reading research, reading teacher development, and reading instructional practices.

Over the last decade, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2000): *The National Report Card* has shown no substantial gains in fourth-grade reading levels. To make matters worse, the gap in reading achievement between the highest and lowest achievers has continued to widen especially for children of poverty and of minority communities (NAEP, 2000). In *America's Reading Challenge* (U.S. Department of Education, 1997), former President Clinton declared, "Forty percent of all children are now reading below basic levels on national reading assessments. Children who cannot read early and well are hampered at the very start of their lives. This will be truer as we move into the 21st Century. To participate in American's high-skill workplaces, to cruise – much less use – the Internet, all children need to read better than ever before."

The economic cost of reading failure to society and to individuals is high (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1983). The U.S. Bureau of Labor, in a report issued to the nation's governors, indicated that 85 percent of future employment (after the year 2000) would likely require skilled or professional levels of training - which also would require the ability to read well (U.S. Bureau of Labor, 1995). For many years, researchers have shown a high correlation between poor early reading and later failure in school (Juel, 1988; Torgesen, Wagner, Rashotte, Alexander, & Conroy, 1997). Evidence is also mounting that reading achievement is strongly linked to adolescent/young adult substance abuse as well as criminal behavior (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000b). Further, there is a clear link between early school reading performance and later incarceration as well as inappropriate behavior while incarcerated (Downing, 1990; Newman,

1996; Pray, 1983). Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier (1998) assert, "Poverty, incarceration, crime, and violence all have a common denominator in our society. That commonality is exclusion. Most of these children grew into adulthood unable to read in an information society... The most expensive burden we place on our society is those students we have failed to teach to read well. The silent army of low readers who move through our schools, siphoning off the lion's share of administrative resources, emerge into society as adults still lacking the single prerequisite for managing their lives and acquiring additional training. They are chronically unemployed, underemployed, or unemployable. They form the single largest identifiable group of those whom we incarcerate, and to whom we provide assistance, housing, medical care, and other social services. They perpetuate and enlarge the problem by creating another generation of poor readers" (p. 5-7). It is clear the current public and political concern over the perceived failure of U. S. reading instruction is reflected in a deeper anxiety about the nation's future economic prosperity.

Failing to Learn to Read: Wars and Rumors of Wars

Simultaneous to the emergence of economic and public political issues surrounding reading failure, the professional reading and literacy education community plunged into a "Reading War" pitting polemic philosophical positions against one another. Advocates of holistic and natural approaches did battle with those favoring more structured, sequential, explicit instructional approaches (Flippo, 1997, 1998; Rasinski & Padak, 1998; Reutzel, 1999 a,b). Flippo (1998) characterized the context of the "Reading War" when she wrote, "A spirit of divisiveness about reading instruction now exists that is causing a tangle of problems.... This divisiveness has led to misunderstandings of the issues, discrediting of teachers and schools, misinformation disseminated to parents and families, searches for simplistic solutions, and not the least, to the media and politicians 'stepping in' to exploit these concerns" (p. 30).

Reading Research Reports: Reaching for Rapprochement

In an effort to bring order out of chaos and put an end to the seemingly inexorable squabbles over what constitutes effective reading

instruction, a virtual plethora of recent reading research studies and reports has been disseminated recommending how and what is needed to provide effective, comprehensive reading instruction for all children. The federal government commissioned some of these reports. Others were the products of learned societies and research centers. Still others were the work of professional individuals, groups and organizations. These national reading research reports describe scores of research studies, offer multiple conclusions, and paint a complex and comprehensive web of recommendations for educators, parents, and policy makers to sift through and make sense of.

The impetus for this study occurred one day following a morning of professional development workshops on research-based best practices in reading instruction. We were seated around the lunch table talking about several of the national reading research reports with a group of colleagues who were genuinely interested in understanding and making efforts to implement research-based instructional recommendations into classroom practice. One colleague questioned, "How are we to keep up with all these reports?" Another commented, "We really want to know what they say in these reports, but we just don't have the time to read through mountains of reports with everything else we have to do!"

In response, we decided to conduct a content analysis of the recommendations of the most influential national reading research reports to summarize, condense, and share the findings of these reports with our colleagues and the many other teachers and administrators who do not have the time to "read mountains of reports." We sought to answer several questions. What do these reports, as a group, recommend about how to provide effective, comprehensive reading instruction? Are there major themes that characterize the recommendations found in these national reading research reports? Is there common ground, some level of consensus among the reports' recommendations that can help us better understand and implement best practices into classroom reading instruction? The study reported in this article provides teachers, administrators, parents, and policy makers with a comprehensive analysis, summary, and comparison of the recommendations for effective, comprehensive reading instruction found in several selected national reading research reports that are "changing the face of reading instruction."

The Study: Analyzing the Recommendations of Six National Reading Research Reports

To begin the study, we selected from recently released reading research reports a group of six nationally disseminated and influential reading research reports for analysis. We selected the following reports:

- *Every child a reader: Applying reading research in the classroom.* (1998). Ann Arbor, MI: Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement. (ECR)
- *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read.* (2000a). Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (NRP)
- *Report of the National Education Association's Task Force on Reading 2000.* Washington, DC: National Education Association. (NEA)
- *Teaching Reading is rocket science: What expert teachers of reading should know and be able to do.* (Moates, 1999). (AFT)
- *Preventing reading difficulties in young children. Chapter 10: Recommendations for practice and research. In C. E. Snow, M. S. Burns, and P. Griffin (1998), Preventing reading failure in young children (pp. 313-334) Washington, DC: National Academy Press.* (PRDYC)
- *Points of agreement: A display of professional unity in our field.* (Flippo, 1998). *The Reading Teacher*, 52(1), 30-40. (POA)

We used content analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) methods to locate, record, sort, summarize, compare and contrast reading instructional recommendations in the six reports selected for analysis. We limited our analysis to recommendations focused on reading instruction and did not analyze, record, or compare recommendations suggesting future research. We read each of the six selected reading research reports five separate times. During the first reading, we

reviewed each report, its contents and recommendations. During the second reading, we individually highlighted each recommendation offered in the reports for providing effective, comprehensive reading instruction. After a third reading to double check the highlighted recommendations, we created a single comprehensive list of discrete, individual recommendations from all six reports. Once a first draft comprehensive listing was completed, we reviewed the list for individual recommendations that were similar or overlapping. When there was disagreement about the inclusion or exclusion of a recommendation on the list, we resolved any disagreements through conferencing. The first draft list was carefully reviewed for duplicate recommendations that were eliminated from the list.

Next, we re-read each of the six national reading research reports a fourth time. When a specific reading research report made a discrete recommendation, we noted it on our first draft list with an "x" under the title of the research report in which the recommendation was made. After the comprehensive listing was reviewed and checked, recommendations were read and reread to determine major themes. Initially, individual recommendations within the comprehensive list were coded into open categories to discover emerging themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Next, we re-examined our open categories to determine if individual recommendations were appropriately coded under the emerging themes and whether or not the themes identified were appropriately titled. This effort resulted in collapsing ten initial categories into eight final themes.

Next, we reviewed individual items within themes to create groupings. We reread all six national reading reports a fifth time to conduct an audit of the separate recommendations as they were recorded in our data tables under each of the eight themes. In fairness to those groups and organizations producing these six reports, it is important to note here that not all of the six national reading research reports were of the same scope and nature. Consequently, some national reading research reports offered fewer recommendations about changing the face of reading instruction than did other reports by their very nature and intended scope.

The Findings: Themes and Recommendations

From the content analysis as described previously, we located and recorded a total of 231 discrete recommendations for providing effective, comprehensive reading instruction across the six national reading research reports. Eight themes emerged from our content analysis: 1) Assessment, 2) Best Practices, 3) Goals and Declarations, 4) Home-School-Community Partnerships, 5) Reading Programs, 6) Necessary Resources and Support, 7) Standards, and 8) Teacher Competence. To reduce the complex web of recommendations found in these six national reports, we created separate theme-related figures (See Figures 1-8). Each recommendation offered within any of the six national reading research reports was recorded with a "a" mark in the column under the abbreviated title of the report. A key for the abbreviated report titles in Figures 1-8 follows: **ECR** – *Every Child a Reader*, **NRP** – *Report of the National Reading Panel*, **NEA** – *Report of the National Education Association's Task Force on Reading 2000*, **AFT** – *Teaching Reading is Rocket Science*, **PRDYC** – *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, **POA** – *Points of Agreement: A Display of Professional Unity in Our Field*.

When at least three or 50 percent of the six reports suggested the same recommendations, we took this as evidence of a convergence or agreement. We used a gray band to visually highlight areas of convergence or agreement in Figures 1-8. Out of the 231 total recommendations in the six reports, half of the six national reading research reports converged on a total of 78 of the total individual recommendations or approximately a 34 percent agreement. We discuss the findings of the content analysis of the six national reading research reports by theme, beginning with the theme of *assessment*.

Theme I: Assessment

Within the theme of *assessment*, we recorded twenty individual recommendations within four groupings. We found that six of the twenty recommendations focused on how to conduct or apply various reading assessments. We noted seven more recommendations focused on requisite teacher knowledge about assessment; four more recommendations about what

ought to be assessed; and three recommendations about when assessment should occur. We found that four of the national reading research reports converged on a single recommendation or about a 5 percent agreement within the assessment theme.

Figure 1. Recommendations of National Reading Reports: Assessment Theme

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
<i>How to Do and Use Assessment</i>						
1. Establish shared assessment processes and instruments within schools	<input type="checkbox"/>					
2. Assessment should address various purposes			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
3. Assessment should not replace instruction			<input type="checkbox"/>			
4. Assessment should align with standards			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
5. Multiple indicators, NOT single indicators, should be used to make decisions			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
6. Assessment should shape and inform instruction				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Teacher Knowledge of Assessment</i>						
1. Train teachers to use valid, reliable instruments and processes for assessing				<input type="checkbox"/>		
2. Understand validity, reliability, and normative comparisons in assessment				<input type="checkbox"/>		
3. Be able to interpret reports of normative assessment outcomes				<input type="checkbox"/>		
4. Teachers to learn how to administer several kinds of valid assessments				<input type="checkbox"/>		
5. Teachers to be able to interpret student performance against standards				<input type="checkbox"/>		
6. Assessment approaches should be research-based					<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. A variety of assessment tools			<input type="checkbox"/>			
<i>What to Assess</i>						
1. Assess students' background knowledge for comprehension instruction	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
2. Assess the quality of published phonics programs		<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. Assess students' accuracy and fluency				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Assess students' comprehension strategy use					<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>When to Assess Category</i>						
1. On-going Assessment and Monitoring of Student Progress/Achievement	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Assessment should occur only after some instruction has taken place			<input type="checkbox"/>			
3. At-risk preschoolers should be assessed, identified, and served early					<input type="checkbox"/>	

Gray band indicates 50 % convergence of the six reports on a recommendation.

Theme II: Best Practices

Within the theme of *Best Practices*, we recorded 104 individual recommendations in eleven groupings shown in Figure 2. Half or more of the six reading research reports converged on 37 of the 104 total best practices recommendations representing a 36 percent agreement. The 37 converging recommendations were distributed across eight of the eleven groupings shown in Figure 2. We found no convergence among the six national reports for the best practice recommendations about grouping strategies, teaching struggling readers, and using technology to teach reading.

Figure 2. Best Practices Theme: Comprehension Instruction

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
<i>What to Teach in Comprehension</i>						
1. Integrate and extend students' background knowledge to improve comprehension	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		
2. Teach children story structure to improve comprehension	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
3. Teach children to self-monitor and regulate to improve comprehension	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Teach children to predict to improve comprehension	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
5. Teach children to infer to improve comprehension	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. Teach children how to clarify misunderstandings to improve comprehension	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
7. Teach children to summarize to improve comprehension	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Teach children how to identify the main idea to improve comprehension					<input type="checkbox"/>	
9. Teach children text structures to improve comprehension	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	
10. Teach children how to self question and answer questions of differing types	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Teach children to use imagery to improve comprehension	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
<i>How to Teach Comprehension</i>						
1. Teach comprehension strategies explicitly and directly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Teach Comprehension Using a Multiple Strategy Model, TSI, RT, ISL, SAIL	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. Use Graphic and Semantic Organizers to teach vocabulary and comprehension		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
4. Comprehension instruction should not be neglected in the primary grades	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5. Teachers should use think alouds to model comprehension processes				<input type="checkbox"/>		
6. Ask high level questions as well as knowledge level questions	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		
7. Respond to stories using drama, drawing, retellings, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>					
<i>When to Teach Comprehension</i>						
Comprehension instruction should not be neglected in the primary grades	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
<i>Early Reading Instruction</i>						
<i>Concepts About Print</i>						
1. Children to have opportunity to see and talk about print	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Teach young children the concepts of print	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Reading activities should highlight speech print relations					<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Alphabet Letter Knowledge</i>						
1. Children to learn to recognize letters and letter names	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Children to learn to produce alphabet letters – upper & lower case	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Developing Oral Language</i>						
1. Use interactive read alouds to promote oral language development	<input type="checkbox"/>					
2. Consciously attend to systematically developing children's oral language	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Phonemic Awareness Instruction</i>						
1. Teach Phonemic Awareness explicitly and directly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. With younger children, use playful activities to develop phonemic awareness	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Small groups are best for teaching phonemic awareness		<input type="checkbox"/>				
4. Teach one or two skills in phonemic awareness at a time for best results		<input type="checkbox"/>				
5. Phonemic awareness instruction can be accomplished in 5-18 hours		<input type="checkbox"/>				
6. Teach children letters simultaneously with phonemic awareness		<input type="checkbox"/>				
<i>Phonics Instruction</i>						
1. Insist that children apply word identification skills while reading texts	<input type="checkbox"/>					

