

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

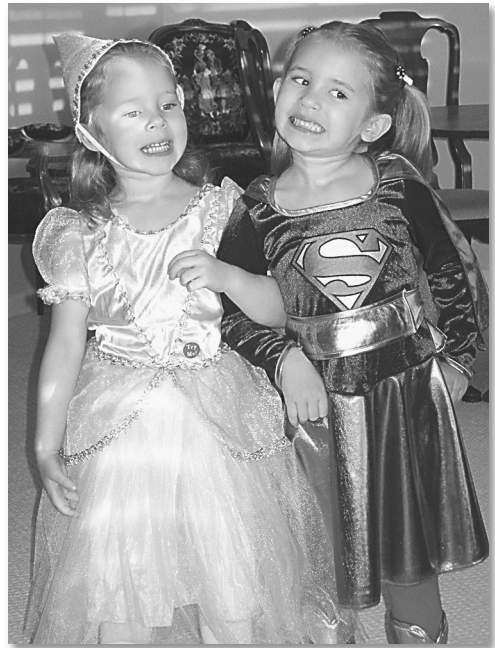
Learning From Successful Literacy Teachers

I love my teachers! I want to give them a hug, Mama. I need to give all my teachers a hug.

—Grace Lacina, 3 years old (field notes, November 2007)

Grace recently, and quite often, has expressed her love for the teachers at the preschool fine arts academy that she attends. Teachers at her school emphasize reading, while focusing on good literature, each week of the school year. Children in the preschool classroom rotate from class to class, and excellent children’s books are read and discussed in each content area (music, math/science, language arts, and art), with a common theme being emphasized throughout the curriculum. Students participate in plays about the books they read, while dressing in costume and acting out parts from the books. Grace recently enjoyed playing a goat in the *Three Billy Goats Gruff*, and her twin sister, Caroline, enjoyed acting as Mama Bear in the reenactment of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. The girls talk about literature after school, and ask for books at the library related to the thematic books they read in school. As a result, a love for reading permeates the school—and that love for reading transfers into early literacy success.

Besides an emphasis on reading and thematic teaching, this particular preschool recruits and retains excellent teachers. At the entrance of the school, prominently displayed on a large wall, are portraits of the teachers—with their years of service indicated below



Caroline and Grace participating in creative play

their pictures. Teachers in this school stay employed at the school for decades at a time because of the positive work environment, strong literature-based curriculum, teacher autonomy, and parental support. This school is an exception to schools across the nation, and offers a model that all preschools and elementary schools can use to achieve excellence.

Unlike in the school described above, new teachers often experience isolation (Levine, 2005; Little, 1982; Lortie, 1975; Waller, 1961), lack of resources, and the inability to manage a classroom of diverse learners—which often equates to burnout (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Farber, 1984; Fives, Hamman, & Olivarez, 2007; Friesen, Prokop, & Sarros, 1988; Tschannen-Morian, Woolfolk-Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Educators refer to the high cost of teachers leaving the field of teaching after only a few years as the “teacher retention crisis” (Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007). However, researchers also find that novice teachers, especially student teachers, who receive a high level of guidance and mentoring demonstrate lower levels of burnout (Fives et al., 2007). This book provides guidance, and mentoring, through the vignettes and case studies that illustrate effective literacy instruction throughout the elementary school grades. The following section describes why educators must begin to think of teaching as a profession instead of merely a job, and how this change in mind-set can change teaching into a profession.

Teaching as a Profession

Thinking about the types of teachers to highlight in this book, we reflected on the diverse academic, linguistic, and social needs children bring with them to the classroom. How can we prepare new teachers for teaching well in “hard to staff” schools, such as in urban and rural schools (American Federation for Teachers, 2007)? Teachers must be prepared for diverse classrooms with students with divergent needs, whether that includes social, linguistic, or academic needs—or any and all of these needs. As we considered the types of teachers to highlight in this book, we reviewed Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) important description of surgeons—and the very reason teachers, and more importantly the communities in which we live, must begin to think of teachers as more than transmitters of knowledge, but instead as professionals. Professionals stay current in their field—and meet the varying needs of the students they teach. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes the reasons why surgeons are viewed as professionals:

But the surgeon has a chance to learn new things each day, and every day he learns that he is in control and that he can perform complicated tasks. The laborer is forced to repeat the same exhausting motions, and what he learns is most about his own helplessness. (p. 144)

The same can be said of good teachers and of the quality of schools in which they teach (Allington, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Excellent teachers find ways to learn new strategies and techniques to better meet their students’ academic, linguistic, and social needs—to increase achievement. Besides learning about research-based strategies and techniques, excellent teachers find ways to implement this new knowledge to improve instruction (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Children’s author Patricia Polacco (1998) explains the power of

such a teacher in her autobiographical picture book, *Thank you, Mr. Falker*, as mentioned in this book's Preface. Polacco travels through her childhood, and shows readers the struggles she faced with dyslexia and learning how to read. This struggle continued throughout elementary school, until she met her fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Falker. Mr. Falker provided explicit and intensive reading instruction, but just as important, he developed a sense of community in his class. He built Patricia's self-confidence as a reader, and he taught her to love to read. Like Mr. Falker, good teachers find ways to blend research into effective practice in the classroom.

