Beating the Odds:
Teaching Middle and High School Students
to Read and Write Well

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the characteristics of instruction that accompany student achievement in reading, writing and English. It focused on English language arts programs in schools that have been trying to increase student performance, comparing those whose students perform higher than demographically comparable schools with schools whose scores are more typical. The study took place in four states and included 25 schools, 44 teachers, and 88 classes studied over a two year period each. Although the sample was diverse, including urban and suburban sites, schools with poor and diverse student bodies predominated. Analyses specified the following six features that permeated the environments and provided marked distinctions between higher and more typically performing schools: In higher performing as opposed to more typical schools, 1) instruction in the knowledge and conventions of English and high literacy take place as separated and simulated as well as integrated experiences; 2) test preparation is interpreted as encompassing the underlying skills and knowledge needed to do well in coursework as well as on tests and integrated into the ongoing class time, as part of the ongoing English language arts curriculum; 3) overt connections are constantly made among knowledge, skills, and ideas across lessons, classes, and grades as well as across in-school and out-of-school applications; 4) students are overtly taught strategies for thinking about ideas as well as completing activities; 5) even after achievement goals are met, teachers move beyond those immediate goals toward students' deeper understandings and generativity of ideas; 6) the content and skills of English are taught as social activity, with depth and complexity of understanding and proficiency with conventions growing from collaborative discourse. While some of these features were present to varying degrees in the English programs in the more typical schools, they were all present all of the time in the higher performing schools, forming a consistently supportive environment for student learning.

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This is a report of a five-year study focusing on characteristics of educational practice that accompany student achievement in reading, writing, and English. English classrooms have long been considered places where "high literacy" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) is learned, where

students gain not merely the basic literacy skills to get by, but also the content knowledge, ways of structuring ideas, and ways of communicating with others that are considered the "marks" of an educated person (Graff, 1987). In order to distinguish this kind of literacy from the more popular notion of literacy as a set of "basic" reading and writing skills, in this work I define the term "high literacy" in an everyday sense to refer to the literacy gained from a well-developed middle and high school English curriculum. While basic reading and writing skills are included in this definition of high literacy, also included are the ability to use language, content, and reasoning in ways that are appropriate for particular situations and disciplines. Students learn to "read" the social meanings, the rules and structures, and the linguistic and cognitive routines to make things work in the real world of English language use, and that knowledge becomes available as options when students confront new situations. This notion of high literacy refers to understanding how reading, writing, language, content, and social appropriateness work together and using this knowledge in effective ways. It is reflected in students' ability to engage in thoughtful reading, writing, and discussion about content in the classroom, to put their knowledge and skills to use in new situations, and to perform well on reading and writing assessments including high stakes testing.

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored in a sociocognitive perspective (especially Bakhtin, 1981 and Vygotsky, 1987; see Langer 1986, 1995). From this perspective, learning is seen to be influenced by the values, experiences, ands actions that exist within the larger environment. Students' and teachers' voices and experiences, learned within the primary and secondary communities to which they belong (see Gee, 1996), make a contribution to what gets learned and how. It is largely from these diverse contexts that notions of what counts as appropriate knowledge and effective communication gain their meaning. Bakhtin (1981), in his conceptualization of dialogic thinking and the multivocal nature of language and thought, offers us a way to think about high literacy and its development. Rather than seeing it as comprised of independent skills or proficiencies that are called upon at needed moments, he offers us a vision in which the educated individual calls upon a multi-layered history of experiences with language and content, cutting across many contexts – assuming that multiple and sometimes competing voices (or ways of interpreting) add richness and depth to emerging ideas. For example, he

argues that the discourse of a nation includes an awareness of the special experiences and rhetorics of many subgroups; we recognize and respond differently, he says, to the characteristic prose of doctors, lawyers, or clergy, ways of communication and interpretation that stand in dialogue with one another rather than being reconciled into a single "common" discourse. Such diverse voices also occur both within and across classrooms and subject areas (Applebee, 1996), as students bring the voices of their out-of-school experiences as well as the conversations within their particular academic courses to bear on the topic at hand. Students are enculturated to understand and use these voices (or perspectives) across the grades; their growing proficiency is shaped by the interactions that are fostered in the classrooms in which they participate. It is largely from these diverse contexts that notions of what counts as appropriate knowledge and effective communication gain their meaning. From this perspective, in a learning environment, students and teachers call upon the voices they have already acquired and are given opportunities to gain new voices. They also have opportunities to hone their ability to sift through these multiple sources in understanding purposes and audiences, creating effective ideas and arguments, and entering forms of discourse that help them move forward.

Vygotsky's sociocultural framework (1987) offers a way to conceptualize teacher and student learning as occurring within an environment in which both can participate in thoughtful examination and discourse about language and content because it is an integral part of the social way the educational environment operates and gets work done. The related views of situative theorists (e.g., Brown, Collins & Daguid, 1989; Greeno, 1987; Greeno and the Middle School Through Applications Group, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991) posit that the way in which people learn particular knowledge and skills is reliant on the environment in which the learning takes place; environment is a fundamental part of what gets learned, how it is interpreted, and how it is used. Beginning from this theoretical frame, the present project sought to examine the deeply contextualized nature of both teaching and learning (Dyson, 1993; Myers, 1996; Turner, 1993) in more and less successful middle and high school English classrooms.

Related Research

Although there is a long tradition of research examining specific features of writing and literature instruction (cf. Hillocks, 1986; Purves & Beach, 1972), there have been few previous attempts to study the characteristics of more- and less-effective English programs as a whole at

the secondary level. One of the earliest was Squire and R. Applebee's (1968) examination of 158 programs in the 1960s. Although Squire and Applebee had intended to contrast "award winning" with "recommended" programs, they found few differences between their two samples. Their report is useful for its description of best practice, as well as common problems, in the programs they studied. Overall, these programs were marked by the professionalism of the teachers, by the availability of resources for instruction, by an emphasis on the teaching of literature, and by a general lack of attention to the needs of lower-track students. In a later study that focused on literature instruction, A. Applebee (1993) surveyed 3 groups of unusually successful English programs (programs that consistently produced winners in the national Achievement Awards in Writing competition, programs designated as Centers of Excellence by the National Council of Teachers of English, and programs nominated as excellent by administrators and university colleagues) and contrasted them with random samples of private and public English programs. As in the earlier Squire and Applebee study, teachers in the more successful programs tended to be more highly professionalized, to have more adequate resources available, and to enjoy more community support for their efforts. They were also more likely to be influenced by recent reform movements in the teaching of English, emphasizing process-oriented writing instruction, active involvement of students in discussion, and reader-response approaches to literature. Such differences were differences in degree rather than in kind from programs in the random samples of schools, and in general reflect the advantages that flow from better funding rather than from different approaches to curriculum and instruction. Although the 25 years between the Squire and Applebee (1968) and Applebee (1993) studies led to many differences in specific aspects of curriculum and instruction in English, there is no way to link any of these differences to student achievement.

At the elementary level, a number of studies have examined curriculum and instruction in classrooms where students have made unusual progress in reading and writing achievement, in contrast with classrooms where achievement is more typical. Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, and Hampston (1998), for example, studied 9 first grade teachers in New York State who differed in their effectiveness in promoting literacy. In the most effective classrooms, there was a high level of engagement in challenging literacy activities, a web of interconnections among tasks (so that writing, for example, was often related to what was being read), and skills were taught explicitly but in connection with real reading and writing activities. In a related study, Pressley et al.

(1998) studied 30 first grade classrooms in five states, contrasting typical teachers with outstanding teachers in the same school. The most effective teachers were again characterized by high academic engagement in challenging literacy tasks, explicit teaching of skills, interconnections among activities, and careful matching of tasks and instruction to student competence levels.

Taylor, Pearson, Clark & Walpole (1999) investigated school and classroom factors related to primary grade reading achievement in a sample of 14 schools identified as most, moderately, or least effective on several measures of reading achievement. At the school level, important factors included parental support, systematic assessment of student progress, good communication among staff within the building, and a collaborative model for the delivery of reading instruction. At the classroom level, significant factors included more use of small group instruction, more time for independent reading, high levels of engagement in higher level literacy tasks, the use of scaffolding to link skill instruction to real reading tasks, and strong links between school and home.

However, no studies have focused on the features of instruction that differentiate English achievement in higher versus lower performing middle and high schools programs. In the present study, I have the examined the educational experiences of both teachers and students, as teachers gain professional knowledge and students achieve higher literacy (as evidenced in reading and writing high stakes test scores) than their peers in other contexts. In an earlier paper Langer, 2000), I reported on how teachers' professional lives support student achievement. Building from that work, the present paper describes features of English instruction that support student achievement, the kinds of attention given to helping students gain both knowledge and skills in English. My project team and I have been studying these features in order to better understand the various components that make a difference in helping students become more highly literate.