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
2. Teach children to use onsets and rimes to decode unfamiliar words	<input type="checkbox"/>					
3. Phonics instruction should vary in intensity with the needs of the child		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
4. Teach phonics explicitly, directly, and systematically	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. All types of phonics instruction are better than No phonics instruction		<input type="checkbox"/>				
6. Phonics instruction should begin in Kindergarten through 1st-Grade		<input type="checkbox"/>				
<i>Methods and Materials for Teaching Young Children</i>						
1. Teachers provide opportunity to handle and discuss books	<input type="checkbox"/>					
2. Use morning message, class sign in, to teach young children about print	<input type="checkbox"/>					
3. Children to listen to read alouds	<input type="checkbox"/>					
4. Use shared reading to teach young children	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Word Work</i>						
1. Teach common spelling patterns using onset and rimes	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Teach children to recognize high frequency sight words	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Use environmental print and print in the environment to teach reading	<input type="checkbox"/>					
4. Teachers should provide systematic, explicit word study	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Use games, sorts, matching, making words, dictation etc., for word work	<input type="checkbox"/>					
6. Display various collections of words for different purposes on word walls	<input type="checkbox"/>					

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
<i>ESL and Bilingual Instruction</i>						
1. Teach LEP students to read/write in first language if possible	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Use cognates (similar word bases) to teach LEP students	<input type="checkbox"/>					
3. Teach children oral English if teaching reading in native language not possible					<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Book Reading and Literature Study</i>						
1. Use book clubs, grand conversations & discussions to talk about books	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Provide charts to show how to use decoding and comprehension strategies	<input type="checkbox"/>					
3. Children need to read a large volume of print to achieve in reading	<input type="checkbox"/>					
4. Teach reading using multi-cultural and multi-language texts	<input type="checkbox"/>					
5. Read a variety of text types, genre, structures	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Provide practice and time with books				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Provide frequent occasions and times for independent reading	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Establish a "print rich" classroom literacy environment	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Promote out-of-school reading programs	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
10. Use silent reading whenever possible and appropriate						<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Provide summer activities such as reading lists	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Grouping Strategies</i>						
1. Use small and one-to-one group instruction	<input type="checkbox"/>					

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
2. Use cooperative learning groups in reading instruction		<input type="checkbox"/>				
<i>Quality Instruction for All Grades</i>						
1. Instruction should be consistent, well-designed, and focused	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
2. Provide strategy lessons for all children including young children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Talk with students about strategy selection and use	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		
4. Provide students regular organized reading/writing practice				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Teach reading using direct, explicit instruction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Teach the purposes of reading and writing	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Make reading functional						<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Make reading fun and authentic						<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Teachers should read aloud at school	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
10. Use guided reading to teach young children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			
11. Provide students oral reading feedback on meaning, decoding and fluency	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Use Volunteer Tutors to support reading practice and motivation	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Vocabulary Instruction</i>						
1. Explicit vocabulary instruction in content domains/conceptual relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Multiple repetitions/exposures needed in vocabulary instruction		<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. Vocabulary can be acquired through wide reading, incidental		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
4. No one vocabulary instruction method is best - multi methods best		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
5. Preteach vocabulary		<input type="checkbox"/>				
<i>Teaching Struggling Readers</i>						
1. Restructure reading and writing tasks for struggling readers		<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. Synthetic phonics instruction helps struggling readers		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
3. Teach sight words using multi sensory methods				<input type="checkbox"/>		
4. Volunteers not to provide remedial or primary reading instruction					<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Using Technology to Teach Reading</i>						
1. Computers can be used to teach vocabulary		<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. Computer can be used to teach phonemic awareness		<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. Computer instruction can benefit some students		<input type="checkbox"/>				
<i>Writing Instruction</i>						
1. Encourage children to write messages	<input type="checkbox"/>					
2. Use guided writing to teach young children to write	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Encourage children to write stories	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Encourage children to keep journals	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Use interactive writing to teach children to write and spell	<input type="checkbox"/>					
6. Allow and encourage the use of invented spellings in early writing	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. Extend invented spelling to conventional spelling	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
8. Use the Writer's Workshop to offer writing instruction	<input type="checkbox"/>					
9. Provide frequent occasions for writing extended texts	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
10. Encourage children to write more than journals				<input type="checkbox"/>		
11. Teach children grammar, handwriting, spelling and conventions	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
12. Use the writing process to teach children to write	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		
13. Publish children's writing to celebrate their accomplishments	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Engage young children in writing research papers on topics as well as older	<input type="checkbox"/>					<input type="checkbox"/>
Fluency Instruction						
1. Develop students' reading fluency	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Use oral reading practice- choral, buddy, assisted, repeated, reader's theater	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Gray band indicates 50% convergence of the six reports on a recommendation

Theme III: Goals and Declarations

Within the theme of *goals and declarations*, we found six individual recommendations divided into two distinct groupings. Two of the six recommendations focused on goals and four of the six recommendations focused on declarations. The reports analyzed converged on two of the six total recommendations representing a 33 percent agreement.

Figure 3. Recommendations of National Reading Reports: Goals and Declarations Theme

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
Categories:						
Goals						
1. National Reading Goal – All children will read on grade level by third-grade	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Achievement goals should be stated clearly and disseminated widely	<input type="checkbox"/>					

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
<i>Declarations</i>						
1. Public understanding of the complexity of reading needs to be promoted					<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. There is no one best way to teach reading to every child			<input type="checkbox"/>			
3. The teacher's competence makes the difference, NOT the method			<input type="checkbox"/>			
4. Study of a variety of reading instructional topic recommended	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Gray band indicates 50% convergence of the six reports on a recommendation.

Theme IV: Home-School-Community Partnerships

Within the theme of *home-school-community partnerships*, we located thirteen individual recommendations distributed across four groupings as found in Figure 4. Half or more of the six national reading research reports converged on four of these thirteen recommendations representing a 31 percent agreement.

Figure 4. Recommendations of National Reading Reports: Home-School-Community Partnership Theme

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
<i>Declaration</i>						
1. Community partnerships should be established to improve children's reading	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Provide quality preschools for children without home support	<input type="checkbox"/>					
3. School-Home partnerships are essential for children's reading success	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Collaboration</i>						
1. Teachers need community and policy support to succeed	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Reading programs should be developed with community input	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
<i>School Responsibilities</i>						
1. Schools should share literacy resources with families	<input type="checkbox"/>					
2. Professional service providers should communicate and collaborate with others	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Schools should collaborate and communicate with stakeholders	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>			
4. Plan and implement Family Literacy Nights to promote reading partnerships	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Home Responsibilities</i>						
1. Parents or caregivers should monitor homework assignments	<input type="checkbox"/>					
2. Parents or caregivers should read aloud to their children at home	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Parents or caregivers should model the love of reading at home	<input type="checkbox"/>					
4. Parents or caregivers should monitor time spent viewing TV	<input type="checkbox"/>					

Gray band indicates 50% convergence of the six reports on a recommendation

Theme V: Reading Programs

We recorded twelve individual recommendations in three different groupings within the *reading programs* theme as found in Figure 5. The reading research reports converged on three of the twelve recommendations representing a 25 percent agreement.

Figure 5. Recommendations of National Reading Reports: Reading Programs Theme

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
<i>School Wide Emphasis</i>						
1. Develop school wide reading programs	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. When performance is poor in a school, restructure school wide					<input type="checkbox"/>	

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
3. Reading is a priority at the building level	<input type="checkbox"/>					
<i>Characteristics of Effective Programs</i>						
1. Reading program should be flexible			<input type="checkbox"/>			
2. Reading programs connect reading and content area instruction			<input type="checkbox"/>			
3. Programs should reflect research findings, assessment, teacher knowledge			<input type="checkbox"/>			
4. Teachers agree on the core components of the program	<input type="checkbox"/>					
5. Programs should be complete or comprehensive		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			
6. Programs should integrate the language arts	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Align programs with standards			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
<i>Struggling Readers</i>						
1. Struggling readers' program interventions connect to classroom instruction	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Reading programs should provide timely intervention for struggling readers	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>			

Gray band indicates 50% convergence of the six reports on a recommendation

Theme VI: Necessary Resources and Support

Within the theme of *necessary resources and support*, we registered twenty-one total recommendations in four separate groupings. The distribution of the twenty-one recommendations across the four separate groupings is shown in Figure 6. Half or more of the six national reading research reports converged on seven of the twenty-one recommendations representing a 33 percent agreement figure.

Figure 6. Recommendations of National Reading Reports: Necessary Resources and Support Theme

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
<i>Statements of Need</i>						
1. Teachers need adequate resources to provide for learning		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
2. Class sizes need to be kept manageable	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Professional Development</i>						
1. Teacher support is especially important during induction to the profession			<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Guidance needed for selecting and evaluating reading instructional materials			<input type="checkbox"/>			
3. Provide professional development to create and support literacy leaders			<input type="checkbox"/>			
4. Provide professional development for school principals in literacy			<input type="checkbox"/>			
5. Provide professional development for special educators in literacy			<input type="checkbox"/>			
6. Provide on-going professional development for inservice teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. All teachers need time to plan and learn		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			
8. Preservice teachers need extensive support		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			
9. Create professional development institutes for professor and master teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
<i>Reading Instructional Materials</i>						
1. Classroom and school libraries need to be adequately stocked	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
2. School reading materials should be interesting, engaging, and of high quality	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
3. Teachers and students need leveled reading materials for different purposes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Insist that publishers improve the quality and content of school textbooks				<input type="checkbox"/>		
<i>Support for Struggling Readers</i>						
1. Extend time for instruction among struggling readers	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Additional instructional services in first grade for struggling readers	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Instruction by a well qualified reading specialist for struggling readers	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Additional resources needed for struggling readers	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Specialists available to each school					<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. Struggling readers need equal quality and quantity environment and resources	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	

Gray band indicates 50% convergence of the six reports on a recommendation

Theme VII: Standards

We recorded seven individual recommendations in four groupings within the *standards* theme. The distribution of these recommendations by groupings is found in Figure 7. Half or more of the six national reading research reports converged on two of the seven recommendations representing a 29 percent agreement figure.

Figure 7. Recommendations of National Reading Reports: Standards Theme

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
<i>Contents</i>						
Reflect researcher, teacher, and community knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
<i>Publishers</i>						
1. Press publishers to improve teacher education textbooks				<input type="checkbox"/>		
2. Publishers should be required to show data/evidence about their products					<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Schools</i>						
1. Standards should clearly delineate content and performance goals	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>			
2. Standards should be age, ability or group level appropriate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
<i>Teacher Professional Development</i>						
1. Standards should require supervised clinical experiences for new teachers				<input type="checkbox"/>		
2. Standards for inservice/ professional development should be established			<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	

Gray band indicates 50% convergence of the six reports on a recommendation

Theme VIII: Teacher Competence

Within the final theme, *teacher competence*, we documented fifty-one individual recommendations in five separate groupings as shown in Figure 8. Half or more of the six reading research reports converged on 21 of the 48 total recommendations within the *teacher competence* theme representing a 44 percent agreement. The 21 converging recommendations were distributed across all five groupings shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Recommendations of National Reading Reports: Teacher Competence Theme

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
<i>Teaching Skill</i>						
1. Know how to effectively teach language and thinking skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
2. Know how to effectively teach phonemic awareness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Know how to effectively teach phonics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Know how to effectively teach decoding strategies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Know how to effectively teach word recognition	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
6. Know how to effectively teach comprehension	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. Know how to effectively promote motivation (Habits, Attitudes, Etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Know how to effectively teach students to identify and use text structure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
9. Know how to effectively teach vocabulary	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			
10. Know how to effectively provide culturally sensitive instruction	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
11. Know how to use a wide range of media and technology			<input type="checkbox"/>			
12. Model reading and writing behaviors and dispositions as a teacher						<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Understand the design and requirements of the reading curriculum	<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>	
14. ECED know how to provide rich conceptual experiences to promote vocabulary					<input type="checkbox"/>	
15. ECED know how to develop reasoning from naming to relational/abstract					<input type="checkbox"/>	
16. ECED know how to develop listening comprehension skills					<input type="checkbox"/>	

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
17. Know how to work with parents	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Teacher Knowledge						
1. Know and understand the development of reading, writing, and spelling	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Know and understand language content and structure	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Know and understand phonetics	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Know and understand phonology	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Know and understand morphology	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. Know and understand orthography	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. Know and understand semantics	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		
8. Know and understand syntax	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
9. Teachers should participate in contributing to the research base of reading					<input type="checkbox"/>	
10. ECED know fine motor development					<input type="checkbox"/>	
11. Know and understand eye movements and text scanning				<input type="checkbox"/>		
Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners						
1. Know how to teach to address diverse learner needs	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Know the characteristics of good and poor readers	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		
3. Understand Environmental, Socioeconomic and Physiological Factors	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		
4. Set High Expectations						<input type="checkbox"/>

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
5. Provide access to ECE environments that promote literacy growth					<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. Provide access to ECE environments that address reading risk factors					<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. Understand bilingual literacy development					<input type="checkbox"/>	
8. Understand how to teach English as a Second Language	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Understanding Instructional Programs</i>						
1. Teachers should know of a variety of early literacy interventions			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
2. Teachers should know about intermediate/middle level reading interventions				<input type="checkbox"/>		
3. Teachers should know a variety of struggling reader interventions	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		
4. Teachers should know a variety of tutorial interventions				<input type="checkbox"/>		
5. Know how to teach reading in academic content fields			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
6. Know how to implement a complete, comprehensive reading program	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Teacher Education Programs</i>						
1. Graduate programs should extend and refine teacher skills and knowledge			<input type="checkbox"/>			
2. Teacher preparation programs should be based on standards				<input type="checkbox"/>		
3. New teacher knowledge should be assessed to receive a teaching license				<input type="checkbox"/>		

Groupings	ECR	NRP	NEA	AFT	PRDYC	POA
4. Teacher preparation should reflect research				<input type="checkbox"/>		
5. Teacher preparation/education needs attention and improvement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. Increased emphasis in Teacher Ed on comprehension instruction		<input type="checkbox"/>				

Gray band indicates 50% convergence of the six reports on a recommendation

We have summarized the percentages of convergence or agreement among the six reports across all eight themes in Figure 9. It is interesting to note that the highest percentages of agreement were in the two themes, *best practices* and *teacher competence*, with the largest number of recommendations.

