

K-3

# Your Core Reading Program & Children's Literature

Effective Strategies for Using  
the Best of Both



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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 40 12 11 10 09 08



# Contents

## CHAPTER 1

<b>Using the Best of Both: Why a Core Reading Program and Literature-Based Approach Works</b> .....	5
---	---

## CHAPTER 2

<b>First-Grade Possibilities</b> .....	23
--	----

## CHAPTER 3

<b>Second-Grade Possibilities</b> .....	47
---	----

## CHAPTER 4

<b>Third-Grade Possibilities</b> .....	73
--	----

## CHAPTER 5

<b>Getting Practical About Using the Best of Both: Questions and Answers</b> .....	101
--	-----

<b>PROFESSIONAL REFERENCES CITED</b> .....	113
--	-----

<b>CHILDREN'S LITERATURE CITED</b> .....	117
--	-----

<b>INDEX</b> .....	125
--------------------	-----



## CHAPTER 1

# Using the Best of Both: Why a Core Reading Program and Literature-Based Approach Works

*If we had told you then, you might not have gone—and, as you've discovered, so many things are possible just as long as you don't know they're impossible.*

—Norton Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth*

We chose this quote to begin *Your Core Reading Program & Children's Literature: Effective Strategies for Using the Best of Both* because it offers a literacy curricula for young children that moves beyond real or implied constraints. We believe using a core reading program and children's literature will allow you to experience the science of teaching as well as the art of teaching. We understand the value of reading research that has led to more systematic and explicit instruction to support young children as they become proficient readers and writers (National Reading Panel, 2000), but we also value the art of teaching, which leads to joy for both teachers and students. We have written this book to help you engage your curiosity and creativity as you plan for literacy instruction. We believe that exemplary literacy instruction for young children must be grounded in joyful anticipation of the possibilities—the *what ifs*—of teaching and learning.

Lately, we have listened in on many conversations among teachers and principals that dichotomize core reading programs and literature-based curricula. From these conversations it



would appear that there's only one option—either a core reading program or a literature-based curricula. We believe this view is limiting and inaccurate, as we see teachers successfully using both. When both approaches are integrated in the classroom, students benefit from interdisciplinary learning experiences that engage them in rich content as they gain insights into literature and literacy.

We understand that in many schools and districts, there is an expectation to use a core reading program for a 90-minute uninterrupted block of instruction. This is especially true for schools that have received Reading First grants or qualify for Title I funds. But teaching just one core program can limit the way you teach your students to read and write. Even when a core reading program is mandated, the rest of the day offers many opportunities to teach reading and writing in other ways. You might respond to this suggestion with something like “Are you kidding? We have no time to do anything else!” We understand the limitations of time and the pressures to provide instruction in all curricular areas. Our response is to offer practical ways that you can use literacy—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—as a vehicle to deepen your students’ understanding and motivation to read and write, and to learn other content areas as they develop these abilities.

This chapter begins with a discussion of effective literacy practices for primary children. It then moves to a discussion of the pros and cons of using core reading programs and literature-based curricula. From this foundation, we consider the pragmatic issues centered on using both in primary classrooms.

## Exemplary Literacy Instruction

Exemplary literacy instruction occurs in classrooms where a literate environment has been created even before the students arrive. When they first enter the classroom, the students are enfolded into an environment that supports literacy. They notice a classroom library with multiple books, with many organized into tubs related to themes or levels. There are books at a table related to a unit of study, such as books written by a single author or books about a particular topic, such as plants. Students’ names are featured near the entry to the room and near their cubbies. Labels point out other areas of the room as well, such as the meeting circle and the teacher’s desk. A writing center beckons with paper, writing utensils, and computers. On the walls children see the alphabet and sound cards. A word wall, which features the alphabet with space for words, suggests the word work in which the children will engage throughout the year. A bulletin board with open space awaits the student work that will soon be displayed. Additionally, the students may notice a journal on their



desk or table space with a pencil for writing (Barone, Mallette, & Xu, 2005; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996; Pressley, 2006a).

The National Reading Report findings (2000) and other research evidence provide guidance for literacy instruction. Research has shown the need for systematic phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics instruction. In addition to this instruction to help children learn the alphabetic code, instruction in comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary are critical to developing young readers and writers. Pressley et al. (1996) noted that teachers with high student achievement provided multiple opportunities in a single day for children to be actively engaged in stories and informational text. As teachers read, they quickly helped children understand an unfamiliar word and stopped to model their thinking about the selection, thus making the comprehension process accessible to young children. Teachers encouraged children to share thoughts and questions with other students, and to contribute to whole-class discussion to keep them engaged in the comprehension process.