As background, there are six issues at the center of current educational debate in English and literacy, and that were in turn reflected in differences that emerged (through a process of constant comparison that continued throughout the study) among the classrooms we studied:

Approaches to Skills Instruction. Throughout at least the 20th century, there has been an ongoing debate about the manner in which instruction is delivered, with some scholars positing the effectiveness of skill and concept learning through experience-based instruction (e.g.,

Dewey, 1938) and others stressing mastery of concepts and skills through decontextualized practice (e.g., Bloom, 1971). This has led to a pedagogical side-taking that continues in English and literacy today. For example Hirsch (1996) calls for students to remember culturally potent facts, and genre theorists (see Cope & Kalantzis, 1993) call for teaching students the rules of organization underlying written forms, while Goodman and Wilde (1992) and Graves (1983) call for teaching skills and knowledge within the context of authentic literacy activities. Yet, studies of reading and writing instructional practice across the century (see Langer & Allington, 1992) indicate that teachers tend to blur distinctions, using what may appear to theorists as a fusion of theoretically dissimilar approaches.

Approaches to Test Preparation. In recent years there has been a widespread call for systemic reform of schools and school systems (e.g., Brown, Campione, & O'Day, 1996; Smith & O'Day, 1991). One part of systemic reform requires that there be alignment between curriculum and assessment. In times such as these, with a widespread focus on achievement scores, how this is done becomes a critical issue. On the one hand, some educators focus primarily on practicing sample test items and helping students become "test wise"; they teach such test-taking skills as ways to select a best answer or how to best respond to a writing task from reading item. Others advocate teaching the needed literacy abilities throughout the year, as part of the regular grade-level curriculum. In both cases test results are the focus; however, in the first case, improvement in test scores is the primary goal, while the second focuses on raising both test scores and student learning by improving the curriculum.

Connecting Learnings. The education literature on learning and instruction is replete with evidence that student learning and recall are more likely to be enhanced when connections can be made to prior knowledge gained from both in- and out-of-school experiences than when the content of instruction is treated as if it is entirely new (see for example, Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Brown & Campione, 1996). Well-developed knowledge is also linked around important concepts and its relevance to other concepts is well understood. Although many curriculum guides as well as scope and sequence charts have attempted to depict links among specific learnings within and across the grades, too often the connections have been implicit at best, and often in the mind of the teacher or curriculum developer rather than shared with the students (see Applebee, 1996).

Enabling Strategies. During the past 25 or more years, a sizable research literature has

emphasized the contribution of students' strategic awareness to learning and performance and the importance of teaching students strategies for carrying out reading, writing, and thinking tasks (e.g., Hillocks, 1995; Paris, Wasik & Turner, 1991; Pressley et al., 1994). This work highlights the importance for students to learn not only content, but also intentional ways of thinking and doing. In response, instructional approaches have been developed to help students become aware not only of the content but also of the particular tasks. While the fields of science and mathematics have always seemed to be natural environments for teaching strategic approaches that enhance student performance (e.g,. the scientific method, steps to mathematical solutions), teaching strategies and helping students to be strategic in the ways in which they approach a task (e.g., process approaches to writing, reflective literacy, or reciprocal teaching) are newer to the English language arts.

Conceptions of Learning. What counts as knowing has become a much-used phrase in the educational literature. It is often used as way to make distinctions among educators who focus on facts and concepts and those who focus on students' abilities to think about and use new knowledge. At one time a student's ability to give definitions, select right answers, and fill deleted information into sentences and charts was considered evidence of learning. But at least two bodies of research changed that: one focused on disciplinary initiation, where the goal became to help students learn to more and more approximate expert thinking in particular fields, such as thinking like an historian (e.g., Bazerman, 1981); and the other, on critical thinking, where the focus was on higher levels of cognitive manipulation of the material (e.g., Langer & Applebee, 1987; Schallert, 1976). More recently the issue has turned to engagement (Guthrie & Alverman, 1999). Here concern goes beyond time on task to student involvement with the material. Although all three bodies of work have had an affect on literacy pedagogy, the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (1998) reports that fewer than seven percent of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 perform at the "advanced" level, the highest of four possible achievement levels in reading. This level represents students' grade-appropriate ability to deal analytically with challenging subject matter and to apply this knowledge to real world situations.

Classroom Organization. In recent years, a variety of approaches to classroom organization have been proposed to provide students with more opportunities to learn through substantive interaction with one another as well as with the teacher. These approaches include collaborative (Barnes, 1976) and cooperative groups (Slavin, 1983), literature clubs (Raphael &

McMahon, 1994), peer writing groups (Graves, 1983), and envisionment-building classrooms (Langer, 1995). These and other similar approaches have been developed in response to both theory and research from a sociocognitive orientation that sees interactive working groups around shared problems to be supportive environments for learning. Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossia (see also Nystrand & Gamoran, 1997) suggests that all learning is dialogic, reliant on and gaining meaning from the many past and present relevant voices. In dialogic groups students bring their personal, cultural, and academic knowledge to the interaction as they play the multiple roles of learners, teachers, and inquirers and in thus doing have an opportunity to consider the issue at hand from multiple perspectives. Students can interact as both problem-generators and problem-solvers. New ideas can be entertained and new ways of thinking modeled as more and less expert knowers of the content and those more and less familiar with the task share expertise, provide feedback, and learn from each other. Such contexts emphasize shared cognition, in which the varied contributions of the participants allow the group to achieve more than individuals could on their own. However, several studies have indicated that such groupings are not pervasive in American schools (NAEP, 1998; Applebee, 1993; Nystrand, Gamoran, & Heck, 1992).

These six issues provided a set of lenses through which to understand differences in instructional practices in higher and lower performing schools.

THE STUDY

The Excellence in English project examined educational practices in middle and high schools that have been trying to increase students' learning and performance in English language arts. The study focused on the workings of schools, teachers, and classrooms that strive to increase student performance and, despite obstacles and difficulties of serving the poor, beat the odds on standardized tests in reading and writing, that is gain higher literacy, beyond comparable schools. My research team and I wanted to understand why – to identify features of instruction that make a difference in student learning and to contrast those schools where test scores are higher with demographically comparable schools in which they are not. We asked the following research question: How are the following enacted in school English programs where, when the schools are otherwise comparable, students score higher on high stakes reading and writing tests than where they do not: approaches to skill instruction; approaches to testing; approaches to

connecting learnings; approaches for enabling strategies; conceptions of learning, and classroom organization?

Method

This study took place over a five year period, permitting observations and interviews as well as identification and testing of patterns to take place over time. The five year period also allowed us to complete data gathering in successive cohorts in four states. Each teacher and school was studied for two years, permitting extensive study of how patterns in curriculum and instruction played themselves out in schools and classes across time. The project as a whole focused on both the professional and classroom activities that contribute to the English instruction the students experienced. Results from the study of the professional lives of the teachers have been reported in Langer, 2000; the present report focuses on analyses of instructional activities.

Project Sites and Participants

To identify potential sites, recommendations were solicited from university and school communities in four states: Florida, New York, California, and Texas. The states were chosen to include diversity in student populations, educational problems, and approaches to improvement. The schools were nominated by at least three independent sources as places where professionals were working in interesting ways to improve student performance and test scores in English. Test data reported on each state education department's web site were checked to identify a) those schools that were scoring higher than schools with similar student bodies and b) those schools that were scoring more typically, more like demographically similar schools. In each case, we examined literacy-related test data that carried high stakes for the students, the school, and the district; the relevant data varied from pass rates on Florida Writes! to performance on the Stanford 9. Schools whose performance on the high stakes literacy tests was markedly above that for schools serving demographically similar populations were designated "Beating the Odds" schools. Schools whose performance did not deviate from that of schools serving demographically similar populations were designated "Typically Performing" schools. Referencing scores against those from schools serving demographically similar student populations controlled for the overall tendency for 'high performing' schools to be wealthy and

suburban (cf. National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1994). It also means that typically performing schools serving more affluent populations can have higher raw scores than beating the odds schools serving high proportions of children in poverty.

Because we were particularly interested in identifying features of excellence in urban schools, we wished to more heavily sample schools and districts serving poor and culturally diverse students. However, because we also wanted to identify features that marked excellent programs across demographic areas, several suburban and urban fringe schools were also identified. We visited the most promising programs based on a combination of recommendations and test scores, and from these made a final selection based on the teachers' and administrators' willingness to work with us over a two- year period as well as the school's ability to contribute to the overall diversity in student populations, problems, and locations in our sample. In the end, 25 schools, 44 teachers, and 88 classes were selected to participate in the study, with a focus on one class for each of the teachers in each of two consecutive years. Fourteen of the 25 participating schools are places where students were beating the odds, performing better on state administered high stakes reading and writing tests than schools rated as demographically comparable by statewide criteria. The other 11 schools are also all places that came highly recommended, with administrators and teachers who were trying hard to improve student performance, but the school literacy scores were more typical of other schools with similar demographics.