Figure 9. Percent of Convergence by Theme on Recommendations for Reading Instruction in Six National Reading Research Reports

Theme	% of Convergence/Agreement
Assessment	5%
Best Practices	36%
Goals and Declarations	33%
Home-School- Community Partnerships	31%
Reading Programs	25%
Necessary Resources and Support	33%
Standards	29%
Teacher Competence	44%

Discussion

We began this study with three questions. First, what do these reports, as a group, recommend about how to provide effective, comprehensive reading instruction? We found that taken as a group these six national reading research reports offer a wide-ranging list of 231 individual recommendations for providing effective and comprehensive classroom reading instruction. Second, we asked if there were major themes connecting the individual recommendations in these national

reading research reports? Eight themes emerged from our content analysis of the six national reading research reports: 1) Assessment, 2) Best Practices, 3) Goals and Declarations, 4) Home-School-Community Partnerships, 5) Reading Programs, 6) Necessary Resources and Support, 7) Standards, and 8) Teacher Competence. Third, we asked if there is common ground or some level of consensus among the reports' instructional recommendations that can help us better understand and implement effective, comprehensive reading instruction? To answer the third research question, we discuss points of convergence among the six reports within each of the eight themes.

Within the *Assessment Theme*, we found one point of agreement across all six reports - *assessment should be ongoing* in order to provide for constant, consistent monitoring of student progress. For many years, teachers viewed assessment as a task to be completed and reported to outside constituencies. As the nature and purposes of assessment have evolved over the past decade or so, teachers are increasingly gaining valuable insights into children's reading processes through assessment. As such, assessment now is seen as a vital, integral, even crucial part of planning and providing quality, effective reading instruction that addresses the needs of all children.

The *Best Practices Theme* generated the largest number of recommendations across the six national reading research reports - a total of 104. As we analyzed the 104 recommendations, there was 100 percent agreement on one of the 104 recommendations - *teachers should teach reading directly, systematically, and explicitly*. This unanimous recommendation stands in stark contrast to the recommendations against such instruction just a few years ago during the whole language era (Goodman, 1986). Five of the six reports converged on the importance of independent reading time. Although the Report of the *National Reading Panel* stated that the current research evidence was insufficient to recommend independent reading as "ready for classroom" implementation, the NRP also did not recommend the cessation of independent reading programs. Rather, the NRP called for much needed reading research to explore the value of independent reading. Finally, it is also interesting to note that the greatest number of convergences within the *best practices* theme was distributed among three of the

eleven groupings: 1) comprehension instruction, 2) book reading and literature study, and 3) fluency development.

Because of the sheer number of converging recommendations within the *Best Practices* theme, we developed a summary shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Summary of Converging Recommendations within the *Best Practices* Theme

Explicit, Direct, Systematic Instruction

- Comprehension
- Phonemic Awareness
- Phonics
- Word Study
- Vocabulary

Comprehension Instruction

- Story Structure
- Self-Monitoring
- Prediction
- Clarifying
- Summarizing
- Text Structures
- Questioning (Self, Author, Differing Types)
- Imagery

Early Reading Instruction

- Concepts of Print
- Letter Recognition and Production
- Phonemic Awareness
- Phonics
- Common Spelling Patterns
- High Frequency Sight Words

ESL & Bilingual Instruction

- If resources are available teach reading in the first language

Book Reading and Literature Study

- Use Discussion Groups, i.e., Book Clubs, Literature Circles, etc.
- Read a variety of text types and genres
- Provide time and practice reading books
- Provide an independent reading program
- Establish a "print rich" classroom
- Promote out-of-school reading programs

Quality Reading Instruction for All Grades

- Teach strategy lessons
- Design consistent, focused, and cohesive instruction
- Teach the purposes of reading and writing
- Read aloud to students
- Use guided reading, especially for younger children
- Give students oral feedback on decoding, meaning, and fluency of their reading

Writing Instruction

- Provide time for writing extended texts
- Teach children grammar, handwriting, spelling, and conventions
- Publish children's writing

We noted as we reviewed the elements found in Figure 10 a very useful, and yet somewhat finite set of best practices associated with providing effective and comprehensive reading instruction. Although helpful as a core set of practices, we do not wish for anyone to infer that Figure 10 represents a complete "do and don't do" list of best practices. It is intended to represent where at least half of the national reading reports converged on recommendations for best practices. Teachers, parents, and administrators can consider using these converging recommendations as anchors for discussing, evaluating, and refining the quality and content of reading instruction in schools and classrooms.

Within the *Goals and Declarations Theme*, we noted two important recommendations. First, the reports acknowledge the complexity of learning to read and teaching reading. All six reports, to the one, asserted that there is still a great deal to be learned about effective reading instruction through future research. And second, several of the reports affirmed President Clinton's *America's Reading Challenge* (U.S. Department of Education, 1997), this carried forward into the Bush Administration – *All children will read on grade level by third-grade*.

With respect to the *Home-School-Community Partnership Theme*, we found broad conceptual support in these six reports for establishing partnerships among homes, schools, and communities to foster children's reading success. Unfortunately, we also found that these reports offered little in the way of research-based recommendations on how to establish, maintain, and refine such partnerships. This is particularly disappointing

given the richness of recent work documenting effective and not so effective practices for establishing home-school-community partnerships (Morrow, 1995; Edwards, 1999).

Several areas of agreement emerged from our analysis of the *Reading Programs Theme*. The reports converged on recommendations that quality reading programs will: 1) integrate the language arts, and 2) be implemented school wide. With respect to programs for struggling readers, the reports recommended that special needs reading instruction be connected to and extend high quality classroom reading instructional programs.

Within the *Necessary Resources and Support Theme*, the reports converged on several recommendations. First, teachers need to be given adequate resources to teach. Second, class sizes need to be kept manageable. Third, school and classroom libraries need to be stocked with adequate quantities of interesting, engaging, and high quality reading materials on a variety of reading levels. Fourth, teachers need professional development to help them make continuous improvement and remain current. Fifth, struggling readers need additional supports such as extended learning time, additional instructional services provided by reading specialists, and an equitable environment stocked with adequate reading materials and resources.

Within the *Standards Theme*, we found two major areas of agreement: 1) that standards should be developed to reflect researcher, teacher, and community knowledge, and 2) that standards should be age, ability, and group level appropriate. For the most part, recommendations within this theme were wide ranging. The reports suggested standards ranging from addressing teacher preparation and professional development to standards for publishers and schools. Although standards are recommended, the nature, scope, and content of standards were not well developed or described in the six reports.

The final theme, *Teacher Competence*, generated the second largest number of recommendations, 48 total. We found exceptionally high levels of convergence among the six reports on the elements of teacher knowledge and skill. With respect to teacher knowledge, the reports converged on teachers knowing or understanding the following:

Developmental aspects of reading, writing, and spelling
Language content and structure including
Phonetics
Phonology
Morphology
Orthography
Syntax

With respect to teaching skills, the reports converged on the necessity for teachers to know how to:

Teach Language and thinking skills
Teach Phonemic awareness
Teach Phonics
Teach Decoding Strategies
Teach Word Recognition
Teach Comprehension
Promote Motivation and Engagement
Identify and Use Text Structure to Teach Comprehension
Teach Vocabulary
Work with Parents
Meet the needs of Diverse Students
Knowing How to Teach English as Second Language

These converging recommendations form a minimum, common core of teaching competencies that should inform both teacher preparation and professional development programs. Finally, the six national reading reports note that the quality of teacher preparation programs needs improvement in order to adequately prepare new teachers and help experienced teachers to effectively teach all children to read.

Putting It Together: Conclusions and Applications

The findings presented in this study represent the collective wisdom, national knowledge base, and current research about reading instruction. Teachers and administrators may consider using the findings of this study in several ways. First, the findings may be used as guidelines for reviewing, evaluating, and revising the content, scope, and

instructional practices used in a school reading program. Second, teachers and administrators may use these findings to provide parents and policy makers with a comprehensive review and ready guide to "what the research says and doesn't say" about effective reading instruction. Third, teachers can use these findings to self-evaluate the status of their own knowledge base, teaching skill, and implementation of best practices. Fourth, school administrators may wish to convert information in this study into a survey to be given to classroom teachers to determine topics for professional development. And fifth, teachers in special education settings can likewise use this information to determine the effectiveness of their efforts in connecting with and supporting effective classroom reading instruction.

The findings of this study should not be used to develop "do" and "don't do" checklists but should be used as a guide for dialog, discussion, and decision-making. We noted with satisfaction that there was considerable agreement among the six national reading research reports on themes and general recommendations. As Flippo (1998) said so well a few years ago, "We are not nearly as divided as some like the public to believe" (p. 39). The reports converged on one-third of the 231 total recommendations offered within the six national reports studied. The importance of these points of agreement on ongoing assessment, best instructional practices, goals, partnerships, standards, resource needs, reading programs, and teacher competence should not be devalued in our continued dialog and healthy disagreements. Also, this study points out the fact that there yet remains a great deal to be learned about effective reading instruction. Although the reports converged upon *what* effective reading instruction looks like, they were much less helpful in describing *how* to teach the elements of effective reading instruction. Since the original publication of these reports, the National Research Council (1999) has published, *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success* (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999), the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (2001) has published *Teaching Every Child to Read: Frequently Asked Questions*, and the U. S. Department of Education (2001) has published, *Putting Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read* (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001), to offer greater guidance to

teachers, administrators, and parents on *how* to teach the elements of effective, balanced, and comprehensive reading instruction.

Decisions about reading instruction are complex and require that the voices of all stakeholders be heard and valued. On the other hand, it is the classroom teacher working in partnership with homes and communities who are in the best position to know what is appropriate at any given time to help a child learn to read successfully. We conclude by quoting the late Jeanne S. Chall along with her colleagues Jacobs & Baldwin (1990) to emphasize the importance of using reading research to inform the quality of reading instruction:

"It is common today, as in the past, to look elsewhere than to educational research for an understanding of the literacy problems of low-income children and for ways of solving these problems. Currently, cultural and political theories are offered as reasons for the low achievement of poor children and for the lag between mainstream and at-risk children. Although cultural and political explanations may help us understand the broader picture, in the end they must be translated, in practical terms, into what can be done in schools and in homes. Such translation ought to consider the historical [and current] educational research – that good teaching improves achievement and thereby can empower all children and especially those at risk" (p. xi).

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A Lesson Before Prying: Invitation to Inquiry within a Collaborative Community of Literacy Educators

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A university-school collaborative, responding to the many challenges of urban educators, including high-stakes testing, invited the authors to improve literacy instruction. The authors chronicle their initial steps of this action research. Their lesson before prying into the teaching and learning lives of the stakeholders of the learning community indicated that the teachers a) used professional vocabulary that often conflicted with classroom practices, b) expressed interest in improving instruction, and c) highly value their students.

IN THE NOVEL, *A Lesson Before Dying* (Gaines, 1993), Grant Wiggins, an elementary school teacher, is faced with despair and frustration about his role in life, and the roles of those in his community in Post World War II rural Louisiana. He views the cycle of poverty, discrimination, and power of others as one that can not be broken, and doubts that he can influence the children to live better lives and acknowledge that learning to read and write is critical to their success as citizens in a changing world. He is tempted to run away from the community, to turn his back on teaching and to go to a bigger city or a different state where it would not be so hard to teach.

Before he can escape this overwhelming frustration to what he visions as an easier life, the community presents Grant with a challenge. One of the members of the community, a young man named Jefferson, is falsely accused of murder and sentenced to death, a conviction that could not and would not be overturned in that climate of social injustice. It is the wish of the community and Jefferson's immediate family that due to the humiliating way in which the court treated him during the trial, Grant would teach him to recognize the value of his own life, allowing him to face death with dignity. As Grant confronts the challenge of racism, poverty, and an unjust system while he helps this innocent man during the remaining days of his life, he becomes aware of the power of knowledge, especially when coupled with pride. Above all, he learns that a teacher has to believe in not only his students, but in the contexts beyond classroom walls, beyond the immediate segregated community, and so, discovers the compelling impact of one's own actions and non-actions. This reciprocal lesson allows both men to face their future with intrepidity, despite the apparent and overwhelming despair that envelops them in attempts of compliance to this unjust system. The lesson empowers them to accept what cannot be changed, but to do so with conviction and self-confidence, laying the foundation for future change-agents.