Pressley et al.'s exploration of exemplary first-grade teachers found that the teachers continuously modeled comprehension and writing strategies. They reorganized students into multiple groupings to maximize learning, such as forming a group for targeted reteaching of a skill or strategy. This group worked together until children acquired the skill or strategy. Other groupings included book clubs and writing partnerships. Most importantly, exemplary first-grade teachers balanced instruction in word-level knowledge with meaning making. That is, they supported students in their knowledge of letters, letters matched to sounds, and, finally, decoding. Students had opportunities to practice their tentative knowledge of decoding through reading decodable texts. These exemplary teachers did not limit children, however, to just letter and word knowledge. They provided opportunities to engage with narrative and informational text, with teacher support when necessary, so that children understood the importance of meaning making while reading. To support meaning making, teachers read to children, sharing important words and ideas so that children were nudged toward more complex ways of understanding texts.

A similar study conducted by Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (1999) explored exemplary teachers in first, second, and third grades with children in high-poverty schools. They noted that in addition to focusing on word- and meaning-level elements of text, students who spent more time in small-group instruction had higher achievement. In these groups, teachers more carefully targeted instruction to the variable learning needs of students. Not surprisingly, these teachers effectively used informal assessments to guide instruction and decision making about the composition of students in each group.



Taylor et al.'s study also reported that effective literacy teachers spent more time teaching reading than did other teachers. Typically they engaged students in reading activities for approximately 134 minutes daily. They also provided about a half hour each day for students to read independently. Clearly, exemplary literacy teachers have abundant energy that they use to guide and enhance student learning.

In addition to focusing on reading at word and text level, exemplary teachers understand the importance of writing both to develop and expand reading competency and to communicate (Pressley, 2006b). Even though the National Reading Panel report did not focus on writing, exemplary teachers have not excluded it from a central place in their literacy curricula. They model writing, support children's writing by scaffolding (interactive writing), have children write independently in learning logs and journals, and support students as they write longer texts with revision and editing. Writing is an important daily literacy activity.

To sum up the research on young children's future literacy achievement, Pressley (2006b) and Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) indicate that the following areas of instruction and learning are significant.

- **Understanding and using the alphabetic principle.** Children have acquired phonological and phonemic knowledge. They can read and represent words using letter-sound knowledge. They are becoming fluent as they read grade-level material.
- **Understanding print functions.** Children understand why they read and write, and they can express themselves orally and in writing.
- **Vocabulary and knowledge.** Children have developed vocabulary knowledge to support their comprehension. Children also have developed the necessary background knowledge to understand the concepts and ideas shared in text. This also includes knowledge of various genres.
- **Motivation.** Children enjoy reading and writing and readily engage in these activities.

Overall, at the end of the primary grades, children have acquired sufficient word knowledge to read and write most single-syllable words accurately. They are relatively fluent (40 words per minute end of first grade, 90 words per minute at end of second, and 110 words per minute end of third [Good, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 2002]), and they can simultaneously read and comprehend narrative and informational text. These are baseline benchmarks used to determine the ease or difficulty of young children's present and future literacy development.

Moreover, students read, write, speak, and listen with competence, ease, and pleasure. As Gambrell, Malloy, and Mazzoni (2007) describe, "Comprehensive literacy instruction emphasizes



the personal, intellectual, and social nature of literacy learning, and supports the notion that students learn new meanings in response to new experiences rather than simply learning what others have created” (p. 14). This description fits the blending of core reading programs and literature-based curricula described throughout this book.

## Core Reading Programs

Core reading programs are not new to elementary schools, and not surprisingly educators both support and criticize such programs (Lapp, Fisher, Flood, Goss-Moore, & Moore, 2002). According to Hoffman et al. (1998), the McGuffey Readers, first published in the 1830s, are considered the first basal reading series. From this early beginning, basals have undergone a multitude of configurations. The earliest basals in the 1930s relied on controlled vocabulary. Later, basals moved away from a narrow focus on control and began to include phonics and sight-word instruction (Popp, 1975). In the 1970s the focus shifted to basals that were more skills-based, with accompanying workbooks for practice. These basals also included an assessment strand for teachers. Not surprisingly, critics challenged the skills-based organization, and the importance of quality literature emerged (Hoffman et al., 1998). During the late 1980s and 1990s, basals were renamed literature-based anthologies. From these traditions came the current evolution of the basal in core reading programs that represent elements from all previous basal cycles. Despite criticism, core reading programs are still the most commonly used materials to teach children to read (Fawson & Reutzel, 2000), perhaps because of their continuous changes to meet current student and teacher needs. Principals tend to favor core reading programs because they come as complete packages, so support materials, such as assessments, need not be purchased (Lapp et al., 2002).

Most current core reading programs provide materials and instruction for all of the language arts, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking, with units organized by theme for students in kindergarten through eighth grade. The programs consist of teachers’ and students’ editions of the literature anthologies, leveled text for differentiated instruction, phonics decodable texts, assessments, workbooks, and other ancillary materials including Internet support. In fact, in schools where we have worked, it often takes teachers a few years to realize all of the support materials provided in a core reading program. These programs are organized so that each day children participate in whole-class and small-group instruction; differentiation is a key component. Most programs also provide materials for reteaching struggling students and support materials for children new to English.