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The schools we have. The schools we need.

Allington explores several "confusions" about literacy teaching and learning that have limited our ability to foster positive changes in classrooms and schools.



If we were to believe the reports about American education that dominate the media we would have to conclude that the quality of U.S. schools has diminished significantly over the past several decades and that radical reforms are immediately necessary. But, one should never believe everything one reads. A more accurate summary of the current state of affairs is that American schools are doing quite well at what society once wanted them to do, but today society wants schools to accomplish more than in the past. This seems especially true in the area of literacy development.

My professional career spans roughly a quarter century. Across this period I have been primarily concerned with the school experiences of children who find learning to read and write difficult. The work I have done, both alone and with my colleagues, has almost invariably addressed the rather straightforward premise that children are more likely to learn what they are taught than what they are not. This simple premise, when applied to the educational experiences of children who find learning to read and write difficult, raises some interesting and disturbing issues (Allington, 1977, 1983; McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1991) and suggests that achieving the new goals set for our schools will necessitate some substantial shifts in what is commonly taught.

I was asked to write in this article about the "instructional/practical implications" of my work. As I pondered the invitation and grappled with composing an article, I returned to the same ideas again and again. Much of what I have written about for nearly

2 decades has been drawn from what I learned while observing in schools and puzzling through (usually with assistance from teachers and colleagues) how to best explain what I had seen. For me, observing usually was more confusing than enlightening—at least initially.

In this article I explore some of the confusions that upset my educational equilibrium and seemed then (and often still) to limit our view of both the problems we face as teachers and teachers of teachers and the potential solutions we might pursue. These confusions, or competing explanations of educational phenomena, foster and sustain much of the uncertainty that marks our profession today. Uncertainty always accompanies change, and there is no doubt that American education is involved in substantial change. Our schools now educate larger numbers of children to higher levels of proficiency than ever before. Still, there exists a general impression that schools no longer work very well. Our schools meet or exceed the goals that have been held historically but fail to meet the more recent expectations set by society. After nearly a century of expecting schools to develop the basic literacy abilities of most students, but expecting advanced literacy to be learned by only some, today schools have been challenged, or expected to develop, advanced literacy in virtually all students. In other words, society now expects schools to educate all students to levels of proficiency expected historically of but a few (Marshall & Tucker, 1992).

We can debate whether such a shift in goals is necessary to sustain the changing economy (Shannon, 1993) and debate how such a shift might be best accomplished, but schools, especially publicly funded schools, are expected to adapt to shifts in public expectations. How might schools begin to adapt to the expectation that virtually all children achieve the sorts of literacy proficiencies that, perhaps, one quarter of students historically attained? We can see adaptations that are already underway in the elimination of tracking in many high schools and the move away from reading groups in elementary schools. Because evidence from a variety of sources indicated that the differential curricula used in different tracks and reading groups

limited the opportunities of some children to achieve anything but the most basic levels of educational proficiencies, elimination of differential goals and differential curricula has been set as an immediately needed adaptation (Wheelock, 1992).

But the notion of differential standards for different children has a long history in American education. Differential goals are anchored in understandings about human intelligence and human learning that have come under increasing attack as human learning is better understood (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). It simply is not necessary that some children fail to learn to read well. Unfortunately, that is how society has historically understood the bell-shaped curve that was created at the turn of the century to represent the normal distribution of a wide range of supposedly innate human abilities. It is time to reject the notion that only a few children can learn to read and write well. For too long we have set arbitrary but limited literacy learning goals for some children, usually those children whose scores fell at the wrong end of the normal curve distribution. This

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With the accumulation of overwhelming evidence that schools have better served advantaged children than disadvantaged children (Cooley, 1993), the notion of differential goals has come under attack as violating basic tenets of education in a democratic society. After nearly a century of attempting to identify what is wrong with poor children or their families, many are instead suggesting that schools need to be dramatically restructured in order to better serve disadvantaged children. Because my work has focused on

children whose educational needs were often not well met in schools, issues of differential goals and expectations, accompanied by differential curriculum and instruction, have literally permeated my writing and my confusions and uncertainties.

But such confusion and uncertainty has not undermined my belief that schools can meet the more recent and more substantial expectations that challenge the profession today. Nor have the confusions and uncertainties undermined my belief that our schools must adapt in order to educate historically underachieving children to the levels of proficiency achieved by their advantaged peers. No, my confusions and uncertainties lie more in precisely how to change the schools we have in order to achieve the higher levels of proficiency we expect. I would like all children to achieve the sorts of proficiencies that my own children have attained. I am quite certain that we must work to create schools where all children achieve, not just children with the "right" parents.

But for schools to accomplish such adaptations several current confusions about literacy teaching and learning must be resolved. These confusions that limit our ability to adapt our schools stem from a turn-of-the-century behaviorist psychology and what I have dubbed "the cult of the normal curve." The first confusion, mistaking limited experience with limited ability, occurs often even before the child actually arrives at the classroom door.