This powerful story provides educators with a guiding and encouraging lesson on how to continue the struggle that has crossed the bridge with us to the twenty-first century. The fictional setting of fifty years ago sadly parallels the reality of the frustrations of teaching in general, and teaching children of poverty in particular. Through our

experiences as educators as elementary school teachers, administrators, and current college professors in literacy education, we are familiar with challenges and opportunities that influence the academy and its stakeholders, *A Lesson Before Dying*, evoked responses that inspired reflection and preparation for beginning action research with teachers at a charter school established to meet the needs of a highly transient and poor community near the university. The purpose of this paper is to chronicle our initiation into the collaborative community of teachers and students at this small charter school.

The overarching goal of this action research is to improve literacy at the school; however, given the enormity of this task, we believed that we must first learn about the school and the stakeholders. The question guiding this phase of the study is: How do we establish a collaborative community of literacy educators? We began our lesson with revisiting and reflecting upon the external influences on schools and teachers within urban settings. We believed that this research-based structure would assist us in establishing an authentic framework necessary to support our initial findings of the literacy events that occur within the school. We hoped to learn about the teaching lives of stakeholders in this community before we began to "pry" and make suggestions and recommendations for the teaching and learning of literacy competencies.

Teaching the Urban Poor in the Twenty-First Century

Although poverty remains a dirty thread woven into the tapestry of our society, our educational fabric now includes a nexus of research, philosophies and praxis that have created an interesting but controversial design. Among these influences on education in the twenty-first century are:

- the paradox of uniqueness and challenges of urban education
- accountability and testing for both the learner and the public institutions of learning, and,
- collaborative efforts between universities and public schools.

The Paradox of Uniqueness and Challenges of Urban Education

Teaching children of poverty, especially those living within an urban setting, is a paradox of experiences, allowing educators opportunities for success, or excuses to permit failure. City dwellers speak multiple languages, and hail from multiple cultures and/or countries. Students in schools serving these diverse communities come to school with a vast array of experiences that could contribute to the framework of a lesson, add to student understanding, or open new educational doorways. Additionally, urban schools are often close to museums, libraries, theatres and other institutions that provide optimal learning opportunities. Yet the prospect for quality education is marred with the harsh reality of public education within the center cities of our country. Conditions of urban education have been well documented by many researchers including Jonathan Kozol, who has chronicled the continued disgrace of crumbling buildings, inadequate curriculum, and unconcerned teachers for well over thirty years. These deplorable physical attributes raise issues of the safety of buildings and threaten the health and well being of students on a daily basis (McClafferty, Torres, & Mitchell, 2000). Schools that service the urban poor often suffer from inadequate funding and are micromanaged by too much bureaucracy within the school system, along with inadequate funding at the building level (Weiner, 1999). Finally, many of the students enrolled in urban schools speak little English, may not be proficient in the discourse of schools (Gee, 1996), and are typically not members of the dominant culture. This lack of cultural capital as described by Delpit (1995) can create academic roadblocks that inhibit success in the school setting, including both academics and classroom behavior.

Accountability and Testing

The complexity of teaching in the twenty-first century in general, and specifically teaching children in poverty is further compounded by growing trends and consequences of a national focus on accountability in education. This trend includes the establishment of standards in all content areas at the national, state, and local levels, and testing both for teachers and students alike. The inclination towards a unified calculation of student and teacher success has evolved into a Byzantine system that

reduces learners and institutions of learning to numbers, which can be manipulated and presented for rankings, grading, and/or other labels that oversimplify the complex process of determining educational success. Within the past few years, the progress of colleges of education and public schools, as measured by the outcomes of standardized tests, has been under close examination by politicians, the media, and the public at large. Included in campaign speeches, editorials, and comments on talk radio are concerns about the reading ability of American children, and the woeful teaching abilities of American teachers (Goodman, 1998); statements that are substantiated by seemingly lower test scores that insinuate that the United States of America is inferior to other countries in reading (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). This hysteria has given impetus to many state legislative bodies to initiate mandates to school districts regarding the nature of reading instruction (Patterson, 1998), often resulting in a prescriptive, scripted, and typically myopic approach to literacy.

The mandated addition of such a narrow focus on reading has frustrated many educators already faced with the fostering a love of literacy as well as building a foundation of skills necessary to be successful both within the boundaries of the school walls and life beyond the classroom doors. This program driven agenda, coupled with the growing accountability movement further adds to the burden that teachers throughout this state bear. The pressure that has been placed on classroom teachers to achieve high test scores for their students has been steadily increasing as these highly publicized test scores are the major component of the formula to grade schools A-F, a practice that determines school funding as well as contributes to the status of the school within the overall community.

Tragically, these governmental controls placed on professional educators by non-educators often result in the deprofessionalization, deskilling, and the demoralization of teachers (Giroux, 1992; Shannon, 1992). Though most educators emerge from teacher preparation programs filled with energy and excitement, eager to put theory into practice, they soon become weary with the over emphasis on high stakes testing and other rules established by those outside the academic community. The lack of confidence this engenders in educators can result in inappropriate instruction and increasing frustration with their

own practice, and in the relegation from professional prepared educators to clerks (Giroux, 1992). That is, teachers slowly evolve from making professional decisions regarding the use of curriculum and methodology in relation to the needs of their students, to disseminating lessons written by those far beyond the classroom walls.

Collaboration

An intersection of this growing trend of accountability with reflective praxis as advocated by Schon (1983) has cascaded into renewed interest in collaboration between public schools and colleges of education. Efforts initiated by reform movements in the eighties have assisted in the establishment of partnerships, including collaboration with teachers in their classrooms (Goodlad, 1990), resulting in emergence of professional development schools, strengthening existing partnerships between colleges of education and public schools, and providing an ecologically valid laboratory for examining classroom practices and preservice teacher internships. The evolution of these relationships has been slow, hampered by traditional roles of the university (Goodlad, 1994; Greenwood & Levin, 2000) and often taking on the roles of colonizer and colonized (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Villenas, 2000), a process often leaving teachers feeling marginalized.

A Community Responds

These three influences have the ability to either disenfranchise educators, leaving them with little hope for change, or to provide them with the impetus to search for unique solutions to problems of urban education. One solution to teaching children of abject poverty in our community is the charter school, a partnership with the urban school district and the university, its overall mission to provide a stable educational climate for a highly transient student population. Mirroring the characteristics of uniqueness, issues in accountability within the context of a school/university partnership, The charter school engages with all stakeholders to create optimal learning opportunities for the primary students that the school serves.

The School

We created the school to establish a community of learners that would serve a highly transient, lower socioeconomic population of children. Students in several schools in the immediate area surrounding the university were shuffled from school to school; primarily due to high percentages of low-income housing in the area, and resulting high mobility rate of the families of students these schools serve. Additionally, the mission of the school is to empower teachers to use innovative methodology to not only meet the basic literacy and numeracy skills of the students, but also to expand knowledge in all content areas.

The charter school is located across the street from the university and housed in a science museum. Classrooms for the two kindergartens, a first grade, and a first/second grade combination class, along with the school lunchroom are located on the first floor. Classrooms for the second, second/third, and third grades are on the second floor. The museum also has classrooms on the second floor for lectures and demonstrations for museum visitors. With the exception of the kindergarten classes that shared a large room, the rooms provided for classrooms are smaller than those typically found in most public schools, and the limited space allows for only desks and necessary materials. This left little room for storage or for extended movement activities or extensive learning activity centers.

The office and the teacher lounge/workroom are contained in a portable building across the parking lot from the museum. Space in this area is also cramped. The administrative offices have room for a desk, a few file cabinets, and two chairs for visitors. The teacher lounge/workroom has the usual equipment for preparing curricular materials, and appliances such as a refrigerator and microwave for preparing snacks and lunches. A small table sits inside with approximately six chairs, requiring a search for appropriate seating when a faculty meeting is held there. These temporary facilities have served the school since its inception in 1997, and will remain until a permanent building is built on the university campus.

The Principal

A welcoming retired school administrator and former school board member volunteered to serve as principal for this new school. Active and enthusiastic, she drew upon her years of experience as an educator to encourage teachers to employ best research-based literacy practices and held to the idea that all children could learn. One of her first priorities was that all adults, including volunteers, interacted with the children in a positive, professional manner. Popular with children in the school, parents, faculty, and volunteers, she visited the classrooms on a regular basis and served as an academic leader as well as an administrator.

The Teachers

The eight teachers of the school during the time of the study included two kindergarten teachers, one first grade teacher, one first/second grade teacher, one second-grade teacher, one second/third grade teacher, one third-grade teacher, and one special education teacher. A kaleidoscope of experiences, cultures, and knowledge came with the faculty. First year teachers, seasoned teachers, teachers with master's degrees and teachers recognized by the district as outstanding all participated. They were male and female, African American, European American, and Asian American. They were selected to teach at the school and had been invited to remain, in part due to their dedication to the children and to the academic community. Each classroom also had a teaching assistant who helped the teacher with paperwork, classroom management, and often tutored small groups of children.

The Children

The student population consisted of approximately 140 students in kindergarten through third grade. The children came from homes with an average income of \$6,500 and of primarily African American descent (59 percent). Further, 20 percent came of European American heritage, 13 percent shared a Hispanic background, 6 percent Multiracial, and 2 percent Asian American. Almost the entire school population (75 percent) qualified for free/reduced lunch. Additionally, many of the students were identified as special needs students, including children

with learning disabilities and/or behavioral disorders. Because of these needs, the number of children enrolled in each classroom ranged from approximately 15-20 children, a number smaller than typical classrooms.

The Researchers

We are university professors who at the beginning of this study were new to the university, to the community, and to each other. Our initial conversations reflected similar belief systems regarding teaching and learning that guided our teaching, our service, and our research. We are student centered and strong advocates for children and for teachers. We have manifested these practices in our own classroom teaching, as we have emphasized social justice, democracy, and encouraged risk taking through our assignments and class activities. Our educational experiences expand three decades within several states both north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Because of our stance, we did not wish to engage in research with students and/or teachers as outside colonizers (Villenas, 2000) or as authority figures, possessing all the answers for a "quick fix." We did not wish to pry into the teaching and learning lives of teachers and children, only to give unsolicited, and perhaps unwarranted advice.

The Process

The Invitation

In the fall of 1999, the collaborative circle of educators interested in promoting the success of the school invited us to join them. The principal of the school and a colleague in our department, one instrumental in establishing the charter school, extended this invitation and included the broad request to help to improve reading.

Due to our philosophy, our newcomer status, and the overwhelming charge in our invitation, we recognized the critical need to establish credibility. Although we gained entry through the "known sponsor" approach (Patton, 1990), we thought it important to learn as much about the overall context of the school before we could truly investigate ways

to improve reading. Because of the external influences on urban education, our overall question guiding this phase of the study, how do we establish a collaborative community of literacy educators, became nested in relationship to:

- the paradox of uniqueness and challenges of urban education
- accountability and testing, and
- collaboration.

Specifically, we set out to establish this community so that all stakeholders could “pry” together to create an optimal literacy environment.

Research Design and Data Collection

In planning our research design, the work of Goodlad (1994) and Wagner (1997), who advocate the recognition of all stakeholders as partners, influenced us along with the findings of previous research in the area of school partnerships, the changing nature of schools (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1997), and the influence of implementing best research-based literacy practices (Gambrell, Morrow, Neuman, and Pressley, 1999). In our attempts to answer the questions guiding the study, we anchored our research questions within the framework of action research described by Greenwood and Levin (1998; 2000), as cyclical and scientific with guiding values for equal participation of all stakeholders. This framework focuses on inquiry, and assists in empowering the participants. For this study, we used qualitative procedures such as classroom observations, informal conversations with teachers, students, and staff, and participated in faculty meetings and in-service sessions. These data were collected through ethnographic observation notes, audio-taped discussion sessions with the teachers, samples of classroom reading and writing assessments, and informal interviews. Additionally, we each kept a reflective journal to record our responses to these observations and to raise questions for subsequent interviews and informal conversations. Finally, our data collection included e-mail correspondences that occurred between the researchers. For this phase of the study, data collection occurred between December and April of the 1999-2000 academic school year, a period of five months.

Data Collection

In late fall, 1999, initial meetings established the research agenda. We first met with the principal for a two-hour discussion about the school. The content of this discussion centered upon the history of the partnership and the members of the learning community. The principal shared with us her concerns about the students' progress, particularly in literacy, and her pride about the successes that occurred in many of the classrooms, as well as those opportunities for the implementation of best research-based practices, including phonemic awareness. The principal then took us on a tour of the school, introducing us to volunteers as well as the classroom teachers. Most of the teachers smiled and warmly greeted us and often described the current classroom milieu.

Two weeks later, the teachers, principal, a student teacher, and a graduate student who had been working with the school in the area of speech/language development, met together to discuss plans for collaboration. In attempts to adhere to what Wagner (1997) describes as a co-learning agreement, we stressed our desire to mutually discover promises and possibilities in classroom instruction. We next discussed the literacy progress of the students.

The teachers shared their frustrations about their teaching and their extreme worry about standardized testing that would rate their school on a low level. Results from the previous year had recently returned, but discouraged the teachers, who believed that the students were making progress, and spent approximately 30 minutes discussing this aspect. One teacher stated the difficulty of putting so much time and effort into teaching and then getting "slapped in the face" with a low test score, plus enduring the punishment and embarrassment that accompanies the standardized measure. Aware of their challenges, and their frustrations about testing, we assured them that their feelings were similar to many teachers throughout the country (Kohn, 2000). We then discussed possible solutions to improve the reading abilities of the students. While the teachers voiced an overall concern to improve reading in general, they specifically had an interest in learning more about phonemic awareness.

