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Introduction

Early reading and literacy have become a focus of policymakers. Early reading should also be a concern of teachers in Grades 1–5 because children have a substantially greater risk of failure and dropout if they cannot read for understanding by the end of elementary school. Thus the renewed emphasis on early education represents a challenge and opportunity for elementary school teachers. *Improving Early Reading and Literacy in Grades 1–5* provides a resource guide for teachers. It is designed to help them assess their current approaches to reading and language arts education, compare their practices to major reform models, and collaborate in systematic change processes within schools that focus on improvement in early reading. Our primary assumption in writing this book has been that it is crucial for teachers to become more involved in planning for reforms in early reading because they are responsible for the instruction and other classroom practices that will foster improvement in literacy outcomes. The book provides a cohesive framework with an integrated set of reviews of reform models.

This introduction starts with a brief overview of the changes in educational policy that have led to the current focus on early reading and literacy in elementary schools. Then a process approach to early reading reform is introduced that teachers can use to (a) assess their own practices in early reading instruction, (b) review alternative approaches to early reading and literacy reform, and (c) collaborate in school decision processes aimed at improving reading outcomes. Individual teachers make daily decisions about early reading instruction that influence student outcomes, which means reading should be of concern to all teachers. Yet teachers in elementary schools need to coordinate their practices in ways that foster the development of children's reading and comprehension skills as they progress through elementary school. Thus improvement in early reading programs requires collaboration among teachers. Therefore we suggest that teachers collaborate in the process of developing reading reforms. This introduction concludes with an overview of the resources in this *Guide* that teachers can use in support of their planning processes.

■   **PUBLIC POLICY AND READING REFORM**

If teachers are to flourish in this context of intensive government interest in reading, they need an understanding of the intent of federal education policy. State and federal policymakers focus on education because most voters are concerned about education. However, when legislators and educational officials advocate different types of programs, they do so within a political context.

Local boards and district officials have substantial influence on educational practice. Historically, education in the United States was locally controlled. Even before the American Revolution, local communities taxed themselves to support schools (Burrup, Brimley, & Garfield, 1988), a pattern that continues in the twenty-first century. Whereas states have taken a more substantial role in funding and in setting parameters for curriculum, the local boards and district officials continue to exert influence on curriculum. School boards offer the initial opportunity for entry into electoral politics. Many school board members eventually become state legislators. Thus many of the most basic decisions about curriculum, including decisions about reading reform strategies, are made locally and are often politically constructed. Yet state and federal policies guide and constrain the available choices.

States also exert substantial influence on curriculum and teaching. In the late 1800s, many states began providing financial incentives to local school districts to extend their school days, increase the number of days in the school year, and promote a common curriculum in schools within the states. And while the federal government now provides substantial funding for special programs, states administer most federal funds and, as a result, exert substantial influence on the regulations that guide the implementation of federal programs. Thus states exert a large influence over the curriculum of schools, even though local districts retain control over many educational decisions.

For the past forty years, federal education policy in the United States has focused on education for students in situations that put them at risk of failure. While there was a fundamental shift in the underlying philosophy of education policy after 1980, from emphasizing equal opportunity to emphasizing excellence for all, federal education programs have continued to focus on the students at the greatest risk of failure. Both of these foundational beliefs—equalizing educational opportunity to learn and academic preparation for all—exert a substantial influence on government policy in reading.

Although government initiatives influence curriculum, teaching remains the responsibility of teachers. We examine major philosophies embedded in government policy below to provide more background for teachers.

Equal Educational Opportunity

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, the first federal legislation to create sustained national education programs, had a substantial focus on equalizing education opportunity. In the 1950s, the federal government had taken a more activist role in education as a consequence of

federal court decisions about desegregation. The ESEA funded special education programs and also introduced a new program under Title I that provided supplementary resources to schools serving large percentages of low-income students.

While the early Title I program was initially relatively flexible, it later emphasized pulling children with learning difficulties out of the classroom to provide them supplemental reading instruction (Wong, in press). There was experimentation with the involvement of parents and instructional aides through Title I and some instructional programs were developed (e.g., Ellson, Barber, Engle, & Kampwerth, 1965; Ellson, Harris, & Barber, 1968), but Title I did not promote a specific curriculum. Rather Title I originally provided additional resources for schools serving children from low-income families.