Types of schools. Selecting schools from Florida, New York, California, and Texas led to great variety in programs and student populations. The Florida sample included schools from the Miami-Dade County area, representing a very diverse student population. The Dade County School District has long been involved in cutting edge efforts to improve education in English, including in part: Pacesetter (sponsored by the College Board), the Zelda Glazer/Dade County Writing Project, the education of all teachers in the education of non-native English speaking students, the creation of interdisciplinary teams, and the early development of school-based management. The New York sample encompassed a large geographic area, with populations ranging from rural to suburban, middle class to urban poor. It included a number of districts in New York City and the Hudson Valley region that have earned reputations for student-centered and response-based English education, an emphasis on writing and reading across the curriculum, implementation of Goals 2000, and taking an interdisciplinary approach to math, science and real-world studies through the English language arts. Two programs we studied (at

King Middle School and International High School) focus on high academic competence for English Language Learners. The California sample included schools from the Los Angeles area, a region with a very diverse student population, that has long been a bellwether for educational innovation and change in English language arts designed to benefit all students. Most recently, in an effort to raise student performance on statewide assessments, a new curriculum, an end to social promotion, a requirement for schools to adopt one of several reform programs, school accountability for student achievement (with schools placed on probation for failure to increase scores), and extra funds for tutoring efforts were put into place. The Texas schools were in a large urban city district. Both the state and district have been involved in major efforts to improve student performance in literacy achievement including an end to social promotion and a stringent school accountability program to monitor achievement. The district put into place several measures to support improved achievement in literacy, and the state high stakes tests were being revised at the time of our study. Summary information about the schools is presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

As can be seen in Table 1, schools with poor and diverse student populations predominate in the study. In terms of representation, the schools range from a 92 percent African American student body and no White students in one school, to 86 percent Hispanic and 2 percent White students in another, to 97 percent White students in another, with the other schools populated by students of greater ethnic and racial diversity. The schools also differ in the amount of student poverty, with school records indicating from 86 percent of the student body to 5 percent of the student body eligible for free or reduced lunch. We worked closely with one or two teachers at each school (one class each, each year), as well as other teachers and administrators with whom they co-planned, co-taught or were otherwise engaged (including teams, departments, and other working groups) in the planning and review as well as implementation of instruction. Although we studied each teacher's entire class, six students from each class, representing the range of performance in that class as judged by the teacher, acted as key informants, collecting all their work and meeting with us to discuss that work, their classroom activities, and what they were learning.

Teachers within Schools. The study design allowed us to examine the English teachers

within the context of their teams, departments, and districts. Over the years in which we worked in the schools, we came to understand the extent to which the teachers were affected by the larger context in terms of professional growth or malaise, or were achieving unusually good results in spite of the context in which they worked. This led us, eventually, to recognize three broad but distinct patterns within our sample of teachers: 1) exemplary teachers whose work was sustained, perhaps even created, by the supportive district and/or school context; 2) exemplary teachers in more typical schools who achieved their success due to professional contexts unrelated to the school and/or district (often through participation in professional organizations such as local affiliates of the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, and writing projects, and collaboration with local colleges and universities); and 3) teachers who were more typical, who did not beat the odds, who were dedicated to their students but working within a system of traditions and expectations that did not lift them beyond the accomplishments of other comparable schools.

In the first category above – beating the odds teachers within beating the odds schools – we found that these unusual teachers were not unusual within the contexts in which they worked; that is, their school and/or district (often both) encouraged all teachers, not just those in our study, to achieve comparable professional goals, and our observations of department meetings and interviews with supervisors and administrators suggested that the instructional approaches of the teachers in our study were widely accepted and carried out in their schools. In working with the second category of teachers – beating the odds in more typical schools – we found that they did not work in contexts that provided students and teachers with consistent and strong curriculum and instructional approaches and development. Thus, while their students may have scored higher than those in other classes in the school, there was no consistent and strong support that sustained student achievement beyond their individual classrooms. We found the third category of teachers – typical teachers in typical schools – in departments and schools that did not support their individual growth and that lacked collective consensus about the most effective approaches to educating their particular student body. Table 2 provides a quick summary of the schools and teachers in the study.

Insert Table 2 about here

Design

This study involved a nested multi-case design with each English program as a case and the class including the teachers and student informants, as cases within. This design permitted shifting lenses among the three contexts (program, teacher, and students) as ideas for instructional change and delivery were considered, discussed, and enacted. Field researchers worked with each program, following the teachers' professional as well as classroom activities and interactions, including their interactions with central office staff, to develop an understanding of their roles in instruction. The field researchers each studied one or more programs for two years; hence we were able to study the instructional concerns, plans, and enactments over time, with two sets of students. (Case study reports for some of the schools are available at http://cela.albany.edu.) The sample involved two years each with 44 teachers working in 25 schools, and included some 2640 students and 528 student informants.

None of the schools we studied were dysfunctional, and none of the teachers were considered to be other than good. Fourteen of the 25 schools were performing better than schools serving demographically similar populations, based on scores on high-stakes tests, and the teachers in the other schools in which we worked were recommended by district administrators as good although the overall performance of their schools was more typical. Thus, this is a study of English instruction within both higher performing and more typically performing schools.

Procedures

Each field researcher spent approximately five weeks per year at each site including a week at the beginning of each year to interview district personnel as well as teachers and students about their goals, plans, and perceptions; to make initial observations of the classes we would be studying; and to plan for the year ahead. This was followed by two weeks of additional visits per semester to observe classes, to conduct informal interviews with participating teachers and students, and to shadow the teachers in their professional encounters (i.e., team, department, building, district, and other relevant meetings).

In addition to the on-site visits, we set up e-mail accounts or spoke by phone or in person in order to maintain weekly contact with the teachers and students, during which time we discussed ongoing classroom activities, including examples of student work provided from the student informants (student informants maintained portfolios and their work was collected and mailed to us weekly), reflections on those lessons, as well as future plans.

Data

Parallel sets of qualitative data were gathered at each of the sites. Data consisted of field notes of all meetings, observed classes, and conversations; e-mail messages; artifacts from school and professional experiences; tape recordings and transcripts of all interviews and observed class sessions; as well as in-process case reports developed by the field researchers. Table 3 summarizes the major types of data collected.

Insert Table 3 about here

Three types of collaborations contributed to the development of the data base within and across cases: full project team, collaborative dyads, and case study sessions.

Full-project team. In addition to meetings with the teacher participants in each state, the teachers and research team interacted in ongoing e-mail discussions about the approaches, activities, and progress in the participating classes and the teacher's experiences in helping students improve their literacy performance.

Collaborative dyad. Each teacher and field researcher communicated on e-mail approximately once a week to develop, discuss and reflect on the teacher's professional interactions as well as class sessions and student performance.

Case study sessions. The field researchers and I met weekly for case study sessions. During these meetings, the field researchers presented in-process case study reports about the professional networks and instructional activities and offerings at their sites. These sessions offered opportunities for case-related patterns to be discussed, tested, and refined, and for cross-case patterns to be noted for further recursive testing and analysis.

Coding. Coding for this project was used to organize and index the various types of data in ways that permitted us to locate the participants' focus on key areas of concern. For example, where possible, all data were initially coded for the type of community the participants were focusing on or referring to: professional, classroom, or social, as well as for their focus on instruction, curriculum, and assessment. More targeted codes for particular types of knowledge, skills, and processes were also coded. This scheme served as an indexing system that allowed us

to later retrieve and more carefully analyze data from one categorical subsection of the data pool, compare it with another, and generate data-driven sub-categories for later analysis.

Analyses

Data were analyzed by a system of constant comparison, where patterns were identified and tested both within and across cases. For this study, we returned to each coded instance as well as the full data set to qualitatively analyze the conditions under which each existed: this in turn led us to identify the features that differentiated the approaches of the three groups of teachers. Thus, the various data sets were keyed to the individual teacher and classroom, providing multiple views of each instructional context, permitting both in-depth case studies and cross-case perspectives to be developed. In each case, we triangulated the data, drawing on various aspects of the classroom communities for evidence. As key issues began to emerge in the qualitative cross-case analyses, they were checked against the entire sample. Thus overall ratings of how each teacher dealt with the six features of instruction discussed in the present report are based on the full range of data gathered for each teacher over a two year period, including interviews, observations, ongoing conversations (e-mail or telephone), and student reports. Specific categorizations of each teacher's practices were made by the field researcher responsible for data collection at each site, after lengthy discussions with the project team.

While the findings are limited to the 44 teachers we have studied, the study required the field researchers to shadow and gather data about the teachers, their colleagues, and their school's English language arts programs as the teachers interacted with others at team, departmental and other meetings, and workshops, and as they planned and sometimes co-taught with their colleagues. The field researchers also interviewed the teachers and administrators with whom the participating teachers interacted in order to understand the larger professional and instructional context of each. Thus, although the focus was on one or two teachers in each school, we were able to gain more first-hand "living" knowledge of each school's English program, including the curricular and instructional emphases of the school and district.

In previous studies of effective literature instruction (Langer, 1995), we found that successful instruction was characterized by its adherence to certain underlying principles rather than by any uniformity from teacher to teacher in specific activities or pedagogical routines. The present study thus assumed that currently popular approaches to English and literacy instruction (e.g.,

process writing instruction, response-based literature instruction, attention to grammar and mechanics) would be realized in multiple ways by different teachers and students. The notion is related to Sternberg and Horvath's (1995) argument that expert teaching should be viewed in terms of a prototype that allows for considerable variation in the profiles of individual experts, except that our "prototypes" are construed as features within the instructional environment rather than the psychological characteristics (insight, efficiency) that Sternberg and Horvath propose. Thus, the analyses and findings of this study do not focus on the surface content and form of instruction, but rather the underlying principles, beliefs, and approaches that are enacted in different ways in the context of each individual classroom.

