

Characteristics of Highly Effective Elementary School Reading Programs

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Intensive analysis of the policies and practices of two high-achieving schools confirms that a coordinated schoolwide emphasis on reading pays off.

Until recently, most efforts to improve achievement focused on instructional techniques, grouping practices, and the content of curriculum materials. While these aspects of reading instruction continue to play an important role in student learning, recent reviews of research on effective schools suggest that school factors also influence student achievement (Edmonds, 1982; Purkey and Smith, 1982). With this research base, we developed a model that describes how high expectations for student achievement are translated into school policies and practices (Murphy and others, 1982). We call this process "academic press," connoting our belief that a school learning climate emphasizing high expectations for student achievement is related to a web of schoolwide policies and practices that bind together the classrooms within a school.

We report here some initial findings pertaining to the model of academic press from a study of effective elementary schools. The schools were considered instructionally effective based on their performance on an annual statewide test (California Assessment Program). For three consecutive years reading achievement in these schools exceeded expectations based on the socioeconomic background of the students. The schools can be characterized as "over-achievers" in the sense that they consistently performed significantly better in reading than other California elementary schools serving

students of comparable socioeconomic background. Their reading scores were also above the 90th percentile at the 3rd and 6th grades, the levels at which the test is administered. Our purpose was to uncover the educational policies and practices that differentiated these schools from a sample of schools of average achievement.

Critics of measuring school effectiveness based on test scores decry the potential sterility of educational programs that are considered successful solely in terms of student achievement on a relatively narrow band of basic skills. While we sympathize with such fears, our study suggested that schools that are effective in terms of test scores can also be environments in which students are enthusiastic about reading, show initiative, and carry their learning beyond basic skills. A coordinated, focused schoolwide effort to teach reading does not appear to diminish the possibility for creativity or

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excitement among students or teachers.

Two of the eight effective schools, in particular, were especially successful at creating learning climates that promoted reading among their students. We consistently saw books pop out of desks or off of shelves during the smallest break in classroom activity. Students used their free time in the classroom to read without specific prompting from teachers, and both students and teachers were proud of the students' reading accomplishments. Our analysis of what happened in these two schools is not a scientific explanation for their higher reading scores. Rather, our focus is on the web of school level policies and practices that we believe contributed to the academic press that supported reading throughout the schools.

The Method

The research presented here draws on a limited set of data from the larger study. We spent two days at each of the schools conducting interviews with all of the teachers in groups of three to five. We interviewed principals separately. Classroom observations ranged from 20 to 40 minutes and focused on a number of specific classroom practices and activities: use of direct instruction, type of behavior management systems in use, classroom reward systems, evidence of student opportunities for involvement, curriculum, frequency and extent of teacher monitoring and feedback of student progress, and homework. We collected from the staff such documents as school handbooks, school and district policy manuals, memos and newsletters to parents, school goals and educational plans, and record-keeping forms used by teachers. And, finally, we administered surveys to teachers, students, parents, and the principal to elicit their perception of the school's educational program.

The Schools

Sycamore Elementary School, located on the outskirts of a rural town in north central California, draws from a middle-class population and serves about 400 students in a K-6 program. Ninety-eight percent of the student body is white. Student and teacher populations have been quite stable. Most of the teachers have been at the



school for eight or more years and have over ten years of teaching experience. Their average age is in the mid-40s. The principal had been at the school for six years, though he has since moved to another school in the district.

Almond Elementary School differs from Sycamore in several respects. It is located in an affluent suburb south of San Francisco and draws from a primarily professional population. It is larger, serving about 550 students in a K-6 program. Ethnically, the school is more diverse with a recent influx of Asian refugee students. Almond Elementary has experienced considerable turmoil over the last six years. A merger with another school brought in a new principal and 25 percent new teachers. Teachers at Corning are quite experienced also with an average age in the mid-40s. The principal had been at the school for three years at the time of our visit.

