

# Exemplary Fourth-Grade Teachers

462

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*Good fourth-grade teaching is an expert activity that is not amenable to any one-size-fits-all plan for instruction.*

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Some children are lucky. They have truly outstanding teachers. Unfortunately, little of what is written about American classrooms focuses on these exemplary teachers. We hope to change that. For the past several years we have been privileged to study some of this nation's best elementary teachers working in their classrooms. For part of this time we observed exemplary fourth-grade teachers engaged in their daily work. We had noticed that although fourth grade is a critical year for many students, few studies documented the experiences of students or teachers at this grade level. What we found in these exemplary teacher classrooms suggests that good fourth-grade teaching is an expert activity—a complex activity that is not amenable to scripted materials, standardized lessons, or any one-

size-fits-all plan for the organization of instruction. In other words, it is good fourth-grade teachers who offer good fourth-grade teaching. School-district plans and procedures may make good teaching more easily accomplished (or more difficult), but the exemplary teaching we describe here derived primarily from the teachers we observed, not from some prescribed set of materials or lessons or mandated outcomes. In our view, creating large numbers of good fourth-grade classrooms will require a very different approach to educational reform than the strategies now most commonly employed, such as curricular mandates, annual testing, and prescribed instructional frameworks.

## THE EXEMPLARY TEACHERS, THEIR CLASSROOMS, AND THEIR STUDENTS

We identified 30 exemplary fourth-grade teachers through a snowball nomination procedure of requesting nominations from multiple sources in each locale. We received nominations from local college and university faculty, from county or school-district supervisors, and, in some sites, from local professional organizations. We followed up on the nominations with visits to the classrooms and confirmation of the nominee's reputation as an exemplary teacher by the school principal. These teachers worked in five states (New York, Texas, California, New Jersey, New Hampshire) and primarily in schools with concentrations of children from low-income families. They were observed for at

least 10 full instructional days over the course of one school year. Field notes taken during these observation days provided a rich description of their instructional environments. Audiotape and videotape records supplemented field notes and provided the research team with rich depictions of lessons. Multiple interviews, both structured and unstructured, were completed with teachers and some students. Members of the larger research team used these various data sources to prepare case studies for 12 of these exemplary teachers. The case-study teachers were drawn from each of the five states and represented a range in years of teaching experience (5 to 25). Their classrooms represented a range of class sizes (19–36), ethnic mixes of students, student poverty levels (10 percent to 85 percent), and organization (from self-contained to departmentalized, from single grade to multigrade) and were located in various community types (urban core, urban fringe, small city, rural town, and suburbia). In short, the case-study teachers worked with students in schools that varied in substantial ways.

## GOOD FOURTH-GRADE TEACHING

Two independent cross-case analyses of the 12 case-study teachers were completed (Allington & Johnston, 2000; Boothroyd, Day, Johnston & Cedeno, 1999). In these analyses each case study was analyzed, and key features of the exemplary teaching were coded. We

then performed a content analysis of the features identified in the earlier independent analyses to develop the five broad focal elements reflected in the exemplary fourth-grade classrooms: the nature of classroom talk, the curriculum materials, the nature of instruction, the work students completed, and the nature of evaluation. These focal elements are described below followed by illustrative vignettes from the classroom of one of the exemplary teachers.

### The Nature of Classroom Talk

Perhaps the single most striking feature of these case studies is the nature of classroom talk. The observers routinely noted that students in these classrooms talked to the teacher and to each other much more often than previously reported in the research literature (Lindfors, 1999). The talk was respectful, supportive, and productive and was demonstrated by teachers in their interactions with students. Creating such talk was the focus of lessons across the year, but especially in the beginning of the year. Talk between teacher and student was personalized and personal. These teachers used conversation—real conversation—to learn about students. Even the instructional talk was often conversational, with teachers engaging students in discussions of their understandings, responses, and puzzlements. Teachers encouraged students to engage each other's ideas; authority was more distributed than centralized. The teacher talk was tentative in that rarely were “No” or “Wrong” uttered by teachers who looked instead for the partially correct and encouraged further thinking about even the “correct” answer. Teachers admitted their limited knowledge of various topics, their mistakes, and their interests. Classroom talk

was also process oriented—what might be called strategic. Teachers encouraged students to describe *how* they accomplished things—solving a problem, selecting a topic, locating information, and so forth. “How could we find that out?” and other such comments permeated teacher talk.

### The Curriculum Materials

The instruction was multisourced. Although teachers did often dip into basal instructional materials in science, social studies, and reading, they hardly ever followed the traditional plan for these materials. These teachers filled students' days with reading and writing beyond the textbooks. For example, they used historical fiction, biography, and informational books in social studies. They drew reading materials from, or had their students locate it on, the Internet, in magazines, and in other nontraditional curriculum sources. This approach allowed students to work more often in materials of appropriate complexity. Such access to texts that could be successfully read by individual students seemed central to the high levels of engagement in academic work that we observed.

Word study was also featured with the dual focus on word structure/pronunciation patterns and fostering vocabulary acquisition. Teachers drew attention to interesting words in the materials they read to students, the materials students read themselves, and the texts the students composed. They fostered student interest both in words and in the turn of a phrase.