Society has long respected and valued the work of surgeons, and when that same respect and trust is placed in the hands of teachers, teachers can maintain a vigor and passion for teaching and learning (Day, 2000; Duffy, 1997). When administrators and school districts force prescriptive curriculum and policies on teachers and schools, teachers become laborers, with little passion and drive to teach and learn (Darling-Hammond, 1997)—and as a result, student achievement suffers.

Teacher Selection

The teachers highlighted in this book are the surgeons, or Mr. Falkers, of their schools, meaning they have a passion for teaching and learning, and the stamina to teach all students well. Just as important, they have a solid background and understanding of language and literacy. These teachers teach in both urban and rural schools, and work with diverse students with varying academic needs. We intentionally selected teachers from the following states: California, Florida, Missouri, Ohio, New York, Wisconsin, and Texas since these states offer a variety of school contexts. Teachers were nominated by building principals, district administrators, or by state Reading First centers. Exemplary teachers in this book taught in a wide variety of school contexts, and the list below describes the types of schools where they taught. Table 1.1 describes the type of schools we studied and notes the corresponding chapters that address each type of school.

TABLE 1.1 Types of Schools and Teachers Studied and Corresponding Chapters

<i>Type of School/Teacher</i>	<i>Chapter Number</i>
<i>National board certified:</i> Teachers complete rigorous professional development training beyond state certification.	5
<i>Reading First schools:</i> Students in Reading First schools are typically from low-income families, based on the number of free and reduced lunches. These schools often have high teacher turnover rates, and receive federal money to implement interventions for struggling readers. They are located in both urban and rural areas throughout the United States.	4, 8

(Continued)

Type of School/Teacher	Chapter Number
<p><i>Urban schools:</i> Urban schools are located in an urban area and have high rates of poverty, high numbers of students learning English as a second language, and high numbers of students of color.</p>	2, 3, 4, 7, 8
<p><i>Suburban schools</i></p>	5
<p><i>Magnet school:</i> Any student in the city can attend these schools. Typically, a lottery format is followed in which students' names are drawn—as a way to select the student population.</p>	7
<p><i>Rural schools:</i> The National Center for Education Statistics defines rural schools as those serving small towns with a population of less than 25,000.</p>	6

Excellent Reading Teachers

As we sought to recruit elementary school teachers who demonstrate excellence in the teaching of reading, we developed a list of qualities, based on the International Reading Association's (2000) *Excellent Reading Teachers: A Position Statement*. An excellent reading teacher makes a difference in a child's reading achievement and motivation to read (IRA, 2000), and for those preservice and new teachers who have not extensively observed such a master teacher, this book provides an in-depth examination of excellent reading teachers. For veteran teachers, this book provides current reading strategies and research support of the strategies and techniques teachers across the country use.

Excellent reading teachers possess a number of qualities that good teachers in general possess (IRA, 2000), such as ways to engage and motivate students while connecting students' prior background knowledge to current instruction. These teachers explicitly teach reading strategies to students, while scaffolding instruction when necessary (Allington, 2006; Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass, & Massengill, 2005). The many qualities possessed by excellent reading teachers are listed below, supported by a strong research base that we developed. We developed this comprehensive research base to correspond with IRA's *Excellent Reading Teachers* statements since the research to support the position statements was more than 7 years old (see Table 1.2).

1. Excellent reading teachers understand reading and writing development and believe all children can learn to read and write.
2. Excellent reading teachers continually assess children's individual progress and relate reading instruction to children's previous experiences.
3. Excellent reading teachers know a variety of ways to teach reading, when to use each method, and how to combine the methods into an effective instructional program.
4. Excellent reading teachers offer a variety of materials and texts for children to read.

5. Excellent reading teachers use flexible grouping strategies to tailor instruction to individual students.
6. Excellent reading teachers are good reading “coaches” (meaning that they provide help strategically) (IRA, 2000, p. 1).