RESULTS

I will begin with a brief overview of the results from the cross-case analyses of English instruction in higher- and more typically- performing schools, and then deal in detail with the six central instructional issues that capture the major differences between these groups.

Although each of the higher performing schools had its own distinctive emphasis, all were marked by active and engaged students and teachers in academically rich classrooms. Further, they were marked by the professionalism, knowledge, and dedication of the teachers and by collaborative participation of the students in quality, "minds-on" activities. Students were well behaved and remarkably on task almost all the time. Each school managed to create an effective learning environment in which students were having opportunities to think with, about, and through English, both as a vehicle for getting things done and as an object of study in its own right. The students in these schools were learning a great deal about high literacy, including the functions and uses of language. The students were learning how language works in context and how to use it to advantage for specific purposes. They were learning grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and organizational structure – sometimes in context but also with carefully planned activities that focused directly on the structure and use of language. We observed a great deal of writing, reading, and oral language as students explored their understandings, prepared presentations, and polished final products. Students in the high performing schools were beating the odds, as evidenced by higher test scores than in comparable schools.

Both qualitative and quantitative analyses indicate that certain noteworthy features related to the six issues (approaches to skill instruction, approaches to test preparation, approaches to

connecting learnings, approaches to enabling strategies, conceptions of learning, and classroom organization) affected the students' experiences with English; these features permeated the environments and provided marked distinctions between higher and more typically performing schools. In each of the six sections below, I present and discuss these results, relating each to one of the educational issues. Table 4 provides a preliminary overview of the six issues along with the ways they differed across instructional contexts.

Insert Table 4 about here

Approaches to Skill Instruction

Analyses of the approaches to skill instruction in the classrooms in this study identified three distinct approaches, that I have called separated, simulated, and integrated. Separated instruction is what most educators would consider to be direct instruction of isolated skills and knowledge. Often this takes place separately from the context of a larger activity, primarily as introduction, practice, or review. It can be recognized when the teacher tells students particular rules, conventions, or facts, or when instructional material focuses on listings of vocabulary, spelling, or rules. Sometimes this instruction is used as a way to "cover" the curriculum, other times as a way to help students understand and remember underlying conventions and to learn ways in which they are applied. Teachers use the *separated* activity as a way to highlight a particular skill, item or rule. It is a presented in a lesson that is generally not connected to what is occurring before or after it in class.

In comparison, *simulated* instruction involves the actual application of those concepts and rules within a targeted unit of reading, writing, or oral language. These are often exercises prepared by the teacher or found in teaching materials, where the students are expected to read or write short units of text with the primary purpose of practicing the skill or concept of focus. Often students are asked to find examples of that skill or concept in use in their literature and writing books, as well as in out-of-school activities. They sometimes practice it within the confines of small and limited tasks. I call it *simulated* because the tasks themselves are specially developed for the purpose of practice.

Integrated instruction takes place when students are expected to use their skills and knowledge within the embedded context of a large and purposeful activity, such as writing a

letter, report, poem, or play for a particular goal (not merely to practice the skill) or planning, researching, writing, and editing a class newspaper. Here, the focus is on completing a project or activity well, with primary focus on the effectiveness of the work in light of its purpose. This is the time when the skill or knowledge is put to real use as a contributing factor in the success of the work. This becomes a time when the teacher might remind the students of a rule they learned during *separated* or *simulated* activities and how it might be useful in the completion of the activity at hand. If extra help is needed, it is provided by other students or the teacher.

Each of the teachers was rated in terms of how they typically went about introducing new language or literacy skills. The results are summarized in Table 5. As the table indicates, the more successful teachers were more likely to make systematic use of separated, simulated, and integrated skills instruction; approximately three fourths of the more successful teachers in both beating the odds and typical schools used all three approaches. In comparison, only 20 percent of the more typical teachers in typically performing schools made systematic use of all three approaches; their instruction was much more likely to be dominated by a single approach. While 50 percent of the typical teachers used separated instruction as their dominant approach, none of the more successful teachers did so.

Insert Table 5 about here

Although English teachers in the higher performing schools tended to use all three types of skills instruction, there was great variety in the specific activities they chose to use. For example, in the higher performing schools, the skills and mechanics of English (grammar, usage, vocabulary) were taught within the context of literature and writing instruction, but there was often a great deal of separate and overt targeted instruction and review in the form of exercises and practice. Gail Slatko and Karis MacDonnell at Reuben Dario Middle School, for instance, had students check each others' grammar even when they didn't do peer revision. They, like most of the teachers in the high performing schools, also engaged in direct teaching of grammar and usage (e.g., sentence structure, punctuation), and used these lessons as models for their students to rely on when responding to each others' as well as their own work.

At Springfield High School, Celeste Rotondi and Suzanna Matton, both teachers who embedded skills and mechanics in long-range activities, always exposed their students to *separated* and *simulated* as well as *integrated* experiences and continually monitored their

students' acquisition of new skills as well as noting where special help was needed. To help her students learn language and comprehension skills, Celeste selected difficult vocabulary words out of context and showed her students how those words could be used in class. She often did this as a *simulated* activity, in the context of the book they were reading, or to incorporate it into their writing practice. Using both *separated* and *simulated* lessons, she also helped her students learn to justify their answers, summarize information, and make connections. However, these new learnings were continually expected to be applied during *integrated* activities, such as literature circles.

Suzanna also used literature circles as activities that call for students' use of the skills and knowledge they were learning. For example, in one instance her students were divided into literature discussion groups and assigned the following roles that changed each week: discussion director, literary illuminary, vocabulary enricher, summarizer, and connector. Each student took responsibility for enriching the group discussion from the vantage point of the assigned role. Since these groups continued across the year, each student had many opportunities to practice the skills in context, and to see them modeled by the other students. When Suzanna saw that extra help was needed, she either helped the individual or offered a *separated* or *simulated* activity to several students or the entire class, depending on need.

In comparison, one teacher at Hayes High School, a more typical school, responded to the call for greater emphasis on grammar by raiding the book room for a classroom set of *Warriner's English Grammar and Composition*. She said,

> Well, this is how I do it (holding up the book). I work hard and have no time to read professional journals. I teach 5 periods and mark papers. I know I have to teach grammar. My students didn't get it before, so I have to teach it. So I use this (*Warriner's*) because it lays out the lessons, and my students can also use it as a reference.

Her skills lessons, through *Warriner's*, were primarily out of context, separate from the rest of her teaching.

Like the Hayes teacher, Carol McGuiness at Hendricks tended to maintain her "old ways" of teaching vocabulary, using a vocabulary workbook in which students did periodic assignments in parsing words to get at Latin and Greek roots. Although she saw this as giving them a tool for encountering new words, a tool to learn how to learn, it was primarily a *separated* activity and we saw no evidence that she had students use these root word skills elsewhere.

Thus, while teachers in higher performing schools used a number of well-orchestrated

instructional approaches to provide instruction and practice of targeted skills and knowledge in ways that suffused the students' English experiences, more typical schools' approaches to skills development seem to be more restricted and separated from the ongoing activities of the English classroom.

Approaches to Test Preparation

Our analyses of approaches to test preparation found two qualitatively different approaches used by the teachers in this study. One approach treated test preparation as a separated activity, involving test practice and test-taking hints. The second approach integrated test preparation with the regular curriculum by carefully analyzing test demands and reformulating curriculum as necessary to be sure that students would, over time, develop the knowledge and skills necessary for accomplished performance.

Almost all the teachers we studied used both integrated and separated approaches to test preparation some of the time, but there were marked differences in the approaches that received dominant emphasis. Table 6 summarizes the relevant results. As the table indicates, more than three fourths of the more successful teachers in both kinds of schools integrated the skills and knowledge that was to be tested into the ongoing curriculum as their dominant approach to test preparation; the others used integrated and separated approaches equally. In comparison, 70 percent of the more typical teachers used a separated approach to test preparation, primarily teaching test preparation skills and knowledge apart from the ongoing curriculum. The more typical teachers who did not teach test preparation at all were not teaching students who were scheduled to take a high stakes test that year.

Insert Table 6 about here

Teachers in the higher performing schools used the tests as an opportunity to revise and reformulate their literacy curriculum. The primary approach to test preparation involved relevant teachers and administrators in a careful deconstruction and analysis of the test items themselves, which led to a deeper understanding of the literacy skills, strategies, and knowledge needed for students to achieve higher levels of literacy performance. This was followed by a review and revision of both the curriculum and instructional guidelines to ensure that the identified skills and

knowledge were incorporated into the ongoing English program the students would experience. Before a test, the format was generally practiced to ensure students' familiarity with it. However, not much teaching time was devoted to this. It was the infusion of the needed skills and knowledge into the curriculum that seems to have made a difference. Students were also taught to become more reflective about their own reading and writing performance, sometimes using rubrics throughout the school year in order to help them gain insight into their better or less well developed reading and writing performance in response to particular tasks.