Over the next several months, we visited classrooms on a weekly basis. We visited these classrooms individually, allowing for more observations of the children and the teacher. Each classroom observation ranged in time from 45 minutes to an hour, and occurred during the morning hours when the students were engaged in literacy events. We also observed children and teachers during math, physical education, art, music, and social studies. Often we walked with the students to the library, to other areas of the museum, and to special classes. These informal times, as well as in-class time when we were able to work with individual students, allowed us many opportunities to converse with the children and the teachers, who also provided us with explanations of classroom procedures.

Data Analysis

For this study, we analyzed our data using guidelines established by Patton (1990). We reviewed field notes, audiotapes, reflective journals, and other artifacts to determine the content, and then organized everything into data files. This process revealed several trends:

- the differences between teachers' words and actions in the classroom
- the teachers' interest in professional growth, and
- the teachers' appreciation for the students that they teach.

The Differences Between Teachers' Words and Classroom Actions

The teachers and the principal frequently mentioned phonemic awareness as an area of concern. Through our discussions and observations of classroom practices, we realized that not all teachers had the same definition of phonemic awareness, nor did they approach phonemic awareness in the same ways in their classrooms. Not surprisingly, we observed that the greatest focus on phonemic awareness occurred in the kindergarten classrooms. The two kindergarten teachers collaborated on lesson planning and adhered to the same overall goals and objectives, but differed in their teaching styles. One teacher relied more on worksheets and other commercial materials. The other

kindergarten teacher engaged in more child-centered activities including technology, manipulative, group activities, and shared reading.

The students in the first and second grades also had instruction in phonemic awareness. Although these teachers employed more student-centered activities such as journal writing, drama, and other interactive literacy activities, there were more lessons associated with the adopted reading series, including a reliance on worksheets and other scripted materials. Observed lessons revealed less emphasis on phonemic awareness in the third grade, although lessons tended to invite student participation and focused on other types of decoding such as structural analysis.

Teachers' Interest in Professional Growth

One focus of the first faculty meeting was the increased pressure that has been placed on our state's teachers to be accountable for the academic progress of children they teach, through state testing. Classroom observations of these teachers at work indicated that many of the teachers engaged in a variety of teaching practices, ranging from child-centered activities to adherence to scripted lessons. Many students worked in workbooks and on worksheets and read textbooks. Conversations with teachers indicated their interest in meeting instructional objectives through different strategies, but also their fear that this gargantuan task is too overwhelming and time consuming. They explained the degree in comfort in using the basal series and other prepared curriculum material, as they would be "covered" if they were required to explain teaching practices if test scores were low.

Teachers' Appreciation for the Students They Teach

The students face the problems that many urban students encounter, including high mobility and learning and/or behavior problems—two factors that helped provide the impetus for the development of this school. Although the teachers spend time encouraging appropriate school behaviors and practices, and have their share of frustrations when students do not meet these expectations, the teachers treat the students with appreciation. In these classrooms, students are free to move about and to engage in purposeful conversations. In most classrooms, happily

observed confused students comfortably asking questions. In particular, students demanded to know the meanings of words, a practice encouraged across all classrooms.

Other discussions held both in faculty meetings and informal conversations held in classrooms and hallways reinforced this appreciation of the children. One teacher stated during our initial meeting that "the children were wonderful," while another suggested that literacy activities center around the children's interest, and keeping positive, and that reading may be a source of comfort to the students facing a difficult life. We also noted that many of the children appeared to be happy and engaged in learning, and in playful conversations with their teachers, staff, and with each other.

These trends, when compared to the influences on urban education that guided our study, provide additional insight into our lesson before prying. The participants in this study truly cared about the well being of the students in the school, but clearly felt challenged by the frustrations that afflict many teachers at urban schools.

The Paradoxes of Uniqueness and Challenges of Urban Education

One interesting aspect of the charter school is its housing in a science museum. While many teachers took advantage of the close proximity of the exhibits and the IMAX movie, the vast opportunities that could enhance literacy, science skills and knowledge remained untapped at this phase of the study. The facilities, while not mirroring the decaying structures as depicted by Kozal (1991), are temporary, cramped, and often, dirty. Teachers and students walked across the parking lot each time they needed to go to the office. While traffic was not usually heavy, there was always a possibility of cars and trucks in that area. The teachers often voiced frustration about these physical conditions, and tended not to employ learning activity centers or other more innovative teaching strategies due to lack of room and supplies.

The cultures and experiences of the children were celebrated in these teachers' classrooms. However, the teachers found their difficulties in learning and/or behavior challenging, and they openly sought ways to

assist students to be successful, often seeking appropriate children's literature and other culturally relevant curricular materials (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The teachers also voiced that they need more time and assistance in this area, concerned about the overwhelming literacy needs of their students.

Accountability and Testing

Teachers remained frustrated about accountability and testing. They believed that they tried to do their best and wanted their children to do well. However, they recognized that the students did have a lack of cultural capital (Delpit, 1995) that would cause some difficulty on standardized testing. Despite the testing cloud that hung over the teachers, they were aware of the importance of standards, and even more aware of the needs of their students. They actively sought ways to best meet these needs, mindful that test scores would not always reflect their students' growth and interest in reading and writing. Some teachers continued to find comfort in scripted curriculum, and even expressed a need to purchase commercial materials that promised high-standardized test scores.

Collaboration

The teachers had participated in the university/charter school partnership since the inception of the school and welcomed university faculty visiting the school and engaging in research. There had been opportunities for university students to intern at the school, and a few faculty had come to work with the teachers in improving the curricular areas of math and writing. However, they were anxious for some assistance in teaching reading and welcomed us into the learning community. Further, the participants held nothing back in their reflections about teaching and learning, and invited us into their classrooms at all times. They often sought our approval in their teaching and seemed pleased when we affirmed their teaching practices and offered suggestions and strategies.

Our Lesson and Conclusions

We performed this study to examine the establishment of a collaborative community of literacy educators with particular attention to:

- the influences of the paradoxes of uniqueness and challenges of urban education
- accountability and testing, and
- collaboration on the literacy practices of the stakeholders at the charter school.

Results of the study indicate that although teachers felt frustration about the increased amount of pressure placed on them by state mandates, they appreciated the strengths that their students brought with them to the classroom. Their desire to be better teachers and to encourage literacy within their own classroom remained strong, although they sometimes used professional vocabulary in discourse that had different situated meanings (Gee, 1996; 2000) for the members of the collaborative community.

In particular, they voiced the need for assistance in phonemic awareness frequently. Our observations indicated activities that fostered phonemic awareness dominating lessons in the kindergarten and first and second grades. As we perceived an overall balanced approach to literacy with an adequate and respectable emphasis on phonemic awareness, we grew curious about the teachers' concern in this area. The balanced approach to literacy has included instruction in phonemic awareness, although the reading wars still rage (Goodman, 1998). Our discussions with the teachers indicated awareness of this controversy and interest in meeting the needs of the students, but also concern about issues of accountability and the impending state test. Given the popularity of the term "phonemic awareness," we knew that teachers would voice this as an area of concern. We had talked of it during our first visit to the school and there had been articles written in the local newspapers and on television and radio news reports. While many of the teachers voiced this as an area of need, most were actively planning and implementing literacy events that focused on the development of phonemic awareness. We found interesting the way in which the teachers viewed this aspect of

literacy learning, and how they tended to define its role in their own classrooms. Gee (2000) reports, "Thinking and language is an active matter of assembling the situated meanings that you need for action in the world" (p.199). He further describes situated meanings as requiring a routine determined by sociocultural groups, and that while some situated meanings such as "coffee" are more easily identified as they have routinized meanings, other words such as "democracy" are less routinized, and may have different meanings.

As a result of this phenomenon, we believe that phonemic awareness is a word with situated meanings. While we may all believe that we have a common definition of "phonemic awareness" based on our sociocultural group, the experiences and belief systems of each of us differ to the point that the routinized meaning manifests itself in different ways. Thus, when we discussed phonemic awareness in our meetings, teachers had different images of how it is best addressed. As researchers often do not examine the meaning of teachers' language (Freeman, 2000), it is not uncommon to have these different views. Language that teachers often use during research studies is taken at face value, a process that can impede the original thoughts of the teachers. Freeman (2000) further admonishes that such practices deprive ownership of the teacher, and place the power with the researcher. While the teachers differed in their classroom practices, despite a seemingly shared definition and commitment to teaching phonemic awareness, the learning community may have falsely assumed this shared definition.

The teachers also voiced concern about the prospect of the state testing system, not only in relation to phonemic awareness, but also throughout all aspects of literacy. They worried that the testing placed them in a conundrum between their wish to learn and implement new strategies that would promote student mastery of competencies of reading and writing, and the grading of their school, which they believed did not accurately reflect the teaching and learning that occurred.

Many educators including Goodman (1998), Shannon (1992), and Kohn (2000) have established the relationship between high stakes testing, student achievement, and teacher professionalism. Yet the process continues and promises to blossom from state mandated

assessments to national assessments. One major concern that these and other educators have raised about standardized testing is the resulting control of the curriculum. Giroux (1992) cautions that indulging in such behavior would result in the establishment of clerks rather than teachers. We share that view and speculate that a teaching life relegated to such mundane practices would result in educators leaving the profession, an occurrence that would not be beneficial to a society concerned with a shortage of teachers, particularly in our state (Darling-Hammond, 2001). It seems reasonable that teachers should not be made to feel as though they have been remiss in their teaching, and that they are not capable of making informed decisions about students they teach. It is reasonable to encourage classroom teachers to move beyond the role of clerks and to strive to be professional educators, teachers who plan for instruction based on informed assessment. These are teachers who do not teach reading programs, but rather teach children to read. The orchestration of such classroom practices is certainly, as Shannon (1992) claims, the deskilling of teachers, a process that reduces the art of teaching to a menial task requiring little thought to individual needs.

Teaching urban, poor children who lack in cultural capital is not a job for clerks. Our observations and discussions with teachers indicate that they did not enjoy that path, and because of their respect for the students, they recognized that this "one-size fits all" curriculum was not appropriate or beneficial to the children. This affirmation and acceptance of the students is helpful for all learners, but especially students in urban schools (Weiner, 1999). The transformation of teachers should consider the cultural/personal situations of the students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Delpit, 1995; Mahiri, 1998), particularly in light of investigations that have revealed the neglected state of urban schools (Kozol, 1991; Ayers, 1996; Mahiri, 1998). The teachers at the charter school absorbed this approach well. But this transformation cannot be achieved alone. It requires the members of the collaborative community to talk, share ideas, and build energy (Graves, 2001).

Our lesson provided a framework for future work within this collaborative community of literacy educators. First, we believe that we established a sense of credibility with the teachers. Through our stance as active-member researchers (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000), we

worked with the teachers, and learned about the literacy routines that occur within the school and the individual classrooms. Secondly, we have learned that the teachers are receptive to professional development, although we need to be explicit in our definition of terms. Educational buzzwords have situated meanings that do vary among teachers and other stakeholders within an academic community. Finally, we have learned that foundation of mutual respect between teachers and students is a strength on which we can easily blaze new literacy paths, allowing for the stakeholders of the school to become change-agents for literacy within the context of urban education.

In A Lesson Before Dying (Gaines, 1993), Jefferson, an uneducated young man, is sentenced to death. At his trial, his own lawyer calls him a "hog," a name that haunts him for most of his incarceration. He is isolated and believes that he has little control over his life and his circumstances. It is not until a group of friends and family, led by teacher Grant Wiggins, meet with him and encourage him that he is able to recognize his own abilities to rise above perceptions and false accusations. It is his lesson before dying.

While no legislator, administrator, or other authority figure has publicly called teachers "hogs," educators have been blamed for many of the perceived failures of our schools. Many teachers feel isolated as they work with children, particularly when high-stakes testing is involved (Kohn, 2000). When these disillusioned teachers lack structure of community, they feel little control over their teaching lives. This frustration often results in flight from teaching and flight from urban schools. Those who stay often find comfort in following the narrow curriculum sanctified by those in authority (Kohn, 2000).

We have discovered that many within the learning community feel discouraged by continuing the struggle that has followed us across the bridge to the twenty-first century. We still teach children immersed in poverty and we still face the frustrations of high-stakes testing. We have discovered that these teachers feel isolated and seek approval and affirmation for classroom practices.

The establishments of learning communities where teachers are able to share ideas, communicate, and most importantly, have ideas and practices affirmed show promise of restoring and generating knowledge and pride. We hope that reflection on our lesson will help to affirm exemplary teaching practices, encourage risk taking in the planning and implementing of literacy events, and help to retain teachers as professional educators. This is the beginning of the transformation from clerks to professional educators and it is our lesson before prying, a lesson that we have all learned as members of a collaborative community of literacy educators.

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Literacy Liaison:
Sending Literacy Home and Back to School

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A pilot project, conducted in a pre-kindergarten classroom, set out to evaluate the effectiveness of sending literacy bookbags home. The classroom teacher provided children with a variety of literacy bookbags to be taken home on a weekly basis. These bookbags contained books, journals, and writing tools along with activities for family/child interactions. Children shared their home experiences with classmates when they return to school. Parents were surveyed to determine their opinions regarding the project.