Experience vs. ability

When children begin school with few experiences with books, stories, or print, we generally confuse their lack of experience with a lack of ability. Children who lack experiences with text before school usually perform poorly on any of the kindergarten screening procedures now common in schools, regardless of whether the assessment emphasizes isolated skills acquisition or holistic understandings. The poorer performance, compared to that of their classmates with more experience with books, stories, and print, is too often understood in school as evidence that the children's capacity for learning may be somehow limited. Children with few experiences with books, stories, and print are

described with phrases such as *at risk*, *unready*, *limited ability*, *developmentally delayed*, *immature*, *slow* and other terms that confuse limited literacy experience with intellectual limitations (McGill-Franzen, 1992).

In a similar manner, once in school, children who read little are the children least likely to read well and most likely to be described in terms that suggest a limited capacity for literacy learning. The phrases used to describe children who find learning to read difficult often contain the words *low* or *slow* (e.g., low group, low readiness, low ability, slow learner). Such children typically experience lessons designed in ways that restrict how much reading they do in school. These children read little in school compared to classmates whose reading development is more advanced (Allington, 1983; Hiebert, 1983).

The premise of one of my earliest articles was that we so emphasized skills activities with children who found learning to read difficult that these children did not have the opportunity to read much in school (Allington, 1977). A number of more recent and larger studies have continually reaffirmed the original premise that children who become good readers routinely read a fair amount both in and out of school. In other words, sheer quantity of reading experience is an important factor in children's literacy development. Still, when we hear talk of children who find learning to read difficult it remains unlikely that we will hear much discussion of the lack of reading experiences as the source of the difficulties. Professional discussions about a 12-year-old child who is still experiencing substantial difficulty reading independently will commonly involve talk of potential neurologically based learning disabilities and only rarely talk of the evident lack of experience with reading.

The design of instructional interventions for limited-experience children has similarly failed to emphasize expanding substantially their opportunities to read, write, and listen to stories. Rather than creating interventions that immerse low-experience children in print and texts, remedial, compensatory, and special education interventions focus more often on providing participating children with more skills lessons.

Children with few preschool experiences with books, stories, and print have not often attended classrooms or experienced literacy curricula that immersed them in a rich array of literacy activities. Even our preschool programs for disadvantaged children have rarely created settings where limited-experience children are immersed in a rich print and story environment (McGill-Franzen & Lanford, 1994). Here, again, we confuse the lack of experience with limited capacity. Because of this, we design preschool curricula that effectively limit the opportunities that disadvantaged children have to experience the sorts of literacy events that more advantaged children routinely experience in their preschools and in their homes. Far too often limited-experience children are viewed as having limited potential and the pace of introduction of the book, story, and print curriculum is slowed for them, while social skills, self-esteem, and rote learning are emphasized.

Acceleration vs. slowing it down

Because we confuse experience with ability, we tragically lower our expectations for literacy learning in children lacking experiences with books, stories, and print. We just do not expect kids who started out behind to ever catch up. Once we had developed the assessment tools that ostensibly allowed us to measure reading achievement and intellectual capacity, we began to use these tools to limit the opportunities that some children would have to become literate. The reading tests indicate some children are behind others in their literacy development. Many children with limited experience with books, stories, and print also perform poorly on the tests of intelligence. This has been interpreted to mean that children who begin school behind or fall behind once in school have some impaired capacity for learning. It has been generally assumed that this presumed impairment was hereditary—intellectually impaired parents, the poor, unemployed, and not well-educated ones, pass this intellectual impairment on to their children. Our most enduring label for these children—slow learners—makes the assumed link between delayed literacy development and intellectual capacity quite clear. The label also clearly suggests

that this supposed limitation in intellectual capacity makes it unlikely that these children will ever learn to read with or as well as their peers.

Of course, children who read well score better on the tests than students who do not read so well. We now know that one reason for the correlation is that intelligence tests usually measure things that are likely learned in school, from books, and in middle-class homes (Gould, 1981; Stanovich, 1993). However, when we take a broader view of the human intellect (Gardner & Hatch, 1989), it becomes painfully clear just how tenuous any relationship between literacy development and intellect must remain. But even if the old view of intelligence as narrow, verbal, and largely unmalleable were true, there need not be any strong correlation between literacy achievement and intellectual capacity. Rather, even the old view could easily be seen as providing an estimate of how much instructional effort might likely be required to develop literacy in individuals of differing intellectual capacities (Allington, 1991). We might use the tests to estimate who will need more and better teaching rather than predicting who will learn to read well and who will not. In fact, part of the argument for compensatory education programs in the 1960s was that providing supplemental instruction to some students would overcome the disadvantage of living in poverty or having parents who were not well educated.