Again, however, the specific ways that schools and districts orchestrated the process of understanding and responding to the demands of high stakes tests varied with their individual situations. Some of this variation will be illustrated in the examples that follow.

At Foshay, Kate McFadden-Midby and Myra Le Bendig strove to understand the test demands of Stanford 9 and help their students make connections between their ongoing curriculum and academic and real-life situations, including testing. To accomplish this, Kate collaborated with a group of teachers to design a series of lessons that would incorporate the skills tested by the Stanford 9 into their literature curriculum. They identified certain areas in which their students did least well (e.g., vocabulary, spelling, and reading comprehension) and planned lessons that would integrate their use in meaningful ways into the students' everyday experiences. They developed a series of eight lessons as models to be used with a variety of literature. These lessons served as ways for the teachers to create other opportunities to address areas of concern within the regular curriculum.

In higher performing schools, district-level coordinators often created working groups of teachers, and together, the coordinators and teachers collaboratively studied the demands of the high stakes tests their students were taking and used their test item analyses to rethink the curriculum, what to teach and when. For example, when the Florida Writes! test was instituted, the Dade County English language arts central office staff and some teachers met to study and understand the exam and the kinds of demands it made on students. Together, they developed an instructional strategy (grade by grade) that would create year-long experiences in the different types of writing, including the kinds of organization, elaboration, and polishing that were required. This coordination began some years before our study, and the instructional changes that led to greater coherence were very evident in the classrooms we studied. All classes were replete with rich and demanding writing experiences, including direct instruction and help at all stages.

In many classes, the teachers spent the first five or ten minutes of each period on an exercise assigned on the board for the students to begin alone or with others as they entered. Sometimes this involved doing analogies or writing their own, or reading a passage and developing multiple choice questions for others to answer (after studying how the questions were constructed). The student work was always discussed in class and connected to how it might be useful not only on a test, but for their own writing or reading. Connections were made to this activity later in the day, week or year.

In some schools, teachers selectively used materials and created activities because they knew that their students needed to practice skills and knowledge that would be tapped by the test. For example, Suzanna Matton at Springfield High was constantly aware of enriching her students' vocabulary. She selected words she thought they would need to know, gave them practice, and followed with quizzes every six weeks. She also had her students do a great deal of analytic writing throughout the year, helping them become aware of strategic ways to write a well-developed analytic paper in response to the material they read as well as in response to writing prompts. For example, she helped her students trace how a conflict developed and was worked through in a story, and how allusion was used and to what affect, and then had them write about it, providing evidence. The students also learned to judge their own and others' writing and gained ability in a variety of writing modes.

Test preparation looked very different in the more typically performing schools. Rather than an opportunity to improve their literacy curriculum, teachers in these schools treated the tests as an additional hurdle, separated from their literacy curriculum. Here, the primary mode of test preparation offered practice on old editions of the test, teacher-made tests and practice materials, and, sometimes, commercial materials using similar formats and questions to the test-at-hand. In such cases, if test preparation occurred at all, there was a test-taking practice one or two weeks (or more) before the exam, or the preparation was sporadic and unconnected across longer periods of time. At Palm Middle School, for example, the Improvement Plan called for 15 test-taking practice assignments to be given to the students across the curriculum during the course of the year, but these assignments, if done at all, were most often inserted into the curriculum as additions rather than integrated. How to take a test, rather than how to gain and use the skills and knowledge tested, seemed to be the focus.

Some teachers in typically performing schools seemed to blame the students, or the test, but

not themselves. At Hayes, although the principal is a highly motivating personality and told the faculty, “We can do it,” there was an underlying belief among the faculty with whom we interacted that the students were not capable of scoring well on the exam. They did not believe they could make a difference. For example, Ron Soja said, “They don’t know anything. It’s like they never did anything.” Ron did not seem to feel personally accountable for ensuring his students possessed the underlying knowledge and skills to do well. He said,

> The Stanford test is not a good test to see whether they are achieving in school or not, because up until this year it hasn’t meant anything. Half the kids, they think it’s a big joke. . . .

Beginning two years hence, students in this district would need to achieve a certain percentile score (not yet determined) on the Stanford 9 test to be eligible for high school graduation. Ron rationalized that the students scored badly on the test because they did not take it seriously (did not understand its implications), rather than focusing on his efforts to prepare them for it.

Practice activities are often developed by states and districts or commercial material developers but not meant to be the sole activity schools use to help students do well. To prepare for the New York State English Regents Exam, which all students must pass to graduate, New Westford High School, a more typically performing school, sent two teachers to a state education department meeting designed to brief them on grading procedures. They, in turn, transmitted what they had learned to their colleagues. The English language arts district supervisor bought sets of guide booklets for Regents practice, and Elaine Dinardi bought yet another for additional practice. The books present Regents Exam-like activities for the students to practice. The department faculty also made up grade-level take-home finals that followed the Regents format. Elaine interspersed these practice activities around her usual curriculum until some time in April, when she began to stress Regents practice in her class. This practice became the major class activity, in effect became the curriculum, for the entire quarter, in preparation for the June exam. Over this time, the practice focused on the kinds of essays the test would require: writing for information, compare and contrast, and critical lens (relating a quote to a work that was read), presented in the form required by the test. It should be noted that this was the first year that the English Regents Exam was mandated for all students. In prior years, the school’s percentage of students passing (based on average grade enrollment) was at or below 50 percent. Consequently, district educators were very apprehensive about the Regents. Like those at Hayes, teachers in New Westford did not believe the average student had the capability to perform well on the test.

Administrators of other typically performing schools sometimes purchased professional services or programs that were not integrated into the ongoing program. For example, at Hendricks, an outside consultant was hired to give test-taking strategy workshops to 10th grade students to help improve their scores. The pre-packaged materials exhibited little understanding of the specific test or the needs of the students.

Overall, higher performing schools seemed to focus on students' overall literacy learning, using the tests to be certain the skills and knowledge that are tested are related to and being learned within the framework of improved language arts instruction,. They regarded tests as one of many literacy activities students needed to learn to do well at, and believed that the underlying skills and knowledge required to do well on tests were related to the underlying skills and knowledge needed to do well in coursework, thus needing to be encompassed within the ongoing curriculum. In contrast, the more typical schools viewed test performance as a separate goal, apart form the regular curriculum. Therefore they saw test preparation as requiring a focus on the tests themselves, with raising test scores, rather than improving students' literacy learning, as the primary goal.

Approaches to Connecting Learnings

Our analyses of instruction in the participating classrooms found that the teachers overtly pointed out connections among three different kinds of student learnings: connections among concepts and experiences within lessons, connections across lessons, classes, and even grades, and connections between in-school and out-of-school knowledge and experiences. Results are summarized in Table 7. As the table indicates, at least 89 percent of the more successful teachers in both types of schools tended to make all three types of connections with approximately equal focus. In comparison, the more typical teachers tended to make no connections at all, and when they did, it tended to be "real world" connections between school and home. None of the more typical teachers emphasized all three types of connections.

Insert Table 7 about here

In the higher performing schools, the teachers worked consciously to weave a web of connections. Thus, at Springfield High School, Suzanna Rotundi planned her lessons with consideration to the ways in which they connected with each other, with test demands, and with

the students' growing knowledge. For example, when discussing her goals for the reading of *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, she said,

> My primary goal is to provide them with what I consider a challenging piece of literature that will give them an excellent resource for the AP exam. It fits in well with the works we have studied in that it explores the inner consciousness and makes use of a recurring image/symbol that has been the key to several other literary works . . . that of blindness. It allows them to explore the way a symbol can convey meaning in several literary works. Personally, I feel that Ellison's is a monumental literary work. The ramifications in terms of social psychology with the concept of invisibility applies to so many different life experiences. I try to open the students' appreciation of how this work relates to their own world and it introduces them to the question of identity and how the daily interactions are crucial to identity formation. . . .

Thus, her lessons connected texts, tests, and life.

Even in hectic times when the teachers felt the burden of many demands on their instructional time, those in the higher performing schools and the excellent ones in the more typical schools still tried to weave even unexpected intrusions into more integrated experiences for their students. For example, when his long-range plans were disrupted, Shawn DeKnight, an excellent teacher in a lower performing school, did what he called "curricular improvising." He said, "If it's possible to bend the disruption so it fits in some way with my instructional plans, then I feel I have triumphed." When a grade-wide project was a field trip to a senior citizens center, his theme was "An Inter-Generational Forum: Senior Citizens and Teens Discuss What it Means to be Liberal or Conservative." He had planned to teach his students to write character analyses, based on their class readings. He decided to use the visit to the senior citizens home as a starter; interviewing the seniors "would force my students to interact with the seniors," he said. But what to do with the interviews? He asked them to write a character sketch. He explained,

> The writing follows a similar format to a persuasive essay, something my kids worked on a couple of months ago. It will also be a nice segue into the character analysis in the sense that both types of writing establish a thesis that a person has a certain character trait, then goes on to provide specific evidence to support the thesis. For the character sketch, the evidence that a person was liberal or conservative or moderate would come from the interviews. With the character analysis, which we will begin in a couple of weeks when we finish *Romeo and Juliet*, the evidence comes from things the character has said or done in the play.