### The Nature of Instruction

These exemplary teachers taught constantly though they were only occasionally in front of the class.

That is, we more often observed teachers working alongside or among students than working from the front of the room. Teachers put their primary focus on engaging learners and situated their concern for accuracy somewhere lower on the agenda. Their instruction was a sort of problem setting, although that often involved problem clarification with students. The instruction was more conversational in nature, as opposed to being comprised of the more typical lecture and interrogation. Students were encouraged to teach one another, and a trusting collaborative environment enabled them to do so. Furthermore, because these teachers normalized conversations about the processes students used to accomplish goals and solve problems, the students themselves demonstrated strategies for one another. In addition, teachers routinely provided explicit demonstrations of the thinking that literate people use as they read and write. For example, graphic organizers were used as scaffolds for demonstrating the thinking strategies that undergird understanding rather than as assessment assignments students were expected to complete after reading.

Although the instruction was not individualized in the traditional sense, it was personalized in that teachers knew and responded to their students' interests and needs, strengths and weaknesses. Students did not exercise full control over instructional decisions; instead, teachers strategically managed the choices provided for students. For instance, students might select any two of the three dozen biographies available to read for a unit on biography as a genre. Those choices were often shaped by teacher recommendation and student negotiation.

## The Students' Work

A strong literary emphasis and extensive student engagement in reading and writing activities across the curriculum and across the school day characterized these classrooms. Trade books were used in content-area activities to model thinking and composing strategies as well as to promote a “just reading” framework. Author studies, genre studies, and theme-based curricular units were common features. Student work was often situated in an awareness of state or district standards but not driven by them. The work was more often driven by student interests and adapted to accomplishing the standards.

Tailored, collaborative, meaningful problem-solving work dominated the instructional day. Teachers focused on developing students' personal responsibility through choice and goal setting. Working together was valued and viewed as developing important learning skills. Much of the work was long-term in nature—assignments that lasted for a week or more—rather than a series of small and isolated tasks to complete each day. Integration across subjects, time, and topics was common. Often we found it difficult to decide, for instance, whether the work students were doing was better categorized as science or as language arts.

## The Nature of Evaluation

These teachers evaluated student work more on improvement, progress, and effort than on achievement of an a priori standard. This emphasis produced an instructional environment where all students worked hard—unlike many classrooms where effort and improvement are not heavily weighted in evaluation. The evaluations were personalized as these teachers attended to individual student devel-

opment and goals. The evaluations were often holistic—rubrics designed for teachers were adapted for student use—and focused on complex achievements—thinking like a biographer, for instance. We observed many examples of performance-assessment activity and routinely observed teachers providing explicit feedback on student work, though often leading students to think about the evaluation criteria rather than just grading the papers.

## VIGNETTES FROM ONE EXEMPLARY TEACHER'S CLASSROOM

Jim Solo teaches a combined fourth- and fifth-grade class in an urban magnet school in southern California. His class consists of 35 multiethnic students housed in a portable classroom set off to the side of the large asphalt play area behind the school. Though cramped and often noisy from the sound of the air-conditioning units, his classroom offers an inviting and print-rich environment for learning. In the vignettes below we attempt to provide a sense of how the five focal elements were displayed in his classroom. While each vignette involves multiple elements, we have labeled each one with the element that it highlights.

- *Nature of Classroom Talk.* Jim listens and responds to students as if he is having a conversation with friends rather than instructing students. For instance, before the school day begins Jim moves from student to student, asking them about their lives and interests. It is this sort of talk, something we observed throughout the day, that is the basis of his extensive knowledge of student interests and situations. “How is your brother Mark feeling about soccer this season? Are you playing soccer this year? I should show you

some of the books I have about soccer that you might like.” Later that same day, he participates in a sustained conversation with a group of students about the relative merits of being a Spanish missionary or a Native American living in an early California mission settlement. These students have completed a historical novel set in that era, and Jim is encouraging them to consider the situation from the perspective of the indigenous people rather than just from the perspective of the missionary narrator.

- *The Curriculum Materials.* Jim's lessons are typically integrated and involve a multilevel, multisource curriculum design. We watch as he pulls out a picture book with only a few sentences on each page to read as part of his introduction to various genres of informational books. “Look at the picture. What do we know about where this story took place because of the tumbleweeds? Fifth graders, do you remember from social studies last year what those bricks are called? Yes, adobe, and what do you think will happen in this story between the adobe bricks and the tumbleweeds? Why do you think so? Do you agree? Does anyone have any other ideas?” His presentation and questioning move at a brisk pace, but students are thinking, predicting, linking, and learning that hypotheses must be supported. And the use of this picture book signals that “easy” books are honored, thus destigmatizing their use. Throughout the year Jim reads from books typically considered “easy” books for fourth and fifth graders, sending the message that “good books”—appropriate books—are not simply defined by their difficulty. We believe that this message was one reason why his multilevel approach to reading materials across the school day was so successful.