Each day, some of the children in Mrs. Dyce's pre-kindergarten class leave their early childhood center with a smile and a bookbag. At least once a week, their families know that they will be bringing home a literacy activity in which the entire family can participate.

Benefits of Home-School Connections

Early childhood educators recognize that the relationship between families and schools can be powerful (Saracho, 2002). Important to this study are the findings that parents play a key role in nurturing children's early literacy development (Brock & Dodd, 1994; Cline, 2001). A survey by Chira (1993) identified parent involvement as the greatest priority for improving education. This notion is supported by a variety of studies that support the positive relationship between schools and families and its positive impact on young children's achievement (Seldin, 1991; Marcon, 1993). When school and family communicate and work together, children reap the benefits academically, socially, and emotionally (Kelley-Laine, 1998).

According to Taylor (1983), the home environment has a direct influence on children's early literacy development. The availability of reading and writing materials, the modeling of literate behaviors by adults, siblings, and others, and the verbal interactions between children and adults impact language and literacy growth in different ways.

According to Eldridge (2001), nurturing home-school liaisons not only benefit children, but parents and teachers as well.

1. *Children* of involved parents have a more positive attitude about school, improved attendance, and show better homework habits than do children whose families are less involved.
2. *Parents* involved with school related activities show increased self-confidence in parenting, more knowledge of child development, and an expanded understanding of the home as an environment for student learning.

3. *Teachers* who involve parents in children's learning are more likely to report a greater understanding of cultures, an increased appreciation for parental interest in helping their children, and a deeper respect for parents' time and abilities.

It is in everyone's best interest to consciously promote home-school liaisons (Eldridge, 2001).

Formats for Parent Involvement

Often, early childhood educators focus on increasing or improving parental involvement with their students through participation in school activities. However, teachers sometimes have inappropriate assumptions that can create barriers to family involvement (Kieff & Wellhousen, 2000). These assumptions can be the result of cultural unawareness, differences in socioeconomic factors, or diverse family structures. Some parents have a variety of reasons for limited attendance at school functions. However, this should not preclude participation in other ways. "The most powerful form of parent involvement has the parent actively involved with the child *at home* in all ways that relate to optimal learning and growing" (Workman & Gage, 1997, p. 49). Perhaps we should consider incorporating more strategies that bring school into the home in ways that provide families with specific suggestions that allow them to extend school learning. Workman & Gage (1997) state that the family is a crucible for the growth and development of children. The home environment and culture deserve significant support, and the family should have access to resources that foster its growth and wellness. Teachers and schools need to construct effective school-to-home connections for young children and their families.

Purpose of the Project

Most teachers seek ways to strengthen the bond between school and home. This study focused on the use of literacy book bags as a vehicle for increasing home connections and reinforcement of classroom literacy goals. These bookbags were filled with age-appropriate literacy materials and activities. These literacy bookbags were designed with the specific interests of

the children in mind. Students, parents, and teachers contributed to the selection of the books and materials by orally sharing ideas.

Setting and Sample

This pilot project was conducted in an early childhood center in a large urban school district. Seventy percent of the school's population receives either free or reduced lunches. There were 18 children in this class, 10 boys and 8 girls. There were no children with IEP's, although two children have been referred for special education screening. One child is receiving special services for counseling. English is the native language of all classmates. The classroom teacher has been an early childhood educator for 31 years.

Literacy Bookbags

This section contains descriptions of literacy bookbags designed and used in this pre-kindergarten classroom. Literacy bookbags are a simple and effective tool for teachers to provide parents with suggestions and materials that enhance the language development of young children. Bookbags used in this study contained a variety of books, props, and activities that children shared with their families. They also included instructions for the parents to help them use bookbags effectively.

Mrs. Carole Dyce, an educator in an early childhood center in an urban school, has developed the following literacy bookbags for her pre-kindergarten students. Each bookbag fit a prototype and contained activities matched to the literature and materials included. Suggestions for interactions focused on children's development in social, emotional, language, and/or literacy skills. Extensions led to further engagement in literacy related interactions.

The following chart outlines the contents and focus of bookbags used:

Bookbag Prototype	Description	Activities	Child Development	Extension
Storybook and prop	Bookbag contains: storybook (<u>Clifford</u> , <u>Madeline</u>) matching doll/stuffed animal, bound teacher-made character book of blank pages.	Children read story with families; write a story describing the doll/stuffed animal's adventure with them at home.	Children encouraged to read and listen to stories; reflect on their experience with the prop; create personal stories in print.	Lends itself to multitude of other bookbags using different storybooks and props.
<i>Where the Wild Things Are</i>	Bookbag contains story, <i>Where the Wild Things Are</i> and a teacher-made character book of blank pages.	Children read story with their families; discuss the character Max; write a story about how they resemble Max.	Promotes reading, listening, and pre-writing skills. Provides opportunity to be self-reflective.	Children can illustrate their stories.
Blocks with storybook	Bookbag contains variety of wooden blocks and a storybook about building.	Children invited to read storybook with family and use blocks to build their masterpiece.	Enhances reading and listening skills; encourages families to participate in a block building experience; can promote problem-solving, decision-making, and fine motor development.	Variety of books can present different styles of building with blocks.
<i>Rainbow Fish</i>	Bookbag contains <i>Rainbow Fish</i> storybook; a rainbow fish; stuffed animal.	Teacher reads book in classroom before sending bookbag home. Children asked to tell story to their families.	Children practice listening skills in classroom; teacher can facilitate literacy development and social skills through discussion. At home, they practice recall re-telling the story.	Activity can be duplicated with a variety of favorite storybooks and props.

Bookbag Prototype	Description	Activities	Child Development	Extension
My Favorite Recipe	Bookbag contains teacher-made class cookbook of blank pages.	Families asked to write favorite recipe in the class book; include all ingredients. Parents invited to participate in school cooking activity.	Children practice decision-making in choosing a recipe to share; class reads recipe with teacher and practice basic measuring concepts.	Food festivals can celebrate with variety of cultural themes.
<i>Me First</i>	Bookbag contains a piggy stuffed animal and the story, <i>Me First</i> .	Children read story with family; then discuss if they ever have a "me first" attitude; recite a story about how they might change this attitude into a more positive one.	Children use language to discuss personal experience; problem solve and see their words in print as well as being read.	Children may illustrate their stories.
Birthday Book	Bookbag contains teacher-made blank paged birthday book with birthday crown.	On the day of their birthday, children compose a story describing their birthday celebration. This story is shared with classmates when they return to school.	Bookbag reserved for a birthday child to help make his/her day very special and promote self-awareness; for child to use oral language and recall events of their birthday.	Families may create birthday book for all members of their family.
Stuffed animals	Bookbag contains variety of stuffed animals of special interest to children.	Children choose a stuffed animal and tell a story about the animal to their families.	Children make choices which animal to discuss; gives them an opportunity to use imaginations and practice oral language.	Selection of stuffed animals may be rotated.

Bookbag Prototype	Description	Activities	Child Development	Extension
<i>The Little Engine that Could</i>	Bookbag contains <i>The Little Engine that Could</i> , and a blank teacher-made train shaped writing book for children to keep!	After reading story to the children they share their personal version of the story which is copied into their blank book.	Children will create personal storylines about the little engine encouraging them to use imaginations and be original in thought. They see their words being set to print and then read.	Children may role-play the little engine.

This literacy project did not end with the family, but was further facilitated by the classroom teacher. Upon returning to school, all of the children were invited to share their stories and activities with classmates during morning circle time. Young children had wonderful opportunities for developing their literacy, social, and emotional skills as a result of the multiple language and literacy interactions that were stimulated.

Data on Parent Reactions

To determine the effectiveness of this literacy bookbag project, two separate questionnaires were sent home to the families of all 18 children in Mrs. Dyce's classroom. Each survey was sent home with a teabag and instructions to sit down with a warm cup of tea and relax while completing the form. The first questionnaire had an 80 percent return rate. The second questionnaire had a 70 percent return rate. The first questionnaire, which was sent home in December, asked six basic questions regarding the activities:

1. Did you enjoy the activities?
2. How long did you spend with your children doing the activities?
3. Did your reading time with your children increase?
4. Did you write the story about the home visit with your child?
5. What was your child's reaction?
6. What are your suggestions for future literacy bookbags?

The following data was collected from this first questionnaire:

Questionnaire #1

Questions	Responses and Comments
1. Did you enjoy sharing our take home books and stuffed friends? Why or Why not?	YES, 100 percent Great sharing Made my child feel special Unique Taught my child responsibility Led to more conversation It was a nice change in our routine Gave us something to talk about It was a nice way to spend time together
2. How long did you spend with your child while doing the reading activity?	Range: 10 minutes – 1 hour Average: 30 minutes
3. Did the time spent increase your usual reading time with your child?	YES, 75 percent It did not increase our time, but it enriched it.
4. Did you write the story about the home visit with your child?	YES, 80 percent It was also mentioned that older siblings and grandparents participated.
5. What was your child's reaction to having the visitors and stories?	Made sure they had somewhere to sleep It was like having a real guest (person) join us for the night Very excited Loved the stories Wanted to play "dress it and feed it" Enjoyed the play acting of "entertaining" Interesting We talked about everything Took it seriously Took it everywhere we went Made my child feel special She showed off her stuffed buddy to everyone
6. What suggestions do you have for future literacy bookbags?	Encourage more artwork School night visits are tough - weekends are best Keep bookbags for more days Have children include personal data such as address, phone number, etc. Include live pets Please continue this project

In reviewing the data of this first questionnaire, particular points of interest emerge. They include enjoyment of the activities, increased opportunities in the home for literacy development, inclusion of other family members, and suggestions for future bookbags.

The second questionnaire, which was sent home in May, asked the families to offer their opinions on the individual literacy bookbags.

Questionnaire #2

Bookbag	Opinions
1. Stuffed animal with matching storybook	50 percent identified this one as their favorite We enjoyed reading the other children's stories as well as writing our own Always a great pleasure, I mean pleasure! Let's the overachievers shine Great cuddling time with the stuffed buddy My child loved helping me write I'm glad you chose well-known stories
2. <i>Where the Wild Things Are</i>	We now read this story all the time Thumbs up. We had to read this story over and over Our favorite since my child is "King of the Wild Things" My son was very proud of his picture It was nice to see my child get so involved It was time for my son's artistic ability to shine It is a good idea to send home familiar stories
3. Blocks	My child was counting a lot This is the only one Dad was involved with It was a good counting tool Nice It could be done with any member of the family Wonderful My daughter loves to build and be creative
4. <i>Rainbow Fish</i>	Didn't do much for me She left this one alone He didn't remember the story Great, she enjoyed telling us her story We had fun thinking of funny things to say She liked being able to do all the talking This was a family favorite

Bookbag	Opinions
5. Recipe Book	We needed more time She enjoyed having me come to school and cook with her classmates Okay, but there was not as much child participation We didn't have enough time
6. <i>Me First</i>	He thought the story was about his brother not himself This book was a great learning story Great Nice
7. Birthday Book	A wonderful way to make the children feel special It enabled her to share her special day with classmates Too bad, he is an August birthday! This started her day off in a special way We enjoyed reading how other classmates celebrate their birthdays She loved to re-tell her classmates' birthday stories
8. Stuffed Animal	The story must have changed 10 times It was hard to keep them clean! Great Whenever she gets to express herself, it is wonderful Sweet! I just loved my son's imagination about the monkey It makes his imagination work better We had fun coming up with a story together
9. <i>The Little Engine That Could</i>	This was a new bookbag that was created after the second questionnaire was sent home.

In reviewing the data of this second questionnaire, parents' comments expressed the greatest approval with prototype number 1 (Stuffed animal and matching storybook) and prototype number 8 (Stuffed Animal). Prototype number 2 (*Where the Wild Things Are*), prototype number 3 (Blocks), prototype number 6 (*Me First*), and prototype number 7 (Birthday Book) were also popular for a variety of reasons. The poorest responses were received for prototype number 5 (Recipe Book) and prototype number 4 (*Rainbow Fish*). It seemed that these last two activities required more time and that created difficulty.

Discussion

The following *unsolicited* comments from families convey a positive relationship between the teacher and parents. It appears that the parents not only enjoyed and valued the activities, but also appreciated the teacher's efforts.

"Each activity is different and lets you spend valuable time with your child after a busy day. I liked the variety and cannot really tell you which one I liked the best or the least. We loved them all!"

"You've done a great job, thank-you."

"Please, more, more, more!"

"I hope you will continue with these home activities."

"I hope you have her sister!"

Although the children and families did not like every literacy bookbag, there was an overwhelming positive response to the project. One hundred percent of the families stated that they enjoyed the activities leading to children's increased motivation to engage in literacy tasks. Seventy-five percent of the families stated that it increased reading time with their children. These two statements alone validate the effectiveness and success of using literacy bookbags in a classroom of young children to promote literacy. According to Routman (2003), children read a lot more when they have easy access to books. After reviewing the data, the following general themes seemed to emerge:

1. Families appreciated the effort of the classroom teacher in promoting a school/home liaison (e.g., Lets the overachievers shine).
2. Families and children enjoyed most of the books and activities (e.g., We enjoyed reading other children's stories as well as our own).
3. These bookbags increased the family time spent with reading (e.g., Led to more conversations).