While the percentage of students graduating from high school steadily increased from 1960 through 1980 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2000), indicating increasing efficacy of programs that promoted equal educational opportunity (St. John, in press), the early federal programs were subjected to frequent criticism. Whether increasing high school graduation rates in the 1970s (NCES, 2000) was attributable to the resources provided by Title I and other federal programs remains subject to debate, but the fact that subsequent policy became more curriculum focused is beyond dispute. Further, the focus on providing educational opportunities for students from low-income families and in other situations that put them at risk of failing educationally remained central to educational policy. However, high school graduation rates have not improved since 1980 (NCES, 2000), indicating equal opportunity has not been the underlying concern of policymakers (St. John, in press).

Academic Preparation for All

The publication of *America at Risk* in 1983 focused public attention on the educational process. During the 1980s and 1990s state and federal education policy emphasized testing and standards. State and local policy increasingly focused on improving pass rates on standardized tests. Many states have implemented high-stakes graduation tests, a pattern that complicated efforts to educate students with special needs (Manset-Williamson & Washburn, in press) and low-income students (Jacob, 2001). The intensive focus on standards and testing corresponds with improved college enrollment by high school graduates since 1980 (NCES, 2000; St. John, in press), but dropout rates worsened.

There were also substantial changes in the programs that served students in at-risk situations during this period. In the 1980s, independent reformers began to experiment with school-wide reform models that engaged the entire school in the reform process (e.g., Hopfenberg, Levin, & Associates, 1993; Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1992). By the early 1990s, the Title I program began to encourage schools with high percentages of low-income students to try out these models as part of the school-wide reform option under Title I. In the early 1990s, the federal government funded a number of new reform initiatives in an attempt to create new models for schools. Then in 1997, the Obie Porter legislation provided funding for more schools to undertake these

comprehensive reforms. Many of the schools that adopted these reforms improved the percentage of students who continued on grade level as well as the percentage of children passing standardized reading tests (St. John et al., in press).

The Reading Excellence Act of 1998 provided funding for states to undertake reading reforms that were "research based." States funded through this federal program developed distinctive state programs to promote improvement in early reading and literacy program. However, some states developed programs that focused on early literacy even before the new federal legislation was passed. The National Research Council's report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), had focused attention on early reading as a national priority. These developments set the stage for the most recent wave of reform.

Focus on Early Reading

The 2001 reauthorization of *ESEA,* the *No Child Left Behind* Act, both expanded the emphasis on early reading and supported comprehensive reform in high-poverty schools. The increased focus on reading in educational policy can be viewed by teachers as an intrusion or an opportunity. Early research on these new initiatives indicates they have potential for improving learning opportunities for children in at-risk situations as well as for all children in schools that engage in these reforms (St. John, Manset, Chung, Simmons, & Musoba, 2001). Increasingly states and the federal government are creating opportunities for elementary schools to apply for grant funding for improvement in early reading and comprehensive reform. The new policy environment creates an opportunity for teachers who are willing to seize it.

■ READING AND LITERACY REFORMS THAT WORK

This *Guide* provides a resource for educators—teachers in Grades 1–5 and school administrators—who are interested in improving early reading programs. It can be used *instrumentally* (as an integrated set of program reviews for schools selecting a reform model), *strategically* (as a process-driven reform approach to aid in the development of distinctive local reform models), and/or *communicatively* (as a basis for building a better understanding of learning processes among teachers in schools).

Criteria for Successful Reading and Literacy Reforms

While there is a broad consensus that early reading is critical to the eventual success children have in school, a wide range of strategies have been proposed for early reading interventions. There are also numbers of competing theories about how students actually learn to read. Our reviews of the research literature have identified five criteria that appeared essential for successful interventions in reading and literacy (St. John, Bardzell, & Associates, 1999). These criteria, or understandings, can help guide the reform process in schools.

Criterion 1: Recognize the Complexity of Early Reading. Reading demands and makes use of a remarkably diverse set of skills, experiences, and aware-nesses. In addition to the well-documented importance of phonemic awareness and the ability to sound out unfamiliar words, children must have well-developed vocabularies, strong oral language comprehension, symbolic awareness, an ability to understand/translate between both local/family and standardized dialects, an awareness of different kinds of reading (i.e., genres, purposes, strategies), and an awareness of the social nature of reading.

There is a tension in the literature on early reading that is too often reduced to tension between phonemic awareness and direct instruction versus an emphasis on contexts, literature, language, and learning. In our view, both emphases are crucial. We use the term *reading* to apply to *readiness to read* (ready to understand the alphabetic principle), *decoding* as a phonemic process (*decod-ing*), and *comprehension*. We use the term *literacy* to refer to a broader construct that includes reading that emphasizes *emergent literacy* (an early understanding of language and texts), *composition* (integrating an emphasis on written lan-guage), and *critical literacy* (an ability to read to understand how texts relate to one's own context). While research that focuses on word recognition and read-ing comprehension consistently shows that the narrower definition is workable (Snow et al., 1998), programs that take the broader approach have success increasing the percentage of children who enter the educational mainstream without experiencing educational failure (Clay, 1991, 1993; Rowe, 1997).