The Programs

Although Sycamore and Almond Elementary Schools differed demographically in several respects, they shared a number of common school policies and practices that supported reading instruction. Overall, we found a high level of coordination between classrooms, not only at particular grade levels, but also across grades. In general, both schools had policies that promoted continuity and consistency in teachers' expectations and practices. These policies, which provided a

structure for teachers, were also understood by students and parents. Although few of the practices at either school were particularly unusual, the way in which they were combined appeared to result in the successful reading climates.

Allocation of time for reading. Both schools had written policies regarding the amount of time spent on reading instruction each day. In one case, the district office had initiated the policy; in the other, the school had. One-and-a-half hours per day were devoted to reading and language arts activities. Each student received a daily minimum of 50 minutes of teacher-directed reading instruction. In addition, teachers described numerous efforts to integrate related reading activities into instruction in other subject areas such as writing, science, and social studies.

Curriculum. The schools used different basal reading series. In both cases, however, a single curriculum series was used for basic reading instruction throughout the school. This seemed to eliminate the gaps that naturally occur when teachers use a variety of basal series at the same or succeeding grade levels. While teachers throughout the school used the same basal reader, they did not limit their reading instruction to the basal series; we saw skill building materials and literature books in most classrooms. In both schools several 5th and 6th grade teachers had developed remedial programs or extended literature series to supplement or replace the basal series to meet student needs.

Many studies of effective schools have noted the use of mastery learning programs and the attendant learning objectives approach. Basic skill continuums existed at Almond and Sycamore, but the teachers in both schools confided that these had not had a substantial impact on instruction. The use of the single reading series may have served a somewhat similar function in terms of providing curricular coordination. It lent a structure to the reading program within which all teachers would work and ensured coordination and continuity in the program. Teachers were permitted to choose materials as they saw fit and instruct as they desired within this curricular framework.

Access to books. Students frequently used free time to read, and both schools had undertaken fundraising efforts and book drives to ensure that all classrooms had a wide supply of books at various levels of difficulty and were easily accessible.

In addition, both schools employed full-time librarians. Students at Sycamore were encouraged to use the library frequently. When they had completed an assignment or had free time, students could take one of two library passes kept by the door and sign out a new book. The system was introduced to students in the 2nd grade and appeared to work smoothly. Librarians in both schools made special efforts to integrate their programs to support classroom instruction. All classes starting in kindergarten made weekly trips to the library.

Emphasis on literature. Routine reading instruction was supplemented by other opportunities to read at school. Almond Elementary had implemented a program in which the whole school spent the first 15 minutes after lunch reading silently. The principal, teachers, and janitors, who were all expected to participate, acted as models for the students at the same time that the students were developing a constructive routine. This type of daily activity helped create an academic press that went beyond classroom boundaries.

Students at both schools kept logs of the books they read. These logs were retained by the teachers in the primary grades. Students earned small rewards and public recognition for reaching milestones in numbers of books and pages read. At one of the schools, students also recorded descriptions of the books in various degrees of detail. Language arts and reading assignments were interwoven with reading activities. Book reports were prominently displayed, and oral book reports started in the primary grades.

Homework. The emphasis on reading in school was reinforced by the schools' policies on reading out of school. Homework focused on reading and was assigned by all teachers every weeknight. Minimum times were set for the primary and intermediate grades. In both cases the policy stated that students were expected to read every night, even if no homework

was specifically assigned.

This policy was communicated to parents by a general memo from the principal and a letter from the teachers, which parents were to sign and return. The policies were also explained at open school night at initial parent conferences. Thus, parents and students learned the school's homework policy early on, and teachers asserted that by the end of the primary grades there were few problems getting students to comply.

Support services. Principals at Almond and Sycamore made specific efforts not to pull students out of class for special instruction during reading. The philosophy was that support programs should supplement regular class reading instruction, not replace it. Reading instruction thus remained the responsibility of the classroom teacher. By expecting specialists to integrate their instructional objectives with regular class teachers, the school increased the amount of reading instruction for students with special needs.