Shawn made connections such as these throughout each day, week, and year, pointing them out to his students so they could recognize ways in which their skills and knowledge were productively used in a range of situations.

Springfield High School, a higher performing school that was preparing for accreditation, was in the process of revising its mission and approaches to education. Self-study led the teachers to develop a more integrated approach to learning, fostering connections both within school and between school and community. One part of the mission statement focuses on students as effective communicators. Faculty were collaboratively working on teams to ensure that the skills needed for effective communication would be taught and reinforced across the grades and across the curriculum. This process was followed for the other components of the school's mission as well, and these were coordinated with the statewide standards. The teachers were aware of making these connections. For example, Celeste Rotondi said,

> Standards, as much as they're a kind of pain in the butt when we have these meetings and align the standards and all that stuff, it has helped me. . . . My curriculum is strong. But once I started really looking at the standards I realized I didn't have a lot of oral writing activities, and so it kind of helped me to conceptualize that a little better and forced me to incorporate that.

It never occurred to Celeste to simply add a few oral activities to her lesson plans. Instead, she rethought ways in which reading, writing, and oral language could be interrelated across the curriculum and across the year in ways that would strengthen her students' oral as well as written communication abilities.

In addition to connectedness of goals, skills, and experiences across the day and year (connections Celeste would plan and make overt to her students when appropriate), she also wanted to ensure that her students could learn to make connections across the literature they were reading as well as connections from literature to life. She wanted her students to learn to read the text and the world. To do this, Celeste organized her literature instruction around thematic units, for example pairing *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Raisin in the Sun* to permit her students to focus on family relationships and ways families deal with the situations they face. For such units, she typically created study guides that provided scaffolding for her students and made overt to both her students and herself the particular connections that were at focus. Comparisons across the pieces helped her students compare and critique aspects of structure, language, and style while they also focused on thematic elements across the pieces and connected (e.g., compared and critiqued) them based on related situations in the world today.

As contrast, in the more typical schools, even when the lessons were integrated within a unit, there was little interweaving across lessons; there were few overt connections made among the

content, knowledge (literary or otherwise), and skills that were being taught. Class lessons were often treated as separate wholes – with a particular focus introduced, practiced, discussed, and then put aside. For example, at Hayes High School, Ron Soja said that in his year-long plans, he moved the students from more subjective to more objective writing tasks. However, we saw no indication he shared this distinction with his students or helped them make other connections among the kinds of writing he assigned.

At Stockton Middle School, Helen Ross asked questions that encouraged her students to make connections, but because discussions were carefully controlled, the connections the students would make were predetermined. For example when they read *The Diary of Anne Frank* in play form, taking turns reading parts, she asked, “These are real people your age. How would you react in that situation?” “What would you do?” Although these seem open ended, she was actually leading in a particular direction, toward the diary. She steered the discussion with questions and comments until a student came forth with the idea she sought. Then she said, “Her diary. That’s how she escapes,” marking the conclusion of that day’s discussion.

This same pattern of questioning can also be seen in Carol McGuiness’ class, at Hendricks High School, as she opened the discussion after reading a chapter of *Anpao: An American Indian Odyssey.*

T: In the Judeo-Christian tradition, do we have animals that converse with God?
S1: No.
T: Only one, and which one is that?
S2: The snake.
T: The snake. Representative of ------ ?
SSS: Satan.
T: Right. Satan. In this case the animals are benevolent. They are not evil. How is humanity according to this legend?

Rather than encouraging her students to make their own connections, or showing them how, Carol guided them to guess the connection she has made. Following this very short pseudo-discussion, Carol had the students sequence 24 events that she had taken from the first chapters of the text. This sequencing activity was disconnected from the discussion that had preceded it and was followed by another disconnected activity the next day, when she planned to have them act out a scene from the text.

The lack of connectedness in the classrooms of Helen and Carol was also reflected in the larger curriculum across the grades; their departments did not foster connectedness. For example,

in Helen's district, department chairs in the middle and high schools were eliminated a few years ago in favor of a K-12 English Language Arts Coordinator for the district's schools. He had been trying to foster curriculum coherence and continuity through cross-grade dialogue and within-grade curriculum coordination; however, because of his many responsibilities, he had difficulty accomplishing all his goals. As he told us, "Too many buildings, too many kids, too many teachers. I just can't do what I want anywhere. So I do what I can. You have to keep your sights limited to what you can do."

Although the central office in Carol's district was making monumental efforts to make the language arts program more cohesive, her department chair at Hendricks made little effort to follow through with his teachers. He said that although he gets good ideas and materials from the central office, he just puts the packages in the teachers' mailboxes instead of meeting, discussing, planning, and collaboratively developing ways to incorporate the ideas into the curriculum.

In the more typical schools, when educators gain information from professional encounters, or adopt pre-developed programs or commercial materials, they seem not to use them in the full and integrated ways in ways in which they were intended. Connie McGee, an English Language Arts Supervisor for the Miami/Dade County Schools, calls it the "Key Lime Pie syndrome." She said that even though a set of activities has been planned, demonstrated, and explained within a particular rationale and sequence, with features that build on each other, some teachers choose only the parts that appeal to them. Connie says, "I show them how to make the whole pie, but they make just the meringue or just the filling and wonder why it doesn't taste like key lime pie." The resulting failure of the activities is then blamed on the poor "recipe" or the poor students rather than lack of a coordinated whole.

Approaches to Enabling Strategies

Our analyses of classroom instruction also found considerable difference in the ways teachers went about teaching students strategies to engage in reading and writing activities and to reflect on and monitor their performance. In some of the classrooms, students were overtly taught strategies for thinking and doing; in others, the focus was on new content or skills, without overtly teaching the overarching strategies for planning, organizing, completing, or reflecting on the content or activity. Table 8 summarizes the relevant data. As the table indicates, there were

distinct differences in ways the more successful and the more typical teachers approached the teaching of strategies. All of the more successful teachers overtly taught their students strategies for organizing their thoughts and completing tasks, while only 20 percent of the more typical teachers did so. The other 80 percent of the more typical teachers left such strategies implicit. Examples of the variety of ways in which teachers went about teaching (or not teaching) such strategies follow.

Insert Table 8 about here

In the higher performing schools, the teachers often segmented new or difficult tasks, providing their students with guides for ways to accomplish them. However, the help they offered was not merely procedural; rather it was designed so that the students would understand how to do well. Sometimes the teachers provided models and lists, and sometimes evaluation rubrics. Strategies for how to do the task as well as how to think about the task were discussed and modeled, and reminder sheets were developed for student use. These strategies provided the students with ways to work through the tasks themselves, helping them to understand and meet the task demands. For instance, at Hudson Middle School, Cathy Starr taught her students strategies to use to reflect on their progress as they moved through an activity. After a research activity, the students were to rate themselves on their research and writing using rubrics they had developed:

> Where do you think you fall for the research [grade yourself]? Did you spend the time trying to find the information? Did you keep going until you had learned enough to write your report?
>
> Whether this is a short and informal or longer and more formal piece, you should spend time thinking about the writing. Did you plan what you were going to say? Did you think about it? Did you review it and revise it before putting it in the back?
>
> Did you edit? Did you check the spelling and punctuation?

Most of the teachers in the higher performing schools shared and discussed with students rubrics for evaluating performance; they also incorporated them into their ongoing instructional activities as a way to help their students develop an understanding of the components that contribute to a higher score (more complete, more elaborated, more highly organized response). Use of the rubrics also helped students develop reflection and repair strategies relevant to their reading, writing, and oral presentation activities.

Kate McFadden-Midby at Foshay also provided her students with strategies for completing a task well if she thought it was going to be new or challenging. For example, when her students were learning to do character analyses and to understand differing perspectives, she asked them to begin by developing a critical thinking question and then to choose two characters from the book (or books) they had read, in order to compare the characters' viewpoints on that question. The critical thinking questions needed to be ones that anyone could discuss even if they had not read the book (e.g., one student asked, "Why are people so cruel when it comes to revenge?"). Before they met in groups, she provided this outline: 1) share your critical thinking question with your group; 2) tell your group partners why you chose that particular question and what situation in the book made you think about it; and, 3) tell which two characters you have chosen to discuss that question in a mini-play. The students engaged in deep and substantive discussion about their classmates' questions, because Kate's strategy list had helped them gain clarity on the goals and process of the task. Discussions were followed, the next day, by a pre-writing activity in preparation for writing a description of the characters they chose. Kate instructed them on how to develop a T Chart on which one character's name is placed at the top of one column of the T and the other character at the other side. She told them to list characteristics: what their characters were like, experiences they had, opinions, etc. She provided them with strategies to identify characteristics and then ways to compare them across the two characters.

This was followed by group sharing, where the students presented their characters. Here, Kate scaffolded the students' thinking by asking questions about the characters: What kind of person was the mother? What are some adjectives that might describe her? How do you think those things could influence how she feels? Over time, when the students had been helped, through a variety of supportive strategies, to develop deeper understandings of their characters, they were then helped to write a mini-play depicting those same characters involved in the issue raised by their critical thinking question. Although this was a highly complex activity, the students were provided with supportive strategies along the way, gaining insight not merely into the characters themselves, but into ways they could understand characters and differing perspectives when reading and writing on their own.