Criterion 2: Use a Comprehensive, Balanced Approach. Given the complexity of reading and the variation in home experiences that children bring to the classroom, sustained attention to all aspects of reading is crucial to reach all students. Although the use of meaningful literature will enhance both motiva-tion and sensitivity to different genres and purposes of written communication, a focus on code will help children internalize the code to gain accurate and automatic access to these meanings.

A focus on phonemic awareness helps students acquire an ability to decode words, but a broader, comprehensive, and balanced approach is needed to help students build understanding of texts and discern meaning from reading. Reading occurs within a broader system of communication. Many young children relate to reading when it integrates with their lives. Young children from families with parents who read aloud to them are more likely to be ready to read when they enter school than are children without such experiences. Consequently, successful preschool interventions emphasize literature and reading to children (e.g., Connors-Tadros, 1996; Levenstein, Levenstein, Shiminski, & Stolzberg, 1998). By extension, school-based programs that also include an emphasis on literature as well as decoding—programs that take a comprehensive approach—are also likely to reach a higher percentage of children in elementary schools. There is little disagreement about the fact that comprehensive programs, such as Success for All, enable students to acquire word recognition and comprehension skills, a point that is supported by the narrower research on phonemic awareness (Snow et al., 1998). The more empha-sis teachers choose to place on literacy for all children—leading to reductions in grade-level retention and special education referral—the more important it is to

develop interventions that are comprehensive (i.e., that include more than just phonics) and use a balanced approach to integrating decoding and texts.

Criterion 3: Focus on the Underlying Development of Children. Although language, reading, and literacy acquisition are nonlinear, some skills and awarenesses precede others. For example, phonics training will be lost on children who lack symbolic and phonemic awareness. On the other hand, some aspects of reading must be encouraged all along, such as comprehension and the sense of pleasure and accomplishment that comes with reading. All reading programs must be flexible enough to accommodate the nonlinearity of language acquisition while being coherent enough to offer a workable path (or set of paths) for all children to follow.

Childhood development theory has moved from a rigid emphasis on stages to a developmental concept that recognizes the different pathways children follow as they develop awareness of language and learn to read (Vygotsky, 1978). This more flexible, nonlinear view of language acquisition had a substantial influence on Marie Clay (1991, 1993) and the emergence of systematic and comprehensive approaches to reading acquisition and instruction, such as Reading Recovery (e.g., Rowe, 1997). This broader construct of child development helps illuminate the roles of symbolic awareness along with phonemic awareness as elements of reading readiness, of the joy embedded in the process of learning to read. These broader concepts provide a logical basis for the success attributed to programs that use the broader literacy concept. They also illuminate the need to have multiple learning pathways open to children within a school's literacy program.

Criterion 4: Use a Coherent Intervention Strategy. Features of reading programs need to be organized in such a way as to support each other. Examples of coherence include a program that sends classroom books home with children to read with parents. In this way, parent involvement supports classroom activity. Other examples include the use of ongoing professional development to support a theoretically rich program or strategic use of pullout instruction within a typical classroom-wide program to reach children with reading difficulties. Certain features are implemented to support and extend effectiveness of other features.

Our reviews have found that there are many common program features[1] across different reading interventions. Relatively few features of reading and literacy programs are unique to a single program. However, the specific set of features included in each of the reading and literacy program programs we have reviewed is unique. That is, each reading and literacy program combines features in a unique way. In fact, all the reform programs reviewed in this book include an array of features that support and reinforce each other. However, each reform program must integrate into a school's context—the existing features of the school—which may or may not support and reinforce the intended reform process. Indeed, some reforms depend on the preexistence of processes in schools. For example, Four Blocks, one of the classroom-based reform

models reviewed in Chapter 5, does not include features related to professional development or parent involvement. Yet in Indiana where this model has been implemented with an emphasis on ongoing professional development, schools with the Four Blocks have shown a consistent pattern of improvement (St. John et al., in press). Thus it is important that educators consider the features of reform models, how well these features support and reinforce each other, and how well the features of the program fit with the processes currently in use in the school.