Unfortunately, few designed remediation in ways likely to foster substantially accelerated literacy development in children (Johnston & Allington, 1990). Often the designs reflected deeply held beliefs about the assumed limited capacity of some children as literacy learners. Even those who have led the way in the development of early, intensive intervention (e.g., Clay, 1991) admit that the powerful demonstrated potential of such remediation was surprising. The “recovery” of so many young readers experiencing difficulty in such short periods of time (12–15 weeks) violated widely held professional beliefs and called traditional remedial and special education practices into question. Since the turn of the century, experts had advocated slowing down curriculum introduction for children who experienced diffi-

culty learning to read. But as instruction was slowed and made *more concrete*, readers in trouble became less and less likely to ever catch up. Many still believe that literacy learning will necessarily be delayed for such children and that most will never catch up. When such beliefs drive the design of intervention programs we cannot be surprised that remedial instruction is usually insufficiently intensive to accelerate literacy development and allow children to catch up to their peers.

Sorting vs. supporting

Much of the institutional energy that is expended on children who find learning to read difficult is focused on sorting children into categorical groups rather than on creating enhanced instructional support for learning to read. We have confused sorting and labeling children with supporting their learning. Across the past 25 years we have expanded the array of labels we use and the number of special programs and special teachers available in schools. In fact, today about half of all adults employed in elementary schools work in some role other than that of a classroom teacher (Allington, 1994).

Our schools have become places where readers in trouble are assessed, sorted, labeled, and then segregated from their peers for all or part of the day. The tests we administer usually tell us more about the instruction the child has received at home and school than about the children themselves, but assessment results are rarely translated in this way. Instead, assessments are used to assign children to one or more of the special categorical programs.

Concern about the increasing use of labels and the increasing segregation of ever-larger numbers of children has resulted in a series of federal initiatives to return harder-to-teach or inexperienced-with-print children to the regular classroom for increasing amounts of time and instruction. There is a good reason for these initiatives. The evidence has accumulated that special programs, special teachers, and segregated instructional programs simply cannot match the effects of high-quality classroom instruction (Cunningham & Allington, 1994).

We spend enormous amounts of money trying to sort kids into different special pro-

grams. These costs accumulate before a child receives any instructional services. We spend large sums each year to identify which low-achieving children will be placed in which categorical programs. Testing children to identify who will be identified as handicapped now occupies the time of large numbers of school psychologists, speech teachers, and special education teachers, many employed in professional support positions that were nonexistent just a few years back. Testing to identify which children will be eligible for federally funded Chapter 1 compensatory services has been an annual ritual in most schools. But the tests only help sort and label children. Tests do not tell us what providing sufficient instruction might entail.

Labeling is not instruction. Labeling was originally intended as a sort of shorthand for describing the needed instruction, but it just never panned out. Tests just do not provide the sorts of information needed to design supportive instruction. In fact, tests provide little reliable information even for sorting children. Today, the labels we give children communicate virtually no useful information beyond which agency funds the intervention to be provided. Children identified as learning disabled, for instance, cannot be readily differentiated from those served in remedial programs or those identified as dyslexics (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1983). In addition, no one has been able to demonstrate that any particular curriculum or teaching style works better with some groups of children than others.

Curriculum vs. instruction

Our professional history is replete with debates about teaching methods and curriculum focus. Following a pendulumlike persistence we swing from more child-selected, holistic, literature-based curriculum to more adult-selected, atomistic, empirically derived curriculum (Langer & Allington, 1992). But curriculum would seem an unlikely source for debate given the evidence on how little curriculum focus really seems to matter. In study after study, curriculum materials and teaching methods have not proved as critical to literacy development as how well and how intensively children were taught. These many studies always found larger differences between

the more-effective and less-effective teachers using any given curriculum than differences in the effectiveness between curriculums being compared. In other words, some teachers achieve better results regardless of the curriculum in place. Children's access to high-quality instruction is what seems to matter and high-quality instruction can be achieved within a variety of curriculum frameworks. We have known for at least 25 years that access to high quality classroom literacy instruction with substantial opportunities to read and write is more important than curriculum focus—but we continue to debate curriculum and method. However, across this long history of curriculum debates one pattern stands out: Some children, usually poor children, are not nearly as successful in developing literacy as other, more advantaged, children. It was this hard fact that led to the passage of the U.S. Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and provided schools with additional reading teachers through the federal Title 1 program (now Chapter 1).

Chapter 1 compensatory education programs were founded with enormous expectations. It was expected that supplemental Chapter 1 instruction would be the solution to the difficulties so many economically disadvantaged children experienced in schools. But by the time that the program celebrated its 25th year, substantial evidence had accumulated that the program had failed to live up to these high expectations (LeTendre, 1991). It was not that Chapter 1 had failed, exactly. Participating children typically made small gains, but the literacy development of few children was accelerated sufficiently or rapidly. Most children had continued eligibility for program participation. Others tested out, only to return a year or two later to the program rosters. Chapter 1 programs improved the futures of participating children only modestly while failing to foster advanced literacy proficiencies in most children served by the program (Allington & Johnston, 1989).