In the more typical schools, instruction focused on the content or the skill, but not necessarily on providing students with procedural or metacognitive strategies. For example, in the sequencing activity in Carol McGuiness' 10th grade class at Hendricks mentioned earlier, two of

the three groups of students were having some difficulty putting the 24 events in sequence. Rather than eliciting any strategies that might be useful, Carol simply told them,

> OK. Divide your slips into thirds. OK? This is research. Start with the beginning, the middle, and the end and put the strips into three different piles. Get this done and you'll have a method.

But her guidance did not help the students understand the concept of sequencing any better, nor what it meant to create temporal order from story. Only one group of students seemed to understand what she meant and completed the task. So although Carol wanted her students to practice the skill of sequencing, she provided them with little guidance for doing so, either with her help or on their own.

The English chair at one of the more typically performing schools, speaking about his teachers in general said, "Incorporating strategies is difficult for most of us because it's hard for us to pull ourselves out of our comfort range. You know, unless we're prepared to teach the strategy, we're inclined to do something the old way."

Conceptions of Learning

When we examined how the teachers in the present study conceived of successful learning, two quite different views emerged. For some of the teachers, learning was seen as successful and complete once students exhibited an initial understanding of the focal skill or concept. For other teachers, such immediate understandings were simply the beginning of the learning process, which continued with related activities to move students toward deeper understandings and generativity of ideas.

Results for the three groups of teachers are summarized in Table 9. Unusually successful and more typical teachers' approaches to student learning were decidedly different. As the table indicates, all of the more successful teachers took a generative approach to student learning, going beyond students' acquisition of the skills or knowledge to engage them in deeper understandings. In comparison, all of the more typical teachers tended to move on to other goals and activities once they had evidence that the target skills or knowledge had been learned. Examples drawn from more successful and more typical classrooms follow.

Insert Table 9 about here

Alicia Alliston at Drew Middle School never stopped her literature lessons when she was

confident her students had understood the book and developed their own defensible interpretations. Once arriving at this level of expertise, she provided an array of activities that provoked her students to think and learn more. For example when her students were reading and writing about *The Midwife's Apprentice* by Karen Cushman, they also discussed the history, life, and art of the Renaissance. They did research into the life and social patterns of the period and ended with a Renaissance Faire. Celeste Rotondi, at Springfield High School, had her students work in literature circles where they discussed both the commonalities and differences in the books they read. Literature circle time was her students' opportunity to go beyond the texts they were reading, as more mature discussants and critics. One literature circle involved students in reading the following teacher-selected books: *The Great Gatsby*; *Bless Me, Ultima; Slaughterhouse Five*; and *Always Running.* At the end of the cycle of discussions the students wrote and performed songs about the books and their deeper meanings and created CD cases with fictional song titles, covers, and artists. The class also read *Night* by Elie Weisel. To prepare for it, Alicia had her students look at photos from concentration camps and write down words and phrases that were relevant. These were used to create poems. While reading *Night*, the class visited the Museum of Tolerance, completed an assignment while they were there, and wrote letters from three points of view (seven to choose from), all involved with the Holocaust in some way. Thus, the reading of *Night* became not merely an understanding and critique of the work itself (though this was done), but rather an integrated opportunity to contemplate historical, ethical, political, and personal issues raised by the reading.

Gloria Rosso at Hudson Middle School wanted to teach her students research skills using the World Wide Web, hard copy material, and interviews as sources of information. To do this, she engaged her students in a generative activity that would extend their learning of content as well as of the research process. She began with what she called a mini-unit on the students' surnames – what they meant and their histories – leading to essay writing, the development of coats of arms, and class presentations. In addition to teaching students to access data on geneologies on the Web, she also taught them to develop good questions for interviews with family members, and how to read materials and take notes and citations. They were invited to explore the use of symbols, as used in coats of arms, as a background to devising their own. While Gloria helped with the research skills, the students discussed what they were learning and ways in which the histories of their names provided a living trail of history. This led into her next and more

extensive research unit on African Americans, where once again, the students not only did research and wrote papers but interacted around the larger implications of the stories of African American experiences and present day life.

In contrast, in the more typical schools, the learning activity and the thinking about it seemed to stop with the responses sought or the assigned task completed – at a level Vygotsky (1987) calls "pseudo concepts," in which the learning is more a superficial recall of names, definitions, and facts than a deeper and more highly conceptualized learning.

For example, when Jack Foley's class at New Westford High read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, he asked questions about the content and vocabulary. He called on students to provide the answers and when they did, he either added additional comments to their responses or moved on to the next question. Neither the text nor the students' responses were used during the discussion to generate historical, social, or other connections and elaborations.

At Hayes High School, after reading *Romeo and Juliet*, Ron Soja gave his students the following issues and asked them to select the one they most "leaned" toward: Romeo and Juliet are victims of fate, Romeo and Juliet are victims of the society, or Romeo and Juliet are victims of their own passions. The next day they discussed their selections and reasons, then Ron went on to the next topic.

At Hendricks High School, Carol McGuiness ended her lessons when her students provided the answer she was after. Using the example of the sequencing activity again, as soon as the first group finished, Carol asked them to read the strips in sequence. Then the activity was over, even though the other groups were in the midst of struggling with the task. No connection was made either to the chapter as a whole or to the forthcoming chapter, nor to sequencing itself as a sometimes useful skill. Even the fact that the teacher was willing to end the task before all but one group had finished was evidence of the lack of value that was attributed to it as a thought-provoking learning experience. Similarly, when her students studied verb tenses, they were given a homework sheet that was a continuation of what they were doing in class. It was more of the same, rather than a generative activity that built upon the new knowledge.

Thus, in the higher performing schools, students were constantly encouraged to go beyond the basic learning experiences in challenging and enriching ways. In contrast, students in the more typical schools had few opportunities for more creative and critical experiences.

Classroom Organization

The final aspect of instructional approaches that differentiated among the teachers in the present study had to do with the extent to which the classrooms were organized to provide students with a variety of opportunities to learn through substantive interaction with one another as well as with the teacher. In some classrooms, English learning and high literacy (the content as well as the skills) were treated as social activity, with depth and complexity of understanding and proficiency with conventions growing out of the shared cognition that emerges from interaction with present and imagined others. Other classrooms emphasized individual activity and individual thinking, with students tending to work alone or to interact primarily with the teacher. Even when group work occurred in such classrooms, the activity usually involved answering questions rather than engaging in substantive discussion from multiple perspectives.

The relevant data are summarized in Table 10. As the table indicates, the dominant classroom interaction patterns in the more successful classrooms differed sharply from those in the more typical classrooms. In the higher performing schools, at least 94 percent of the teachers helped students engage in the thoughtful dialogue we call shared cognition. Teachers expected their students to not merely work together, but to sharpen their understandings with, against, and from each other. In comparison, teachers in the more typical classes focused on individual thinking. Even when their students worked together, the thinking was parallel as opposed to dialogic. Examples of both approaches follow.

Insert Table 10 about here

In the classes of the higher performing schools, students not only worked together in physical proximity, but they gained skill in sharing ideas, reacting to each other, testing out ideas and arguments, and contributing to the intellectual tenor of the class. They engaged in the kind of teamwork that is now so highly prized in business and industry although sometimes suspect in school settings where solitary work is still too often prized.

All the classes at International High School, including Marsha Slater's, work collaboratively. In Marsha's class, from the first days of school and throughout the year, students are taught to work together, discussing issues and reacting to each others' ideas even as they are gaining a common language through which to communicate. (All students at International are recent immigrants.) During one of the first few weeks of school, Marsha introduced a literature

research and writing activity that required group work throughout. The students divided into groups and started planning their strategy. We saw a similar pattern in science, where the students were graphing and mapping on computer the results of their group-accomplished experiments. It is part of the educational philosophy of the school that "The most successful educational programs are those that emphasize high expectations coupled with effective support systems; individuals learn best from each other in collaborative groupings." Throughout our study, Marsha's emphasis was on collaborative and active learning. Activity guides helped the students in a group work together toward a common goal, but debriefing sessions and conferences provided a time for each student to discuss not only the group's work but also to describe her or his own areas of accomplishment and need. In all the higher performing schools, such collaborative activities were common. Students worked together to develop the best thinking or best paper (or other product) they collectively could; they helped and learned within the same activity as in life.

In the higher performing schools, even whole class activities, particularly discussion, were used to foster similar cognitive collaborations. At Foshay, although her students sometimes worked in groups, Myra LeBendig often favored whole class discussions. She used discussion as a time for exchanging ideas and stimulating thought, exploration, and explanation. As a whole class, her students were taught to work together, listening to and interacting with one another about the ideas at hand. For example, throughout one whole-class discussion about *The Invisible Man*, her students raised ideas and freely engaged in literary dialogue. One student brought up the issue of how race was treated in the book, and another the symbolism of blindness as ignorance (as portrayed in the book), of not being able to see. One student said he thought Dr. Bledsoe had self-hatred, in response to which a classmate said she didn't think it was self-hatred, but that he [Bledsoe] didn't know where he fit in and didn't know how to connect his two cultural parts. "He hasn't found himself. He's in-between." This generated a discussion that continued for half an hour, with the students in deep discussion about their interpretations of the text and its connection to social issues of identity. Myra explained that she uses such discussions to help students "work through their evolving understandings, ideas, and opinions that will change as they continue reading the book." She explained that early in the year she told her students, "Fight to teach me," meaning she wanted them to disagree with her (and each other) and extend her (and their) thinking with their comments. This is exactly what they did in class

discussion.