Progress reports. Both schools used detailed quarterly reports to inform parents of student progress. In each district, school time that was set aside for parent conferences signified their importance. Parents were expected to come to the school at least twice during the year, and both schools reported a high attendance rate. Conferences provided a means not only to report on student progress, but to reinforce school policies on homework and encourage ways parents could support reading in the home such as by modeling reading themselves, providing a set time and quiet space for reading, and making sure that reading materials were available. In homes where there were not a lot of books, parents were asked to have their children bring books home from the classroom or school library. All contacts with parents were used to reinforce these messages.

The school improvement program. The teachers and principals at both schools contended that the California School Improvement Program had had a significant impact on the way they planned their reading curriculums. The program brings state money into the school to implement educational programs contained within an annually updated educational plan.

The purpose is to bring a more coordinated effort to the schools' programs. Goals are developed that cut across classrooms and grade levels. The principal and School Improvement Program coordinator are expected to monitor teacher activities and student progress. Teachers at Sycamore credited the program with the development of a more coherent reading program. The principal at Almond asserted that it had provided a planning vehicle for the whole school, even though its formal design was ostensibly for the primary grades alone.

Instructional leadership. Effective schools have usually been associated with a high level of instructional leadership. The Almond principal played a prominent role in all decision making related to reading. Her teachers insisted that she knew the reading level of every student in the school. Her frequent informal visits to classrooms and involvement in the reading program communicated her concern for reading. She often demonstrated lessons when new reading materials came into the school.

In contrast, the Sycamore principal was relatively uninvolved in coordinating or supervising the school's reading program. He admitted that curricular and instructional supervision were not his strengths. Instructional leadership at Sycamore was provided by faculty leaders at the primary and intermediate levels. At the primary level the leadership role was assumed by the School Improvement Program coordinator, who also taught. Instructional leadership at the intermediate level was shared by two of the staff members. Thus, the principal played a supportive role, but the teachers coordinated the curriculum.

This finding concerning the source of instructional leadership is in line with the work conducted by Carnine and others (1982). Instructional leadership as embodied in the function of curricular coordination is essential to successful school programs, but it does not necessarily have to be provided by the principal. Instructional leadership can thrive in an environment in which the principal supports teachers who have the expertise and willingness to assume these responsibilities.

Conclusion

The focus on instructional methods for improving the teaching of reading has recently been expanded to include a number of school level policies and practices that support classroom reading instruction. While not a substitute for good instruction, their implementation may enhance the ability of all teachers to teach reading. Sycamore and Almond's policies and practices are probably used by many schools in varying degrees; few are new or earth-shaking. However, when implemented in concert, an academic press is created that enhances school learning climate and academic achievement.

Such an academic press results from the perspective that reading instruction is a schoolwide responsibility, rather than the responsibility of individual teachers. This perspective was apparent in:

- Policies that (1) delineated homework expectations starting in the early grades, (2) provided a curricular

framework for reading within which all teachers could work, and (3) ensured that students would have many varied opportunities to read every day.

- Reward and recognition systems that reinforced students' desirable reading habits.

- Planning and coordination that supported teachers' efforts to work toward a schoolwide goal to improve reading.

In addition, we found that school learning climate can improve as a result of increased continuity and consistency among teachers in at least some of their instructional practices. Increased coordination at Sycamore and Almond did not appear to result in dissatisfaction among teachers; in fact, their professional decision making appeared to be enhanced by the schoolwide work structures. Similarly, the development of a schoolwide approach to support reading instruction did not imply the implementation of a

sterile reading program. Rather, we found that the establishment of clear, consistent academic expectations and coordinated policies and practices enabled teachers to use their time more efficiently. Thus, the reading programs at these schools offered students a wide range of activities and showed a high degree of sensitivity to individual student needs. □

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