But the most common design of Chapter 1 interventions was an unlikely candidate to achieve such goals. Historically, Chapter 1 programs were designed as pull-out instruction operating during the regular school day. Thus, no additional instructional time was

actually made available. In addition, most participating children were pulled out of the regular classroom during some part of classroom reading and language arts instruction, ensuring that no added literacy instructional time was available. Usually Chapter 1 programs involved small group instruction for 5–7 children for 30 minutes several times a week. These instructional groups were similar in size to the classroom reading groups, and so intensity of instruction was rarely increased. Because Chapter 1 teachers often worked with larger numbers of children each day than did the average classroom teacher and worked with these children for rather brief periods of time, instruction was rarely personalized. Instead, the most common Chapter 1 program designs literally precluded instruction of the sort that might be expected to accelerate achievement (Allington, 1987; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989a; McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1990). Unfortunately, the same has been true of the most common program designs implemented for the instruction of children with learning disabilities (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989b).

However, the debates that have dominated the professional literature of remedial reading and learning disabilities have typically argued curriculum matters. These debates largely ignored the critical features of the instructional interventions and environments provided participating children. In focusing on which curriculum to use, the inadequacies of the intervention designs were ignored. As the limited effects of these programs became clearer, design issues have finally been addressed. Thus, today we can find substantial experimentation in the design of remedial and special education programs. Generally, the redesign discussions focus on how to actually expand instructional time, how instruction might be better personalized for students, and how intensity of the intervention can be increased (Allington, 1993).

As the reauthorization of various federal educational programs proceeds, issues of instructional program design, not curriculum, seem to dominate (Commission of Chapter 1, 1993; Rotberg, Harvey, & Warner, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 1993). But while curriculum debates are largely and fortunately absent, a focus on the types of literacy activi-

ties that children accomplish across the school day is needed. It is important that all children have substantial opportunities to engage in reading and writing activity. It is especially important that instructional interventions intended to accelerate literacy development ensure that participating children read more and write more than other children. But reading and writing are still not popular activities in American schools.

Books vs. blanks

It is true that American elementary school students today read and write more during the school day than they did just 10 years ago (Langer, Applebee, Mullis, & Foertsch, 1990). Still, reading and writing activity occupy less than 10% of the school day! While we have increased the time children spend actively engaged in reading and writing and decreased the time they spend in seatwork activity, children still read and write little in school (Allington, Guice, & Li, 1993). Much of the traditional fill-in-the-blank seatwork has been removed from the school day, and there is no reason to mourn the loss (Jachym, Allington,

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& Broiku, 1989). However, replacing traditional seatwork are maps, webs, journals, and question-generating and question-answering activities that still occupy much time that might be spent reading and writing. New to the school day routine are the presentations of books in which the whole class sits and listens as each reader describes his or her current reading. These instructional activities can offer powerful support for children's developing understandings of how to read skillfully and thoughtfully. But such activities still prevent children from actually reading and writing. We need to ask ourselves as we plan, "Is this activity a better way for children to spend their time than engaging in reading or writ-

ing?" Children need time to read in school. We continue to organize the school day such that most children have little opportunity to actually read or write.

Another reason that children read so little in school seems to be the lack of anything much to read. No basal has enough reading material for anyone to become a good reader and yet in too many classrooms basal anthologies are just about the only reading material available. In our recent work we have found that some schools have books and magazines available for children to read, but very few schools could be described as having a wealth of books available (Guice & Allington, 1992). In the schools we studied, children's access to books and magazines was directly related to the number of children from low-income families that attended the schools. In other words, schools with few poor children had about 50% more books and magazines than schools that enrolled many poor children. This may account for the limited use of literature in schools that enroll large numbers of poor children (Puma, Jones, Rock, & Fernandez, 1993).

However, even in schools with the largest school and classroom libraries there was often still little variety in the reading material available. Library collections were often dated and classroom collections offered multiple copies of a few titles rather than single copies of many titles. The short supply of easy, interesting material was especially troublesome for children who were finding learning to read difficult. If we carefully examine the materials available in classrooms, the lack of a ready supply of diverse, interesting, and manageable material becomes readily apparent. Most classrooms still have a larger supply and variety of skills materials available than good books and magazines. Without easy access to comfortable, interesting materials, many children go about their daily work but never actually experience real reading.

I suggest that the essence of reading is getting lost in a story—literally entering the text world—but we organize the elementary school day in ways that more often prevent such reading behavior. It is difficult to "step into" (Langer, 1990) a good book in the short periods of time that dominate literacy lessons in most classrooms. Imagine, for instance,

attempting to read a wonderful novel in a series of separate 8–10-minute encounters. Children too rarely spend any sustained school time just reading (by sustained I mean 30–60 minutes or more). Teachers seem to feel uncomfortable when children just read. Sustained reading seems more like a leisure activity than educational work to adults. But actual involvement in reading remains the most potent factor in development of reading processes. Truth be told, the current organization of the school day leaves teachers with little opportunity to schedule longer blocks of uninterrupted time for sustained reading. For a number of reasons, including a dogged adherence to another remnant of turn-of-the-century psychology, distributed learning, the current school day seems organized around 10–20 blocks of time. In other words, there are multiple, separate activities that fill up the school day and multiple interruptions of potential learning time across the day. Children need fewer brief, shallow literacy activities and many more extended opportunities to read and write.