Criterion 5: Integrate Teacher Inquiry Into the Intervention Process. No matter how soundly an intervention is designed, its effectiveness will vary depending on the teachers and children actually participating in it. It is the school's responsibility to ensure that an implemented intervention is working for all children and to identify those aspects of the program that are not as successful as others.

Some reform models emphasize teacher inquiry; others do not. Yet given the diversity of schools, teachers, and children, there is a need to reflect of how well a program actually works. Teachers will likely need to adapt a model to fit the school. The example of Four Blocks in Indiana, described above, illustrates how adaptation can evolve. By emphasizing ongoing professional development as part of the reform process, the state evolved a workable and successful approach to Four Blocks. However, this capacity to reflect on what types of interventions are appropriate, on how well a chosen reform model is working, and on how to adapt the model to meet local needs is an essential ingredient of reading reform. As a means of encouraging this type of teacher inquiry, we suggest a process-oriented approach to reading and literacy reform.

A Research-Based Approach

This *Guide* was designed to support a research-based approach to the development of early reading and literacy programs in elementary schools. A systematic, theoretically grounded approach was used to review reform models and to develop a research approach that teachers can use to assess their own classroom practices, to compare their classroom practices and philosophies to possible models, and to engage in a reform process. There are three key elements of the research-based approach we recommend: (a) planning collaboratively in schools, (b) studying alternative reform models, and (c) integrating inquiry into reading and literacy reform.

Planning Collaboratively in Schools

The process approach has three phases: assessing current practices, setting a new direction, and designing an intervention strategy. The process can be used by individual teachers who are interested in improving reading instruction in their classrooms, as well as by teams of teachers in schools using collaborative approaches to reform in reading and literacy reform. The phases of the reform process (see Chapter 2) are as follows:

- **Phase I: Assess Current Practices.** A team of teachers will examine the reading-related outcomes of classrooms and the school as a whole, assessing classroom practices and identifying the challenges facing the school. Based on this initial assessment, teachers should have a good understanding of the types of reform that would be most appropriate for their school (e.g., targeted interventions, classroom-based interventions, or more comprehensive reform models).

- **Phase II: Set a New Direction.** The direction-setting process involves teachers in a process of building an understanding of the school's philosophy, as evidenced from teacher surveys; identifying the strengths and limitations of current practices; and identifying possible approaches. Teachers should be involved in this process to ensure their *buy-in* to the reform and to minimize teacher resistance to the reform process.

- **Phase III: Design Interventions.** With this base, it is possible to establish a direction, either selecting a reform that might help them address the challenges facing the school and individual teachers or designing an intervention locally.

Studying Alternative Reform Models

Early in the process of reviewing reading literacy reforms, we realized that there was not a common basis for comparing reforms. Much of the review literature focused on the debates about phonemic awareness and literature-rich approaches (e.g., Snow et al., 1998), but ignored many of the other features of reform models. Thus, it was necessary not only to identify criteria related to programs that work but also to develop a way to compare programs. We developed a framework that categorized the types of features that are included in various reform models (see Chapter 3) and used this framework to compare programs. We identified features related to systemwide processes, professional development, the embedded theory/philosophy, parent/community involvement, instruction, and organization/structure (including curriculum). When we examined the features of various reform models (i.e., the practice they advocate), we found that most features cut across reforms. This framework was then used to

- Provide an assessment instrument that teachers can use to compare their classrooms to the various models, inform their collaboration on the design of a reform model, and assess their progress on reform (see Chapter 2).
- Specify the program features associated with a large number of diverse reforms, providing a comprehensive approach to comparing reform approach (see Chapter 3).
- Compare the features of various reform models, providing reviews teachers can use to make informed choices about reform strategies in their schools (Chapters 4–8).

Integrating Inquiry Into Reading and Literacy Reform

Teaching students to read and comprehend the texts involves more than following any scripted approach to instruction, even scripted approaches that

rely on phonemic awareness and use appropriate literature. Teachers should routinely assess how well their students are learning, adjust the materials and methods they use to meet the particular learning needs of students, and work on their own skills in assessment and teaching. Many of the reform models reviewed in this *Guide* include a formative assessment process that teachers can use to support early reading. However, even these systematic methods are not sufficient to ensure that every child will learn to read and that every teacher will reach her or his potential as a teacher. Chapter 9 concludes this *Guide* by providing guidance on using inquiry in the reform process. It focuses on using the inquiry cycle to improve classroom practices and using team approaches to build collaborative processes in schools that are using inquiry to support reform. Thus teachers can use classroom research and other collaborative inquiry processes to engage in reforms that improve the learning environments for all the children in their classrooms.