At the same school Kate McFadden-Midby's classes often worked in collaborative groups. Group Share was a common activity during which students came up with interesting questions about what they were reading for the group to consider and discuss. When it was group time, the students immediately began interacting in productive ways. They knew what to do and were eager to interact. Kate explained that early in the school year she told students about her expectations, time management, and ways in which their thinking was valued. Her goal was to have her students truly share ideas and stimulate each other's thinking by engaging in real conversations. We have already seen how she orchestrated such activities, in the example of her lessons on character analysis presented in the section on strategy instruction. In that example, the students worked together to sharpen their individual and collective understandings of characters in books they had read, even though they had read different books. In turn, the understandings that emerged from those discussions helped the students to develop rich characters in plays of their own. Throughout, they were absorbed in discussion and thought.

Cathy Starr, at Hudson Middle School, used both whole class and small group activities; they wove into one another and together supported students' developing thinking. For, example, in response to reading assignments, she asked her students to bring three thought-provoking questions to class to stimulate discussion. Students met in groups to discuss these questions and come up with one or two "big" questions for the entire class to discuss. Cathy moved from group to group, modeling questions and comments, and provoking deeper discussion and analysis. After the whole class discussion, Cathy listed on the board items on which the students had agreed as well as issues that still needed to be resolved. In both small groups and whole class discussions, the students needed to interact in thoughtful ways; the social activity was critical to moving their understandings forward and doing well. These discussions were interspersed with assignments the students were to complete in groups. For example, while reading *The Giver*, she gave the following assignment:

This task required the students nor merely to locate information, but to discuss and refine what they meant by government and how it functions in the story, as well as the implicit roles the various characters serve. Some of the teachers in this study called such working groups "mind to mind," stressing the thoughtfulness they expected.

In classes in the more typical schools, such collaborative work rarely took place. For example, Monica Matthews at Crestwood Middle School explained that she has tried to have her students work in groups, but “they’re unruly.” She had them work together in groups minimally “because they talk off task.” Similarly, Elba Rosales at Hendricks High School “saved” group work for the honors and AP classes, claiming that the regular students require more lecture and don’t handle group work well. Often the group work that was assigned to what she considers her higher functioning classes required the students to work independently to complete their part of a task, then put the pieces together as final product. For example, after reading *Animal Farm*, each group was to create an Animal Farm Newspaper. However, each group member selected a segment (e.g., obituary, horoscope, cartoon, editorial) and completed it as homework; then the pieces were assembled into a four-page newspaper. While the group effort could be said to reflect what happens at a real news office, the students missed opportunities to work through ideas together for each of the components that was incorporated into the final product.

In other classes, group work often took place, but the students didn’t “chew ideas” together, nor challenge each other intellectually. They cooperated in completing the task but didn’t work conceptualizations through. For example, when Jack Foley’s students at New Westford High School worked together doing study guides, they kept the guides in front of them, moving from item to item down the page. As one student called out the answer, the others wrote it onto their worksheets, and together they moved on to the next question.

Thus, there is an essential difference in the way learning activity is carried on in the higher performing and more typical schools, with the higher performing teachers treating students as members of dynamic learning communities that rely on social and cognitive interactions to support learning. In contrast, the more typical teachers in more typical schools tend to treat each learner as an individual, with the assumption that interaction will either diminish the thinking or disrupt the discipline. However, since the schools in this study had similar student bodies, it became evident that the students were more actively engaged in their school work more of the time when English and literacy were treated as social activity.

DISCUSSION

This study focused on students’ achievement of high literacy as it is taught in English classes

and results in scores on high stakes assessments of reading and writing. We began the work holding a sociocognitive view of instruction, postulating that learning is influenced by the values, experiences, and actions that exist within the educational environment. From this perspective, it is posited that student performance in reading and writing is influenced by the instructional context the students experience as well as on the larger educational environment that gives rise to what counts as knowing, what gets taught and how. Because educational environments differ in their goals, procedures for arriving at them, and what gets rewarded as success, this view suggests that differing types of environments will result in different approaches to teaching reading, writing, and English, and different types of learning. This study of higher and more typically achieving schools bore out the theoretical expectations and identified the following distinguishing features of instruction in the higher performing schools: 1) skills and knowledge are taught in multiple types of lessons, 2) tests are deconstructed to inform curriculum and instruction, 3) within curriculum and instruction, connections are made across content and structure to ensure coherence, 4) strategies for thinking and doing are emphasized, 5) generative learning is encouraged, and 6) classrooms are organized to foster collaboration and shared cognition.

These features dominated the higher achieving English and language arts programs. In contrast, some aspects of these features were present in some of the more typical schools some of the time and other features none of the time. It is the "whole cloth" environment, the multilayered contribution of the full set of these features to the teaching and learning interactions, that distinguished the higher achieving programs from the others. These features are obviously related to teachers' visions of what counts as knowing and the goals of instruction that guide the teaching and learning process. They shaped the educational experiences of students and teachers in the high performing schools we studied. All the teachers with whom we worked were aware of concerns about test scores and students' acquisition of skills. Yet in the most successful schools, there was always a belief in students' abilities to be able and enthusiastic learners; they believed all students can learn and that they, as teachers, could make a difference. They therefore took on the hard job of providing rich and challenging instructional contexts in which important discussions about English, language, literature, and writing in all its forms could take place, while using both the direct instruction and contextualized experiences their students' needed for skills and knowledge development. Weaving a web of integrated and interconnected experiences,

they ensured that their students would develop the pervasive as well as internalized learning of knowledge, skills, and strategies to use on their own as more mature and more highly literate individuals at school as well as at home and in their future work.

These findings cut across high-poverty areas in inner cities as well as middle class suburban communities. They occurred in schools that were scoring higher in English and literacy than other schools serving comparable populations of students. They involved concentrated efforts on the part of teachers to offer extremely well-conceived and well-delivered instruction based on identified goals about what is important to be learned, and on an essential understanding of how the particular knowledge and skills identified as learning goals occur and are used in the carrying out of real literacy activities. From these teachers, we have learned that it is not enough to teach to the test, to add additional tutoring sessions or mandated summer school classes, or to add test prep units or extra workbooks on grammar or literary concepts. While many forms of additional and targeted help were evident as parts of the effort to improve student achievement in the higher performing schools, these alone were not enough. The overriding contributor to success was the whole-scale attention to students' higher literacy needs and development throughout the curriculum, which shaped what students experienced on a day-to-day basis in their regular classrooms. Such revisioning of both curriculum and instruction requires a careful rethinking of the skills and knowledge that need to be learned, their integration for students' use in broader activities, and continued practice, discussion, and review of them as needed over time. The English and literacy learning goals, at once recognizable and overt, can then permeate a range of direct literacy and literacy-embedded activities. They are at the heart of the kind of English teaching and learning across the grades I discussed in the introduction to this paper, and underlie the development of the higher literacy and deeper knowledge this entails. Thus, the findings provide us with not merely a vision, but also a set of principles and an array of examples to use as guides in revisioning effective instruction.

It is important to emphasize that in the higher performing schools, the six features worked in conjunction with one another to form a supportive web of related learning. It would be erroneous to assume that the adoption of any one feature, however well orchestrated, without the others could make the broad-based impact needed to effect major change in student learning. Rather, it was the suffusion of the school environment with related and important learnings that were highlighted by the teachers and recognized by the students as making a difference. My earlier

paper (Langer, 2001) dealt with the principle-led creation of professional contexts in schools that beat the odds; this paper adds that next critical dimension, principle-led practice. I hope these reports, will be helpful to educators in making decisions about effective paths toward the improvement of student achievement.

Limitations and Next Steps

Since this was an observational study, it cannot prove causality. It does, however, add to our knowledge of the differences between schools and classrooms whose students are attaining higher than expected levels of literacy achievement, and those who are not, across a very diverse range of schools and student populations. The schools, teachers, and teaching styles in this study differed in many ways, but they reflected a cohesive set of underlying approaches to curriculum and instruction, despite the many variations in how these general approaches were implemented. While the approaches were quite consistent across the schools that beat the odds, some were also were present in some of the lower performing schools, but with lesser consistency or pervasiveness. At least two types of follow up investigation would be helpful. One would focus at a more micro level on teacher and class differences to specify what differences can be tolerated, and to what degree, before achievement is compromised. The second would be an instructional intervention, attempting to put into place the features of beating the odds schools in more typical, lower performing schools, studying whether these features when placed in schools that do not already have them will positively affect student performance, and the kinds of professional and instructional development activities needed for this to occur.

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