- Nature of Instruction.* A typical lesson involves sustained study for a period of days or weeks and focuses on fostering inquiry and engagement with ideas. As Jim prepares to begin a unit on American Indians he pulls out a Native American drum, ceramic pots, and several other artifacts. He passes them around for students to hold while he asks what students might learn from the people who made them. He directs their attention by asking questions. "Why do you think they chose to use those colors? What might this be used for? Do you think this was for special occasions or everyday use? Why do you think so?" Again, activating prior knowledge, hypothesizing, and engaging in the topic to be studied are the accomplished goals of this activity. On some days such lessons lead to a writing activity where our students are told: "Describe the pot in detail. Write down your ideas on how this pot was used." Students thoroughly engage in thinking about the topic and then are called upon to read and discuss what they wrote as Jim and other students listen and respond.
- The Work Students Completed.* Jim organizes the instructional day such

that his students will engage in substantial amounts of reading and writing activity. His class begins each day with 30–40 minutes of reading in a self-selected book. Students curl up at or under desks, in corners, on pillows, or in groups of two or three to read. At the end of this time, Jim directs children to stop amid sighs and pleas of "Just five more minutes." He then makes time for a few students to briefly discuss what they have read, and he often shares his own enthusiasm for a good book. Several students remark that Jim is one of their best sources for ideas of what to read next. Situating this silent reading block at the beginning of the school day signals its importance and ensures that time to read won't be squeezed from the schedule by other activities.

- Nature of Evaluation.* Jim routinely provides demonstrations of the thinking literate people do when they read and write and often emphasizes self-regulation. During independent writing time, Jim moves from student to student to confer, but he also encourages students to help each other when they get

stuck. "We're all good at different things. See if you can get someone at your table who is good at that to help you. I'm not the only one with answers here." He expects each student to use a writing rubric he has developed to self-assess their compositions before they meet with him and to have met with a peer to review the rubric-based evaluation. As he notes, "My job isn't to edit their work for them but to teach them to edit their work themselves." He expects that they will identify misspellings, inaccurate punctuation, run-on sentences, and coherence problems, as well as more "writerly" concerns, such as "interesting-ness," of their compositions. To accomplish this he offers writing lessons in whole-class, small-group, and personalized side-by-side conferencing sessions and routinely uses children's books as demonstrations of particular writing techniques and strategies.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our analyses of student achievement data show that these exemplary teachers produce superior educational gains as measured on standardized achievement tests—not the most sensitive measures of complex achievement. However, our analyses also point to student achievements beyond the most sophisticated standardized test (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Johnston, 1999; Johnston, Woodside-Jiron & Day, 2001). For instance, this thoughtful literacy instruction produced students who demonstrated dramatic improvements in their literate conversations, evidence of internalizing the thinking that was routinely demonstrated.

In fact, it was the nature and complexity of the talk in these classrooms that left the deepest impressions with us. Perhaps, as

Applebee (1996) has argued, we should pay far more attention to how students talk during and after instruction. Unfortunately, while good fourth-grade teachers seem to understand the importance of rich and regular classroom conversation (Servis, 1999), neither the educational research community nor the educational policymakers seem to fully understand the critical role that classroom talk plays in learning. Too few researchers study classroom conversations, and we know of no system for instructional monitoring or accountability that focuses on the nature of the talk that occurs during instruction. Yet, in these classrooms much, if not most, of the learning was fostered by the routine engagement in powerful classroom conversations.

These exemplary teachers created classrooms that engaged their students in learning to read, write, and think about important topics, themes, and issues. We think that many more classrooms like these can be fostered. But curricular and instructional mandates seem an unlikely route for fostering the development of good fourth-grade teaching because we could not find common curricular frameworks or instructional materials that characterized the good teaching we observed. As was the case with the exemplary fifth-grade teachers surveyed by Pressley, Rankin, Wharton-McDonald, and Mistretta (1997), these exemplary fourth-grade teachers created instructional plans derived from their best analysis of students' needs and interests rather than from an externally imposed framework.

Elsewhere we have documented how these teachers describe their acquisition of such competence (Day, 2000) and note that school leadership toward thoughtful

teaching was an important factor. But developing thoughtful instruction is complicated and requires considerable organizational support (Johnston, Allington, Guice, & Brooks, 1998), with an emphasis on encouraging teacher risk-taking and fostering the expertise necessary to design instruction around students' needs. Nonetheless, now that we have a clearer vision of what good fourth-grade classrooms look like, it is time to support the development of such teaching expertise. The quality of children's classroom experiences should be more a matter of school policy and less a matter of luck.

#### Author's Note

*This paper is based on research carried out at the National Research Center for English Learning and Achievement and supported under the Research and Development Centers Program (award #R305A60005) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement. However, the contents of this paper do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, OERI, or the Institute on Student Achievement. This research would not have been possible without the advice and assistance of Gay Ivey, James Madison University, Ruth Wharton-McDonald, University of New Hampshire, Cathy Collins Block, Texas Christian University, Lesley Morrow, Rutgers University, and the research assistants who worked with us. Finally, this study would not exist had these teachers not agreed to let us observe them engaged in their professional work. We would like to express our gratitude to all of those who helped us in completing this effort.*

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