4. Participation in bookbag activities at home and then reporting on these at school made the children feel special (e.g., Made my child feel special).
5. The bookbags provided families with novel ideas to reinforce children's literacy skills (e.g., It was like having a real guest join us for the night).
6. Families liked the variety of books, props, and activities (e.g., I liked the variety and cannot really tell you which one I liked the best or least. We loved them all).
7. Families identified strengths and interests of their children (e.g., Sweet! I just loved my son's imagination about the monkey).
8. Children enjoyed sharing their stories with both families and classmates (e.g., We enjoyed reading the other children's stories as well as writing our own).
9. Families identified different forms of literacy: reading, writing, listening, artistic expression, and speaking (e.g., My child loved helping me write).
10. Families and children wanted to continue with the literacy bookbags project (e.g., Please, more, more, more!).

Conclusions

As early childhood educators, we are forever seeking developmentally appropriate ways to promote all areas of young children's development. The practice of using literacy bookbags allowed children to engage in literacy tasks with the support of family members. It also allowed them to share their experiences with peers.

This project adopts some of the basic tenets of Developmentally Appropriate Practices, a concept identified by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): young children learn through experience and schools need to connect with families. This strategy also aligns with standards of the NAEYC. These include: promote child development and learning, build family and community relationships, connect with children and families, and use developmentally appropriate approaches (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

In promoting the NAEYC Standards, teachers need to develop innovative ways to build bridges between families and schools. Linder and Foote (2002) urge teacher education programs to include strategies for involving parents in meaningful ways that support children's growth and development. Literacy bookbags are a tool that helps to achieve this goal. Although the concept of literacy bags for families is not new (Dever, 2001), the findings of this project further validate its usefulness in promoting literacy for young children. It appears that the use of literacy bookbags is a wonderful vehicle for supporting and guiding young children and their families towards success in literacy.

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Purchasing Power: One School District's Decisions to Purchase Three Reading Programs

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To understand decision-making processes of purchasing supplemental reading programs, the researchers conducted interviews with teachers, administrators, and central office personnel, asking them to describe curricular purchasing decisions, grant writing, and budgeting process. These interviews, observations, and documents allowed us to understand many perspectives of the decision-making process.

SINCE 1999, the authors have been working with the Thomas School District in a rural district in the Southeastern United States in several capacities. We have been involved in several grant-funded programs at Thomas Elementary School, an elementary school in the district, collaborating with teachers and administrators to provide professional development, curriculum, and tutoring. At Thomas Elementary, we collaborated with teachers to review curriculum and determine what needed to be addressed in the tutorial programs. In addition, we met with teachers and administrators from Thomas School District to discuss, assist in implementing, and participate in professional development at the school.

Thomas School District includes two elementary schools and two high schools which serve just over 1200 students. More than 80 percent of students in the district are African-American, more than 90 percent receive free or reduced lunch and/or are designated as "economically disadvantaged." The district serves families that live across Thomas County, an area covering more than 250 square miles. The Thomas School District is plagued by high teacher and administrator turnover. In 2000, 10 percent of teachers were uncertified or teaching with emergency certification, and nearly half of teachers had fewer than five years' experience. Three of the schools have changed principals in the last three years, and Thomas Elementary, where we primarily work, is on its third principal in four years.

As is common in a poor, rural district in the south, reading achievement is below national and state standards in the Thomas School District. Results from the year 2000 administration of the state standardized test indicated that over 60 percent of third graders scored in the lowest quartile for both reading and language arts, and only 7 percent scored above the 50th percentile.

Voters of the county elect the school board and the superintendent. During the 1990s the district lost state accreditation and is now operated by a state-appointed conservator who has responsibility for supervising reform efforts and raising achievement scores.

The district has a relatively small number of central office administrators. These include an elementary education coordinator and a testing coordinator/grant writer, in addition to the state-appointed conservator and the elected superintendent.

During our second year of collaboration with the school district, the district purchased (and trained teachers to use) three different reading programs:

- *Breakthrough to Literacy* (2000, Wright Group/McGraw-Hill Publishers)
- *Lightspan Achieve Now!* (2000-2001, Lightspan), and
- *SRA Open Court* (2000, McGraw-Hill Publishers).

We became interested in documenting the district's decision-making processes as we heard teachers express concerns about the purchasing of the reading materials and whether or not these materials could successfully meet the needs of the students. This study uses case study (Stake, 1995) and participant-observer (Patton, 1990) methodologies to examine the decision-making processes that led to the purchase of the three reading programs in the Thomas School District.

As literacy professionals, we believe that it is our responsibility to undertake work, which is likely to contribute to efforts to improve teaching and learning in literacy classrooms. By understanding the ways in which one district makes decisions about its literacy curriculum, we hope that we can make better decisions for our own research in and teaching of literacy. We believe this research can improve our interactions with schools and that we will more likely be effective in working with classroom teachers. We also hope that this information will be used to inform other literacy educators about reading programs.

Perspectives

Prepackaged literacy programs are repeatedly advocated as a means of ameliorating some of the most intractable issues affecting reading achievement:

- linguistic and economic diversity
- poverty
- inexperienced teachers, and
- teachers without appropriate credentials.

Unfortunately, as MacGillivray, Ardell, Skoda, and Curwen (2002), Gutierrez (2001), and others (e.g. Adcock and Patton, 2001) have shown, these programs often serve to exacerbate the very problems they are intended to solve.

Prepackaged literacy programs are intended to be teacher-proof and to meet the needs of all students by presenting a unified, one-size-fits-all curriculum. Teachers deliver, rather than create, the curriculum, as they read the scripts and assign the assignments specified in the teacher's manual. These materials often tend to ignore the rich linguistic skills, competencies, and knowledge children bring to school. Moreover, these materials tend to divert precious professional development time and resources away from helping teachers examine their day-to-day practice and understand children and content. Gutierrez (2001) describes these materials as "characterized by reductive literacy practices, bolstered by English-only legislation, narrow conceptions of the teaching and learning of literacy, [and] a focus on teaching a narrow range of basic skills" (p. 565).

In spite of these concerns about prepackaged programs, in recent years federal legislation has increasingly emphasized the purchase of prepackaged curricular materials. The federal Reading Excellence Act (2001) provided millions of dollars to improve instruction by providing improved curriculum. Guidelines for grant applications specified that grant proposals must ". . . select one or more programs of reading instruction, developed using scientifically-based reading research, to improve reading instruction by all academic teachers for all children in each of the schools selected by the agency . . ." (section 2255.b.1.A). Districts were allowed to design their own programs for reading instruction and professional development, however, funding would only be given to programs which were designed according to the guidelines of scientifically based reading research and needed to include an agreement or a relationship with a "person or entity with experience or expertise

about such programs" (section 2255 d.1.A.2) who has "experience or expertise about the program" (section 2255 b.1.B) and has demonstrated success. The legislation precluded teachers and school faculty from designing their own literature based programs based on their knowledge of teaching and children. The statute itself privileged consultations with vendors and the purchase of reading programs which come complete with consultants, professional development, and research supporting claims about their success.

The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLBA) also seems to privilege the purchase of prepackaged curriculum materials as a means of increasing literacy achievement. An on-line fact sheet about the *No Child Left Behind Act* stated that NCLBA "Requires that Title I funds be used only for effective educational practices," based on "strategies that are grounded in scientifically based research." (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The NCLBA legislation itself states that funds for improving students' reading skills may be distributed to local education agencies if they select and implement "a learning system or program of reading instruction based on scientifically based reading research and that schools may also use the funds for procuring and implementing instructional materials, including education technology such as software and other digital curricula, that are based on scientifically based reading research." (Part B, Subpart 1, Section 1202).

In order to try to understand the impact of federal legislation of this sort on local decision-making about reading curriculum, we began an investigation of the factors that impacted the curriculum purchasing decisions of one small school district.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collected for this study were gathered as a result of our roles with Thomas School District. In 1999, school district officials asked us to collaborate on teacher education, professional development, and remediation programs. This collaboration has led us to complex roles with the district. We are teacher educators supervising teacher candidates in field experiences; we are collaborators helping with grant efforts and professional development; we are part-time teachers working with

children and family members in a grant-funded after school and summer program; and we are researchers studying factors that influence literacy achievement in a rural setting. As we collaborated with teachers and administrators in the school and administrators at district level, we were allowed access to observe the events, which unfolded as a particular case of decision-making, consistent with the case study research as described by Stake (1995).

As participant-observers, much of the data for this study have arisen as a component of our participation in and interaction with the district. We have established meaningful identities with the administrators in the Thomas School District central office and the State Department of Education and with teachers at Thomas Elementary School. These relationships have allowed us to gain entry into both formal and informal operations of the school and school district. Administrators and teachers at Thomas Elementary School and the administrators at the district level seem to understand our tripartite role as they have interacted with us as teachers, researchers, and teacher educators.

The data for this study include field notes documenting our interactions with school and district personnel. We have spent many hours at the school and central office, observing the decision-making process as it unfolded, documenting interactions with curriculum vendors, and collecting appropriate documents that were part of the decision-making process, such as budgets, grant proposals and requests for proposals, advertising materials and free samples of curriculum, and internal memos (Denzin, 1978). In addition, we have conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers, administrators, and central office personnel, asking them to describe curricular purchasing decisions and the grant writing and budgeting process (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). These interviews, observations, and documents allowed us to understand many perspectives of the decision-making process.

Categories of factors influencing curricular decisions for the Thomas School District have emerged using a process of triangulation, thick descriptions, and long-term observation to analyze and understand the data (Denzin, 1978; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Seidman, 1998). We examined the data for consistencies and patterns, which would suggest

categories of factors shaping the district's decisions. During follow-up interviews, administrators and teachers confirmed or disconfirmed these categories, as we formally asked them about the processes of decision-making, and by the documents we collected, including grant applications, budget reports, and memos to and from administrators.

Reading Programs Purchased by Thomas School District

For the last several years, teachers at Thomas School District have used the adopted reading program which is the Houghton Mifflin series *Invitations to Literacy* (1998). In addition, during the 2000-2001 school year, Thomas School District used funds from three grants to purchase three additional, supplemental reading programs. A Reading Sufficiency Grant paid for the purchase of *SRA/Open Court*, to be used in K-3 classrooms at Thomas Elementary. A Technology Literacy Challenge Grant paid for the purchase of *Breakthrough to Literacy* (2002) for the kindergarten and first grade classrooms. Finally, a Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Grant allowed the district to purchase *Lightspan Achieve Now* materials and software, for use in 7th and 8th grade classrooms at Thomas High School.

SRA/Open Court, a scripted reading basal program for kindergarten through sixth grade, provides direct instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics. This program includes basal anthologies, big books, student workbooks, and prepared lesson plans. *Open Court* has been advertised as a research-based curriculum that provides systematic, explicit instruction to teaching reading. In addition, *Open Court* provides instructional support that includes skills worksheets, enrichment and remediation activities, and professional development activities for the teachers.

Breakthrough to Literacy, published by The Wright Group/McGraw Hill, and is described as an individualized, balanced instructional program focused on a variety of vocabulary controlled books children read at home and in the classroom, and on computer software which focuses on the alphabet, phonemic awareness and phonics, and reading and rereading vocabulary controlled books. When purchased, *Breakthrough to Literacy* provides each classroom with five computers

and furniture, as well as prepackaged lesson plans for whole group, small group, and individualized instruction.

The Lightspan Company produces *Lightspan Achieve Now*. The central feature of *Lightspan Achieve Now* is a set of discs for use on Sony Playstations that use interactive games and activities to teach a variety of literacy skills. The Sony Playstation platform is intended to be motivating and portable, so that students can carry home a unit and a set of discs in order to work on literacy out of school. *Lightspan Achieve Now* also includes a variety of assessments, detailed lesson plans, and support for aligning the Lightspan curriculum with state standards.

Factors Affecting the Decision Making Process

In order to assist us in understanding why the three reading programs were purchased, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the school community. Through these interviews we found that decision-makers purchased these programs based on low-test scores and exposure to particular materials. The factors, which influenced district officials' decisions are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Response to Low Test Scores

In general, the decision to purchase reading programs for literacy curriculum in the Thomas School District arose as a result of years of low-test scores. The district purchased new materials in response to its low-test scores, and low-test scores helped enable the district to win the federal and state grant funds that paid for the purchase of the programs.

The superintendent reported an unfamiliarity with the specifics leading to the purchase of any of the three programs documented here, but believed the staff (central office personnel and principals) primarily made decisions based on assessments of students, saying, "I think data that we obtain from standardized tests and teacher made tests and those types of things will be used religiously to make those kinds of decisions...."

These data to which the superintendent referred were translated into a need for additional reading programs for the literacy curriculum. The grant writer for Thomas School District, for example, used his understanding of the needs of the district, including poor performance on standardized tests, to write grants for the purchase of *Lightspan Achieve Now*. According to the grant writer, after looking at the test scores and studying several programs, he worked *Lightspan Achieve Now* into the grant application because "it might actually meet a need or two, and this is compared to about 20 different things." The district's definition of data, interpretation of that data, and definition of school district needs shaped the districts' purchasing decisions.

The superintendent also spoke of a need to standardize curriculum in the district. The superintendent wanted all of the teachers to be teaching with the same sets of materials using consistent methods. According to the superintendent, this would enable district administrators the ability to make judgments about individual teachers' performance. The superintendent reasoned that if all the teachers were teaching the same materials, differences in student performance between classes could be tied directly to teacher ability.

Exposure to Particular Materials

District administrators' knowledge of the existence of particular programs and the nature of their exposure to particular programs greatly affected purchasing decisions. Administrators first learned about *Breakthrough to Literacy* during a session, conducted by the vendor, at a statewide conference sponsored by the Department of Education. At this session, the vendor told the elementary coordinator, superintendent, and other administrators from Thomas School District about the program and its materials, and showed them charts of statistics about the program's benefits.