The situation for children who find learning to read difficult is especially fragmented, since they are most likely to be scheduled for special program participation during the school day. Such participation usually interrupts some part of the classroom reading and language arts lessons (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Thus, children who are most in need of substantially greater opportunities to actually read are often, by design, the children who receive the shortest and least well-linked opportunities to read and write. Over the past 25 years schools have added a number of special programs to address the difficulties that some children experience in acquiring literacy. Today, these various well-intended efforts seem as likely to impede the design of an effective educational intervention as to foster it. In too many schools classroom teachers have no single hourlong block during the school day when all children are present in the classroom! Special program participation and special content class schedules (e.g., art, music, physical education, library) all interfere with efforts to create coherent blocks of time when students might engage in sustained reading and writing. This interference with the regular education pro-

gram has influenced the call to dramatically restrict the segregation of some children that has been created by special programs and special classes. Instead, there is a renewed effort to focus attention on enhancing the quality of classroom literacy lessons for all students. Thus, we see calls for more inclusionary education for children with handicaps and more in-class support instruction or after-school and summer school programs for children needing remedial or compensatory educational services.

Schools are experimenting with schedules for special classes and special programs in an attempt to counter the current enormous fragmentation of the daily classroom schedule. Some schools are incorporating “block schedules” that provide all classroom teachers with daily protected time periods of several hours in length. During these periods no special classes are scheduled and no children participate in special programs. In other schools, special instructional programs operate outside the regular school day or school year—before or after school, on Saturdays, or during the summer months. Some schools are trying team teaching models, pairing classroom and specialist teachers together in the regular classroom for extended time blocks. The impetus for such changes lies in the recognition that children need time to read and write and that our current programs are often designed in ways that literally reduce such opportunities.

But providing children with access to a rich array of reading materials and sustained blocks of time to read them is not enough. All children need some instruction in order to acquire the complex cognitive process we call reading. But many children require more and better instruction as well as expanded opportunities to read.

Teaching vs. assigning

Unfortunately, we assign children work to complete and confuse that with teaching. What all children need, and some need more of, is models, explanations, and demonstrations of how reading is accomplished. What most do not need are more assignments without strategy instruction, yet much of the work children do in school is not accompanied by any sort of instructional interaction. Rather,

work is assigned and checked. Teachers talk to students when assigning, but the talk usually involves presentations of procedures, not instructional explanations of the thinking processes needed to complete the activity. Children are told to "Read pages 12 to 15 and answer the questions at the end (or on the Ditto, in the workbook, or in a journal)." They are assigned story maps to complete with no modeling or demonstrations of how one might discover the structure of a story. Children are assigned to write persuasive essays with no models or demonstrations of how to develop an argument or support it. Some children get vowel Dittos to fill in with no instruction in word structure patterns. Most children are interrogated after reading but have limited opportunity to receive instruction in the comprehension strategies needed to answer the questions posed. In short, we too often confuse assigning and asking with teaching. Omitting the instructional component enormously reduces the potential of many activities (e.g., maps, webs, summary writing, response journals) for supporting the acquisition of complex literacy strategies and understandings. Without a strong instructional component children are left to their own devices to discover the strategies and processes that skillful readers and writers use. Many children attempt to puzzle through the activities but never discover the thinking patterns that skillful readers employ (Delpit, 1986; Johnston, 1985). We now label these children and schedule them for special instructional programs. It is time, instead, to teach them what they need to know.

The teaching activities, modeling, explaining, and demonstrating, have much in common. Teachers model the reading and writing processes by engaging in them at times when children can observe. Simply reading aloud to children, for instance, provides a model of how reading sounds and how stories go. Writing a list of things to do on the board provides a model of one function of writing. Sharing a newspaper story or a poem provides models as does presenting a reaction or response to a story or book. But models do not provide the child with much information about how one actually accomplishes such feats.

Explanations are one way, and probably the most common method used in schools, to help children understand how one goes about reading and writing. But explanations get bulky and often require a specialized language. For instance, traditionally when we attempted to help children understand the alphabetic principle that underlies English orthography we talked about vowels and consonants and long and short sounds. Such specialized and abstract vocabulary often served to confuse some children. In actuality, children do not need such specialized vocabulary to acquire the understandings needed to become effective in the use of decoding strategies. But whenever we attempt to explain the process, we have invariably become tangled up with a focus on the specialized vocabulary of the abstract explanation. Thus, some children labored at learning the specialized vocabulary but never did learn to effectively employ knowledge of the alphabetic principle when reading. These children could mark long and short vowels, but they could not read well. At other times we used explanations like "the main idea is the most important idea" in our attempts to foster children's comprehension. Unfortunately, explanation by definition is often unhelpful—children now can define main idea, for instance, but they still cannot construct an adequate summary reflecting the important information in a text. Explaining a process is an improvement over simply assigning students work, but many children do not benefit from explanations alone.