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS   ■

This *Guide* provides a framework, reviews, tools, and methods that teachers can use to study their own practices as teachers as well as to engage in collaborative planning with other teachers in their schools, focusing on improving the learning environment for all the children in their schools. While we recognize that school districts and state agencies exert a substantial influence on reform strategies, it is ultimately the responsibility of teachers to work with students. Thus, this *Guide* is written for teachers, to provide them with the resources they need to improve their teaching.

When reform models are chosen by central offices, teachers must decide whether to resist the reform and teach in ways they think are appropriate or to adjust their classroom practices in ways that are consonant with the intent of the reform model. This *Guide* can help teachers to make these choices in an informed way, as well as help central administrators involve teachers in the report process. Not only does it provide teachers with the tools they can use to study and adapt their practices in virtually any type of reform environment, but it also provides guidance. Each chapter concludes with guidance for teachers, recognizing that the choices about reform models may be made in central offices. Therefore, we consider how our research can inform teachers in different types of reform environments. Ideally, a communicative environment can be created in schools that illuminates the complexities of central control of curriculum decisions in contexts in which teachers bear responsibility for improving learning outcomes. We hope this *Guide* can be used to facilitate the emergence of such shared understandings in schools.

Individual schools should have the freedom to choose the reform models and methods they use. Increasingly federal policy is moving in the direction of encouraging schools to choose either research-based models that have proven records or designs based on recent research. By encouraging a *buy-in* period before the reform begins, comprehensive school reform (CSR) and other federal reforms encourage collaborative planning. This text provides reviews of the designs used in various reading and literacy models. We have worked with

state agencies (in Indiana, Minnesota, and Michigan) to identify reform models for review and to conduct reviews that help us link the designs of the reading components of the reforms back to the research. Teachers can use the reviews in this *Guide* to assess whether the design concepts used in various reforms would help them address the challenges they face. Further, a framework and process approach should enable teams of teachers to assess their practices, make informed choices about reform models, and evaluate their progress with the model compared to the design (and in some cases to research on schools that have used the model). Thus, this *Guide* provides a *resource* that teachers can use to make informed of strategic choices about reform strategies for the reading programs in their schools.

While most types of reform models for reading and literacy are reviewed here, the specific reforms examined are limited. The reforms presented in the *Guide* evolved through collaborations with state agencies. In Indiana, we developed two reform guides that reviewed the reading programs that were of interest to the Indiana Department of Education. In Minnesota, we worked with the state education agency and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory to identify a set of reforms for review. Then, as part of our evaluation studies of CSR in Michigan we conducted further examination of reforms being used by Michigan schools so that we had common rubrics for research and evaluation. However, while this *Guide* reports on many of the reading and literacy reforms being used by these states, the set of reforms reviewed is far from exhaustive. Therefore, we are careful in the text to discuss contexts in which different types of reform strategies should be used as well as to suggest methods teachers can use to expand the range of models they consider. We treat these reviews as illustrative examples of reform models within generic approaches to reading and literacy reform.

Most of the reviews (in Chapters 4, 5, 7, and 8) examine program features of the interventions models, but discuss the research as part of the concluding section, Guidance for Educators. In the review of teacher-inquiry models (Chapter 6), the reviewers discuss the strengths and limitations of the models proposed. This additional step was used because of the emphasis these models placed on teacher research.

Ideally schools should be conceived of as learning communities of professionals who work together to create learning environments that enable students to read, comprehend, and solve problems of all types; equally important, they should support the personal and professional development of teachers. Learning communities of teachers can learn from various reform models. However, they can also learn from classroom-based reading reforms. By presenting our research results from the studies we have conducted for the states we have worked with, we add to the research base that schools can use to evolve coherent reform strategies. In particular, we summarize the results factor analyses that illustrate how different patterns of practice influence student outcomes. In fact, the *Guide* has been structured to help teachers build an understanding of the ways their practices relate to those in schools that have tried various reform models.

Thus this *Guide* is intended as a *resource* for teachers, administrators, and parents who are interested in collaborating within their school communities

on strategies for improving reading and literacy instruction. It integrates a systematic review of reform models, a process-approach to change for elementary schools, and the findings from research on various reform models. The combination of information provides an integrated set of resources that teachers can use to refine the approaches they use in their early reading and literacy programs.

NOTE

1. Throughout this book we use the term *program features* to refer to the component parts of reading programs. The framework used to identify program features, along with the list of definitions of features, is presented in Chapter 2.