The district decided to purchase *SRA/Open Court* in part because it had very high exposure just before they needed to spend some funds remaining in a grant budget. While several central office administrators made decisions about how to spend Reading Sufficiency funds, the grant writer was researching via the Internet a variety of curricular programs.

Because of this Internet research, he had catalogs, print outs, and flyers about *SRA/Open Court*, and loaned those to the administrators making the spending decision. As part of his Internet research, the grant writer met with the vendor for *SRA/Open Court*. When the grant writer found out that the vendor was from the same hometown as the elementary coordinator, the grant writer made sure that the two were introduced. As the grant writer said, "the product had been presented; awareness of the product had been presented." The connection between the elementary coordinator and the vendor, the flyers, and printouts all gave awareness of the product.

Grant Writing Help From Vendors and Publishers

Vendors and publishers frequently help districts write grants. This can be seen on several websites curriculum company websites, which offer support to districts when writing grant applications. The *Breakthrough to Literacy* web site, for example, invites browsers to learn about the *Reading Excellence Act*. In 2002, the *Breakthrough to Literacy* site also provided a four-page PDF document, which lists the criteria for qualifying for a *Reading Excellence Act* grant, along with the ways in which *Breakthrough to Literacy* meets or surpasses each of those criteria. The website (2002) boasts:

Grant-writing Assistance: *Breakthrough to Literacy* has prepared materials that can help your school district write a successful *Reading Excellence Act* grant application. For immediate grant-writing assistance, contact your local *Breakthrough to Literacy* sales consultant or the *Breakthrough to Literacy* national office.

At the Thomas School District, the grant writer used information from vendors' websites, particularly the *Lightspan Achieve Now* web site, during the proposal process. In addition, Thomas School District received even more direct support from a vendor. One of the grant writer's colleagues volunteered to help write the Technology Literacy Challenge proposal. As the grant writer told us, "This guy used to be my boss [in another educational setting] and he's kind of like a friend and I was asking for help writing these grants, and he helped me out." Turns out he was a *Lightspan* employee. The grant writer and vendor wrote the

purchase of the *Lightspan Achieve Now* materials into the budget for the proposal, won the grant for the high school, and purchased the materials.

The same vendor helped another local district write a Reading Excellence Act grant proposal, again securing a place for *Lightspan Achieve Now* materials in the budget, and leading to the eventual purchase of *Lightspan* curriculum. Personnel from this school district asked us to assist them in writing the same grant. One of us visited the school while the vendor for *Lightspan* assisted in writing the grant proposal.

The Extras

Another factor, which influenced the district's decisions to purchase programs, was the perceived value of the materials and extras they would provide. For example, the elementary coordinator told us that she wrote a grant proposal especially to purchase the *Breakthrough to Literacy* program. Central office administrators were particularly interested in this program because it would provide five computers, including both software and furniture, for each classroom. They also liked the number of big books and take-home books that the program would provide.

The extras also influenced the decision to purchase *Lightspan Achieve Now*. The grant writer explained that he especially liked the *Lightspan Achieve Now* materials because they make use of Sony Playstations. The program would provide several game consoles, and the video game platform seemed likely to motivate students.

Vendors know that the "bells and whistles," the take-home books, big books, book bags, technology, black-line masters, posters, and bulletin board pieces that these supplemental programs provide sway decision-makers who have little time to carefully study written lesson plans, curriculum, or the research and philosophy of literacy programs. This was made most vivid when we attended a vendor's presentation, hosted at the school. Teachers and administrators gathered together to listen to the vendor, who read from a big book, stacked the trade books that come with the program into conspicuous piles, counted the number of vocabulary-controlled take-home books that would come with

teacher's manuals and handouts, displayed games that accompany the program, and then made sure that free samples of big books and book bags got into the hands of people who might have money to spend, including the principal, us, and a grant coordinator, but not the teachers or assistant teachers also attending the presentation. During the 2001 school year, the district decided to purchase materials from this vendor.

Money

The unencumbered availability of money affected the district's decision to purchase programs in several ways. In one case, the fear of losing money sparked the decision to make a purchase. Thomas Elementary purchased *SRA/Open Court* materials toward the end of a fiscal year when there were several thousand dollars left over in the Reading Sufficiency budget. Since they had recently reviewed *SRA/Open Court* materials, administrators decided to purchase it at the last minute. As the grant writer said, "There was a need in the budget to spend a lot of money quick and that was one of the things that fit the bill."

The grants themselves, and the funds provided by the grants, also shaped the district's decisions. Generally, districts receive a percentage of total grant funds for overhead and expenses. These funds, in part, motivated the district to apply for grants. Grant RFPs also shaped the district's purchasing decisions, especially when those grants tailored to particular kinds of programs. The Technology Literacy Challenge Grant, for example, provided funds for technology (hardware and software), teaching materials, and technology training to districts that could show a well-organized plan for incorporating technology into literacy instruction. *Breakthrough to Literacy* is advertised as a comprehensive program, which provides software, curriculum, and training to integrate technology into early literacy teaching and learning. Requesting funds for *Breakthrough to Literacy* increased the district's odds of winning the grant because the program came with hardware and software that met the technology criteria. The link between grant funding and the purchase of particular kinds of reading programs continues.

State Standards

Thomas School District personnel also tended to be more likely to consider literacy programs that advertised themselves as consistent with the state's standards. According to the elementary coordinator, one reason that the school district purchased *Breakthrough to Literacy* was because it "matches the state components." Knowing that school districts feel pressured to purchase materials that will help them meet state standards, vendors create promotional materials claiming consistency with those standards. After we, the government awarded us a substantial federal grant, the Leap Into Literacy Center (*Leapfrog*) and The Wright Group, among others, sent us promotional materials. Many of these materials contain outlines or charts, which explicitly explain how particular lesson plans, books, or activities that come with their programs meet the state's literacy standards.

District officials seemed to be swayed by promotional materials and vendors' assurances that the curriculum they purchased aligned with the state standards for reading. However, there is no evidence that they spent time checking vendors' promises or establishing whether the curriculum would help students meet all, some, or few of the state standards.

State Department of Education Facilitation

Exposure to literacy programs and connections with vendors affected the district's decision to purchase or apply for funds to purchase literacy programs. The State Department of Education increasingly facilitates exposure and connections such as these through face-to-face networking, conference presentations, and print materials describing various reading programs. The State Department of Education hosts annual conferences for educators. Administrators and other educators from schools awarded particular grants have been and continue to be required to attend the annual conference in order to continue to receive their grants.

At the conference, the State Department of Education facilitates connections between districts and vendors in several ways. The State Department of Education works with a company to facilitate registration and to handle vendor packets for the conference. Vendors are allowed to rent space to display their wares in the conference exhibition hall. In addition, the

conference schedule is arranged with time for educators to "mingle" with vendors.

During the school year 2000-2001, the State Department of Education began sharing print materials about reading programs in their *Guide to Research-Based Reading Programs*. The State Department of Education invited vendors and publishers to describe their reading programs, including descriptions of the goals of the program, results of its use, the students and special populations it serves, and vendor-selected research documenting its effectiveness. For the *Guide*, vendors created charts listing each of the state's K-3 literacy standards and the components of the reading programs which match each standard. They distributed the *Guide to Research-Based Reading Programs* to one administrator from each school but not to teachers. The Thomas School District received the guide after they had made the three purchases described in this paper.

Vendor-Provided Research

Federal legislation calls for districts to purchase reading programs, which have a proven record of effectiveness. Independent research would enable publishers to make claims about the effectiveness of their programs, however, little positive independent research has been conducted on the impact of prepackaged literacy programs, and the bulk of independent research tends to be negative. Publishers do, however, provide and make claims about research that proves the effectiveness of their materials. The publishers and vendors of the programs provided research that affected the decisions to purchase *SRA/Open Court*, *Breakthrough to Literacy*, and *Lightspan Achieve Now*. Thomas acquired the research presented by vendors along with promotional materials, at State Department of Education Conferences, and by consulting the vendors' web sites.

Administrators

Administrators in the Thomas School District told us that they do not regularly read academic and research journals. A few of the administrators subscribe to journals such as *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Educational Leadership*, and ASCD materials, or know that copies of

these journals are available at the central office, but, they find that their jobs leave them little time to read those journals. They are also unfamiliar with journals that publish literacy research. Their only exposure to the research base that reading programs are supposed to be built around (according to federal legislation) comes from the legislation itself and vendors' promotional materials. No one involved in the decision to purchase the three programs studied here sought out additional research from journals or books during the decision making process. The administrators who made decisions did not read much of the research provided by the vendors, let alone research on the impact of prepackaged literacy programs or research specifying the characteristics of quality literacy instruction and curriculum.

Teachers

Teachers were not involved in the decision to purchase any of the three programs. The central office staff made the decisions when they applied for the grants and when they made budgetary decisions. When asked if she knew who participated in the decision-making about purchasing reading programs, a first grade teacher stated, "I do not know for sure but I do know that the decisions are made at the central office. I am not sure who exactly makes the decisions." Teachers often learned that decisions had been made long after the materials had been purchased. A kindergarten teacher told us that she learned about *Breakthrough to Literacy* when boxes of materials were delivered to her classroom. The new principal did not know what the boxes were for, so the teacher eventually reached a central office administrator to ask what was in the boxes and why they were delivered to the school. Only then did she learn that she would be required to set up the five computers, attend *Breakthrough to Literacy* trainings, and teach using the *Breakthrough to Literacy* materials.

If the decision makers had asked teachers for input, they would have realized that some elementary teachers were being asked to implement three different reading programs. One of the third grade teachers stated:

"I believe strongly that the only way to make readers of children is to let them read. We have a good literature based series with lots of support material, and I just don't think we need any more programs. There's not time to do justice to all of the things that we have."

Summary

The decision making process at the Thomas School District during the 2000-2001 school year was haphazard, context dependent, authoritative, and externally influenced. Central office administrators, including the grant writer and the elementary education coordinator, in consultation with the school board and the State Department conservator, made the decision to purchase and implement each of the three reading programs was by. Principals and classroom teachers had little to no input in the decision making process. While statewide initiatives impacted the process, such as the state's language arts standards, the districts' definition of its children as at-risk and language deficient and connections with vendors who effectively sold their products to the district affected it more.

Discussion

We have described this process not to point fingers at the district, or to imply that their decision making process is any better or worse than that used by other districts across the state and nation. In many ways, the district's decisions can be viewed as quite rational. At the very least, officials in the Thomas School District have been working to respond to and improve their low achievement scores. District administrators listened to the advice of colleagues and vendors, they based decisions on their perceived understanding of the district's needs, they took advantage of collaboration and support offered to them by trusted colleagues, and they sought out additional funds and resources for their district.

However, the district administrators' decision to respond to low-test scores by purchasing prepackaged reading curriculums is debatable. Viewed as a response to federal legislation and federal reform efforts, the process used by the Thomas School District to make decisions about

reading curriculum indicates that reform efforts may lead to decisions which decrease teacher autonomy and lead to greater, rather than less, inequality in our nation's schools.

The district's decision-making process suggests a lack of respect for teachers' knowledge and a mistrust of teachers' skills and abilities. Teachers could have been consulted about their needs, and asked whether the existing basal system was sufficient. Teachers could have been allowed to study the variety of supplemental and comprehensive reading programs being considered, and teacher skill could have informed the decision. Instead, teachers' knowledge was ignored, and the context of each school and classroom devalued.

The language of the *No Child Left Behind Act* can encourage school districts to perpetuate the autocratic, appositional process used at Thomas School District. The *No Child Left Behind Act* aims to provide funds to districts, which commit to using "a learning system or program of reading instruction based on scientifically based reading research." Accountability measures emphasize standardized test scores over other assessments. District officials aim to keep their Title I funds. To do so, they will find themselves purchasing materials that fit (or are advertised to fit) the NCLBA criteria and which claim to align themselves with state accountability measures. The publishers of reading materials are already redesigning their marketing tools to emphasize consistency between their materials and the criteria established in *No Child Left Behind*.

We understand that to impact the decisions made at Thomas School District and other districts, we must do more than help districts do a better job choosing from the offerings that vendors provide and that we must help districts move beyond picking their materials based on where the vendor went to high school. Instead, we must work with districts, administrators, teachers, and parents as advocates for literacy education, which emphasizes children and learning over delivery of programs.

We cannot allow the research to speak for itself, trusting that grant-writers, curriculum supervisors, superintendents, and other decisions makers will find it or that vendors will bring it to their attention. According to Barth (2001), no other profession ignores the voices of its

members. Barth (1990) explained we must strive to actively assist school districts in becoming a community of learners, "places where students, teachers, parents, and administrators share the opportunities and responsibilities for making decisions that affect all the occupants of the schoolhouse" (p. 9).

Teachers and principals in the Thomas School District were not part of the decision making process. When teachers do become involved in decision-making, they seek an understanding of their roles and how they contribute to the overall effectiveness of the school and the school system (Norton, 1999). Billingsley (1993) reported that when teachers' professional expertise is recognized, when teachers are encouraged to be involved in decision-making, and when teachers are allowed to use professional discretion, then the motivation, confidence, and commitment of those teachers are boosted.

In the Thomas School District, decisions were made without teacher or principal input. These decisions did little to garner support for the initiation and implementation of these supplemental reading programs. The teachers and principals in this district did not have the buy in needed to promote the use of these supplemental programs. In fact, the teachers reported that they were not even sure these programs were even needed.

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