Demonstrations include teacher talk about the mental activities that occur during the reading and writing processes. Demonstrations usually involve modeling and explanation along with the teacher's description of what sorts of thinking occur during the process. For instance, when a teacher composes a story summary on an overhead projector in front of the class (Cunningham & Allington, 1994), he or she provides a model of the writing process and a model of a summary. If the teacher works from a story map that has been constructed following an explanation of the essential story elements, then explanation has been available. But demonstration occurs when the teacher thinks aloud during the composing, making visible the

thinking that assembles the information from the story map, puts it into words, and finally creates a readable story summary. Likewise, when a teacher talks children through a strategy for puzzling out an unknown word while reading a story (here are things I can try: read to the end of the sentence; ask myself what makes sense here; cross-check what makes sense against word structure; reread the sentence using the word that makes sense and has the right letters), the teacher demonstrates the complex mental processes that readers engage in while reading. When the teacher demonstrates such thinking and demonstrates how thinking shifts from incident to incident (here I can look at the picture to get a clue; I think the word will rhyme with *name* because it is spelled the same way, etc.), the child has the opportunity to understand that skillful strategy use is flexible and always requires thinking, not simply rote applications of rules or knowledge.

Many children only infrequently encounter demonstrations of this sort. Instead their days are filled with memorizing rules and completing isolated tasks with no accompanying demonstrations. These children see the teacher and other children engaging in reading and writing activities or serving as models, but they are left with the puzzle “How do they do it?” All children need instruction, but some children need incredible amounts of close, personal instruction, usually clear and repeated demonstrations of how readers and writers go about reading and writing (Duffy, Roehler, & Rackliffe, 1986). Without adequate demonstrations these children continue through school always struggling to make sense out of lessons and rarely accomplishing this feat. These children never really learn to read and write, they just learn to score better on tests.

Models, explanations, and demonstrations of how we go about reading and writing are essential elements of an effective literacy instructional program. However, as we plan literacy instruction we must focus our lessons on the processes real readers and writers engage in as they read and write.

Understanding vs. remembering

In our classes and on our tests we have focused children’s attention primarily on

remembering what they have read and routinely underemphasized facilitating or evaluating their understanding. American children are, for instance, more likely to be asked a simple recall question about material they have read than they are to be asked to summarize that same material. They are more likely to be assigned work that requires that they copy out information from a text than they are to be assigned an activity that asks them to synthesize information from two or more texts. They are more likely to be interrogated about the facts of a story than involved in a discussion of the author’s craft in producing the story. Our lessons do not often involve much thoughtful reflection on what has been read or written, as several recent analyses of American elementary and secondary schools have demonstrated (e.g., Brown, 1991; Goodlad, 1983). Often our lessons have little relationship to reading and writing outside of school.

Somewhere along the way we confused comprehension with question-answering (Allington & Weber, 1993). School questions are different from the questions we pose outside of school. In school we ask known-answer questions—we interrogate. Outside of school we ask authentic questions—questions we do not know the answer to but are interested in having answered. When we talk with friends about things they have read, we do not engage in the sort of interrogation that follows the completion of a reading assignment in elementary or secondary school. (To see just how odd such behavior would be, readers might interrogate colleagues or family members about materials they are currently reading using questions at each of three comprehension levels.)

To foster understanding, children will need substantially less interrogation and substantially more opportunities to observe and engage in conversations about books, stories, and other texts they have read. Children from homes where parents provide few models of such literate talk about texts will learn how to enter and participate in such conversations only when we provide them with the models and opportunities in school. For these children the demonstrations provided at school offer the only opportunities to acquire literate understanding.

The popularity of the known-answer question in schools and the tendency for such questions to focus on literal detail found in texts may, in fact, work to impede children's understandings of how literate people actually read and discuss the materials they read. The focus on detail may work to create readers who never actually enter the text world, concentrating instead on remembering the sorts of detail that most literate readers omit when summarizing or discussing texts. For instance, I have long believed that the primary reason that answers to textbook questions were placed in parentheses in teachers' guides is that normal people do not typically remember the sorts of story details these questions asked for! Those children most likely to be asked the largest number of such questions—the children having difficulty learning to read—would then have their attention turned from more authentic and holistic engagement and toward a careful attention to details. These children would improve their question-answering achievement but never learn to enter a story or to summarize or discuss material read. Recent reports from the National Assessment of Educational Progress seem to indicate just this result—more evidence that children learn what they are taught.

For most children to acquire the advanced literacy proficiencies that allow one to summarize, synthesize, analyze, and actually discuss the ideas found in texts of various sorts, the nature of classroom conversations will necessarily have to change. Applebee (1993) has suggested that we might consider the nature of the conversations we want children to be able to enter and complete as a primary basis for thinking about the sorts of curriculum we create. Literate talk, usually conversational, is not often heard in classrooms of the schools we have. Instead, interrogation is the most common form of discourse between teachers and students. Until we realize that question asking does little to foster thinking and that question answering provides little good evidence of understanding, we should not be surprised that only few students ever develop advanced literacy proficiency.