TABLE 1.2 Excellent Reading Teachers Research Base

<i>Excellent Reading Teacher Characteristics (IRA, 2000)</i>	<i>Research Base</i>
Understand the importance of the reading and writing process—and believe all children can learn	(Allington & Johnson, 2000; Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007; Briggs & Thomas, 1997; Bukowiecki, 2007; Duffy, Roehler, & Herrmann, 1988; Haberman, 1995; Hoffman & Pearson, 1999; Knapp, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Metsala, 1997; Moll, 1988; Pederson, Faucher, & Eaton, 1978; Pressley, Mohan, & Raphael, 2007; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996; Ruddell, 1995; Sweet, Guthrie, & Ng, 1998; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999; Tharp, 1997; Thomas & Barksdale-Ladd, 1995; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998)
Continually assess students—and link new material to prior knowledge	(Allington & Johnston, 2000; Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007; Briggs & Thomas, 1997; Bukowiecki, 2007; Duffy, Roehler, & Herrmann, 1988; Fiene & McMahon, 2007; Gersten, Baker, & Shanahan, 2007; Haberman, 1995; Hoffman & Pearson, 1999; Knapp, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Metsala, 1997; Moll, 1988; Pressley, Mohan, & Raphael, 2007; Ruddell, 1995; Schumm, 2006; Sweet, Guthrie, & Ng, 1998; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999; Tharp, 1997; Thomas & Barksdale-Ladd, 1995)
Know a variety of ways to teach reading, using successful research-based strategies	(Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007; Bukowiecki, 2007; Duffy, Roehler, & Herrmann, 1988; Hoffman & Pearson, 1999; Knapp, 1995; Metsala, 1997; Pressley, Mohan, & Raphael, 2007; Ruddell, 1995; Sweet, Guthrie, & Ng, 1998; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999; Tharp, 1997; Thomas & Barksdale-Ladd, 1995; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998)
Provide a variety of texts for students to read	(Allington & Johnston, 2000; Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007; Briggs & Thomas, 1997; Bukowiecki, 2007; Duffy, Roehler, & Herrmann, 1988; Metsala, 1997; Moll, 1988; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999; Thomas & Barksdale-Ladd, 1995; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998)
Use flexible grouping structures, and differentiate instruction to meet each student’s needs	(Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007; Briggs & Thomas, 1997; Bukowiecki, 2007; Fiene & McMahon, 2007; Gersten, Baker, & Shanahan, 2007; Metsala, 1997; Pressley, Mohan, & Raphael, 2007; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996; Ruddell, 1995; Schumm, 2006; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999)
Provide strategic reading help to students	(Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007; Briggs & Thomas, 1997; Bukowiecki, 2007; Duffy, Roehler, & Herrmann, 1988; Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McIntyre, 2007; Metsala, 1997; Moll, 1988; Pressley, Mohan, & Raphael, 2007; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999; Tharp, 1997; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998)

SOURCE: Adapted from International Reading Association. (2000). *Excellent Reading Teachers: A Position Statement of the International Reading Association*. Newark, DE: Author.

Besides promoting a love for reading and writing, teachers must also explicitly teach reading and writing strategies to children. Across the nation, researchers find that teachers who hold a balanced literacy philosophy often do not devote enough time to the instruction and modeling of effective reading and writing strategies for students who are struggling to learn how to read and write (Frey et al., 2005). For more than a decade, researchers argued that successful literacy programs must balance teacher-directed instruction and student-centered activities (Au, Carroll, & Scheu, 1997; Freppon & Dahl, 1998; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Teachers in our text provide a balanced approach to teaching reading, while also explicitly teaching children research-based strategies that enable them to be successful readers and writers.

Ever since the publication of *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow et al., 1998), we have sought teachers who are exemplars of the teaching of reading because of the profound impact they can make in ensuring early reading success. Finding such a teacher for each of our preservice teachers was a challenge, and for each future teacher who was not placed with an excellent teacher, we felt as though we had failed. One of our former students, Sidney (participant self-selected pseudonym) describes why we must find cooperating teachers who not only understand how to teach reading, but are capable of teaching reading successfully to diverse groups of students. Sidney describes how she learned from her cooperating teacher how to teach reading strategies.

We tell kids, “Remember the hand plan [previewing the text, stop and jot, one sentence summary, text evidence, and summarize] whenever you are going through and reading [benchmark tests].” My teacher takes ten points off if a kid does not use all five strategies. Some of those kids didn’t actually need to [use the strategies] . . . and complain, “Miss this is a waste of time.” But, you have to use the hand plan . . . or you lose the points. (interview transcripts, September 18, 2006)

In this description, you can see that the mandated use of specific reading strategies does not help children as they attempt to comprehend a story. The “hand plan” is an instructional strategy designed by local school district personnel as a way for students to remember five reading strategies: preview the text, stop and jot, one sentence summary, text evidence, and summarize. On each finger of the hand, the name of one of the reading strategies is listed. The instructional strategy is a good one; however, the way in which it is implemented in this classroom is not effective.

Sidney completed the student teaching experience at an urban school in the South. The school consisted primarily of African American (51%) and Hispanic students (43%); 89% of the students were labeled by the state as low income based on the high percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Though the school received “acceptable” status from the state board of education, only 66% of the students passed the yearly reading assessment. Despite the teacher’s familiarity with reading strategies, there was a disconnect between what research says about the teaching of reading strategies and how reading strategies were actually taught in this classroom. The teacher’s

requirement for students to use all five strategies when completing each reading passage indicates this misunderstanding.

Future teachers like Sidney need to be placed with an exemplary mentor teacher who knows how to teach researched-based reading strategies effectively; unfortunately, across the country, that does not always happen. Throughout the variety of vignettes in each chapter of this book, we showcase exemplary reading teachers from throughout the country, and the many ways these teachers met the academic needs of diverse student populations.