Creating the schools we need

American schools have long been better organized to sort children than to support

them in their quest to develop literacy. Sorting children, as Bloom (1976) pointed out, always takes less effort than supporting children. But this sorting, based upon turn-of-the-century hereditarianism and supported by behaviorist psychology and psychometry, has always benefited children of the advantaged classes more than it benefited less advantaged children. I am certain that we can create schools that lessen the current inequities in literacy learning opportunities (Allington, 1994). There is little reason to doubt that we can have schools where children develop advanced literacy proficiencies regardless of the parents they have. But designing such schools requires that we discard many of the long traditions of American schooling and replace many widely held historical beliefs about human learning.

As long as we continue to believe that some children, usually children with the wrong parents, cannot learn to read alongside their more advantaged peers, there will be little reason to attempt to design instructional programs that ensure all children succeed. If we remain ensnared by hereditarian beliefs concerning the limited potential of some children, there will be little reason to work intensively to accelerate their literacy development. We must not continue to confuse lack of experience and opportunity with lack of ability. Some children will always require closer, more personalized instruction in larger quantities than other children if we are to help them achieve their full potential. Some children will need more and better models, explanations, and demonstrations than other children if they are to learn together with their peers. These are the children that need greater access to interesting books that they can comfortably read as well as expanded opportunities to read those books in and out of school.

Creating schools that better support children who find learning to read difficult will require more and closer collaborative educational efforts on the part of both the classroom teacher and the special teachers we employ to help support readers in trouble. Schools will undoubtedly have to expand the school day and school year for some children in order to expand their instructional opportunities. We can create schools where virtually all children achieve the sorts of literacy profi-

ciencies that in the past have been attained by only a few children. But there will necessarily be much changed in the design and delivery of our literacy lessons before this will occur. I am quite certain that children are more likely to learn what they are taught than what they are not. I am also quite certain that our schools, our classrooms, and our lessons are organized in ways that often impede our progress toward change and that impede the progress of the children we teach toward advanced literacy. I am less certain about how to accomplish the changes that are needed, but I think the changes are unlikely if we continue to adhere to the turn-of-the-century psychology and turn-of-the-century school organizational structures that dominate our practice today.

How we might begin

As a first step we will have to reemphasize the importance of the classroom teacher and classroom lessons in developing literacy in all children. Even though we have doubled the number of adults working in elementary schools since 1960, virtually all of those new personnel are specialists and support staff. Little of the real increase in educational spending has gone to support enhanced classroom environments. Instead, we have invested enormously in people and programs that often seem to be more likely to inhibit high-quality classroom instruction than to enhance it. We must create schools where classroom literacy instruction is continuously adapted and improved. In these schools the primary role of special program funds and personnel would be to enhance the quality of classroom literacy instruction available to children finding learning to read and write difficult and to expand their opportunities to engage in literacy learning activity.

Many schools have already undertaken initial reorganization of instruction for readers in trouble by reemphasizing the importance of classroom instruction that serves all children well. We can see this in schools where children who find learning to read difficult are no longer segregated for all or part of the school day but, instead, receive additional supportive instruction in their classrooms. Collaborative teaching models, where classroom and special program teachers work

together—side by side—to effectively support literacy learning, take time to learn, but it is time well spent (e.g., Standerford, 1993). It is children who find learning to read difficult who can least tolerate fragmented instruction. Rather than continuing the fragmentation of the curriculum and the school day, collaborative teaching models foster coherent and consistent instructional efforts.

A second step is reorganizing the school day and week. Teachers need long, uninterrupted blocks of time to teach, and children need such time to learn. Instead of planning for a daily series of separate short lessons for a variety of subjects, the day and the week need to be substantially reconfigured. Perhaps it is time to schedule literacy lessons on only Monday and Tuesday—but all day Monday and Tuesday! Just think how planning changes if two whole, uninterrupted days of literacy lessons become available. Activities that now “take too much time”—like reading a whole book, producing a dramatization of a story or even a scene, researching a topic rather thoroughly for an oral presentation, composing a truly well-formed story, report, or poem, from drafting to illustrating to publishing, and so on—could actually become part of the regular planning. Imagine the new roles that specialist teachers might play if they worked a half day once or twice weekly in such classrooms. But until we imagine such reorganization we will remain trapped in the schools we have.

Similarly, these schools would not operate on the 8:30–2:30 schedule that seems so common in the U.S. today. Rather, schools would change to meet the needs of children in a society that has changed much since we designed the schools we have. Schools would open earlier and close later. In some cases, schools might remain open well into the evening to provide parent education and homework support. But schools would routinely extend the instructional day for some children—those who need increased instructional opportunities to accelerate their learning. The schools we need would not operate as though most parents are home at 3:00 to help with homework—since most are not (Martin, 1992). They would be redesigned in recognition that in most families with children both parents work, and more parents

work longer hours today than they did when the schools we have were designed. Such shifts have already taken place in some communities. Some schools open at 7:00 in the morning and close at 9:00 in the evening. In these schools a variety of learning activities are scheduled after the formal school day. Children can learn to dance, sew, cook, act, play the piano, juggle a soccer ball, or deliver a karate kick. In these schools children have a quiet place to do homework, with library resources at hand, and, often, an adult to provide assistance. Some of those adults who work into the evening might be drawn from that half of the professional staff currently in schools who are not classroom teachers.

Schools would change to meet the needs of children in a society that has changed much since we designed the schools we have.

Linked to reorganizing the daily and weekly schedule is reworking our approach to curriculum design. A third step will be to throw out the old notion of distributed learning that fostered the current approaches to instructional planning. In its place we put the notions of engagement, involvement, and *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). We replace the broad curriculum of today with a deep curriculum—a *post-hole* approach (Dow, 1991)—one that develops deeper levels of integrated understanding of far fewer topics. It is difficult for anyone to be thoughtful about topics that are understood only shallowly. In fact, lots of brief lessons on multiple unrelated topics literally force shallow thinking. If we are to create schools where understanding replaces simple remembering until the test has been taken, our curriculum will necessarily change. Again, some schools have already begun to move in this direction. Integrated language arts curriculum, thematic lessons, monthlong expertise units, whole day project periods, and the like are all examples

of preliminary movement in this direction (Walmsley, 1994).

A fourth step is replenishing the classroom and the classroom teacher. Few of the classrooms we have studied are well equipped for the schools we need, and few classroom teachers are well supported with ongoing professional development activities. For instance, even though schools are moving to literature-based curriculum in an attempt to create more thoughtful instruction, few teachers are very expert in the area of children's literature, and few classrooms have sufficient collections of books and magazines (Allington, Guice, & Li, 1993). It seems a rare school where developing such expertise is part of the ongoing professional development plan. Few of the schools implementing literature-based instruction seem to have in place any sort of structure for fostering teacher familiarity with the new children's books that are published each year. Few have a long-term plan for building school library and classroom collections of books. If children are ever to become readers, many more will need the sorts of access to books that only a few have today (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1993). Schools that serve large numbers of poor children, especially, will need a tenfold increase in the numbers of books, magazines, and reference materials that children might use.

Such changes could be funded, in large part, from the funds that currently support the schools we have. For instance, in an elementary school with 300 students and 13 classroom teachers we might forego hiring one specialist staff member and use the costs recovered to fund the replenishing. If we use a US\$37,000 base salary and a 21% fringe benefit cost we have about \$45,000 available annually—or about \$3,500 per classroom. We might spend \$1,000 of this amount each year to purchase books for the classroom and \$1,000 for the school collection (or an additional \$13,000 per year). The remaining funds might be used to fund professional development opportunities for each teacher. These might include conference attendance, summer curriculum development workshops, videos, professional library collections, college courses, and so on. Over a 10-year period we would invest \$35,000 in replenishing each

classroom and each classroom teacher. Would such an investment accrue benefits to the children who find learning to read difficult that were at least comparable to the benefit accumulated through the employment of that one special teacher? Without a far broader view of how schools might invest special program funds to better meet the needs of children who find learning to read difficult, it is likely the question will never be raised, much less answered.

Finally, the schools we need will reformulate the processes of evaluating student learning. Evaluating programs will become a different sort of enterprise than it is today. While standardized achievement tests will probably remain as one indicator, these tests would play a substantially smaller role than they do today. Students taking standardized tests and high-stakes assessments associated with program evaluation would complete the tests anonymously. No student identification would be attached to those test results. School personnel, legislators, and policy makers would still have the achievement test information for program evaluation purposes, but these narrow and very fallible instruments would not be used to sort students or to plan instruction. The evaluation of student learning, or exploration of their learning difficulties, would become a personalized process with a heavy reliance on close, careful examination of a student's work (Johnston, 1992). Again, we can see movement in these directions as schools work to develop portfolios, performance, and student self-evaluation processes. We can see it in the debate over report cards (Afflerbach, 1993) and the current experimentation in how best to convey student progress to parents, employers, and to the students themselves (Pearson, 1993; Purves, 1993). The testing and reporting procedures so common today were better suited for the low-level curriculum goals of the schools we had, but those procedures simply do not work for the schools we need.

In the end it will all come down to putting children together with expert teachers who have the time and resources necessary to support the diverse groups of children assigned to their classrooms. We can and should rethink many of the features of the schools we have, but it ultimately comes

down to schools staffed with high-quality classroom teachers, especially for the futures of children who find learning to read and write difficult.

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Literacy graphic

A nice way to spend a summer day



While they were waiting for the hamburgers to grill during a backyard cookout, Mara, Katherine, and Nissa took a break on the porch to read some books.

This photograph was taken by Susan M. Tancock, who teaches reading courses at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, USA.

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