Best Practices in Classroom Literacy

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Introduction

**Purpose.** In an effort to note the different ways that Walker’s (2012) Best Practices of Literacy Instruction are enacted authentically in the classroom, I chose to observe some teachers in literacy environments, looking for ways that they exemplified each of the ten domains – the ten effective literacy practices – grouping strategies, and teacher dispositions. My purpose was to see how classroom teachers are engaged in the ten domains within their classrooms, even if they were unaware that this was what they were revealing through their teaching practices, attitudes toward teaching, and beliefs about children. I also desired to observe the theoretical perspectives and how they fostered the teachers’ choices in grouping and the teachers’ dispositions. If I was unable to find an example of a teacher meeting a specific domain, I would have noted this and speculated as to why this was the case, though this did not happen throughout the course of my particular observations. In some areas, I also noted ways in which I think the teacher could have moved further into one of the ten domains and taught more effectively in this respect, expanding my purpose to not only include what practices were evident in the teachers’ classrooms, but what practices were weaker and which were stronger, noting what I thought a teacher could have done in that particular situation to have delved deeper into one of the ten domains.

**Setting.** Over the course of the semester, I spent well over 30 hours observing teachers as they were engaged in daily lessons and activities at the a primary school in Western New York. The school building includes students in kindergarten through second grade, with four kindergarten and first grade teachers and three second grade teachers. My observations ranged from a few hours to almost an entire day in the teacher’s classroom, even visiting some teachers multiple times, depending upon the teacher and what she felt was an appropriate amount of time for an observation. For each observation, I attempted to observe the teacher when she was teaching reading and, though this was not always the case, it became obvious that even when
reading and literacy were not the focus of the lessons, this was integrated into every other subject and all that the teachers did within the classroom.

**Participants.** Throughout this study, I observed six different teachers. Mrs. B. (pseudonym), a kindergarten teacher, comprised of the majority of my observations as she is my cooperating teacher and classroom teacher connection for my internship hours. Mrs. B. has had thirteen years of teaching experience. I also observed Mrs. L (pseudonym), a reading specialist in the building. Mrs. L. works with students in all of the grades in the building as a pull-out teacher. Mrs. W. (pseudonym) is a second grade teacher in the building, having taught at this primary school for over twenty years. Mrs. C. (pseudonym) is currently a kindergarten teacher, though has moved between kindergarten and first grade over the course of the past few years, and Mrs. M. (pseudonym) is a pull-out resource room reading teacher for all grades, but focuses the entirety of her afternoons specifically on a two-student special education class for two second grade girls, both identified with intellectual disabilities. Finally, I also observed Mrs. P. (pseudonym), who is a first grade general education teacher in the building. I observed teachers across all three of the grade levels that are present in the building, hoping to get a broad idea of the literacy practices used by different teachers and across grade levels as well.

**Data collection methods.** When I was in the classroom, I observed in different classrooms for different lengths of time, depending upon the teacher and what she desired for me to do when observing her classroom. Some teachers were more willing to allow me to stay for the entire day, while other teachers preferred that I came to observe for a few classes and then went elsewhere. At all observations, however, I entered the classroom with a notebook and pen so that I could capture what I was noticing from both the teacher and the students and even capture dialogue when I thought it would be necessary for understanding the particular moves that a teacher was making in the classroom to demonstrate effective literacy practices.
Effective Literacy Practices

Engage All Learners

When a teacher engages all learners in the classroom, that teacher is employing the Engagement Theory in his or her classroom. This theory posits that “engaged readers are those who are intrinsically motivated to read and who therefore read frequently” and “are frequently social, often talking with others about what they are reading and learning” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 65). Under the Engagement Theory is Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction. This instruction has five different components, including the “emphasis on student choice for both reading texts and responses” (p. 65).

Walker (2011) additionally posits that “effective teachers know that, when given a choice, students will choose what they are interested in and will choose from subjects of which they have some knowledge” (p. 29). Mrs. B., a kindergarten teacher, uses this effective literacy practice daily, including both aforementioned components, as students engage in a form of literacy instruction called “The Daily 5.” This particular literary practice has been developed by Boushey and Moser (2006) and is “a student-driven management structure designed to fully engage students in reading and writing” (p. 12).

During “The Daily 5,” students have the opportunity to read from their own personal “book boxes” during a time known as “Read to Self.” While Mrs. B. could have chosen to select the books that the students read during this time, she understands the power that choice can have in fostering student motivation and interest. With this in mind, she chooses to allow the students to select these books by themselves, encouraging them to choose books in which they are interested. Every Monday morning, prior to the time when students will engage in “The Daily 5” and guided reading groups, each student takes his or her book box up to the classroom library
and selects five new books to put in his or her book box for the week. The power of choice in the selection of these books is evidenced during “Read to Self” time when the students are engaged in the reading of their books (through reading the pictures, reading the words, and retelling the story) because the students love their books and read for the full amount of time.

As the beginning of the year progressed and Mrs. B. began to get to know her students, she noticed that two specific boys in her class were very interested in dinosaurs. Mrs. B. did not initially have many books about dinosaurs in her classroom library, but there were two books that she read for a read-aloud where the main character was a dinosaur. For the next week, Mrs. B. lent these books to the two boys who were very interested in dinosaurs and these two little boys were thrilled because this is a topic that they would choose to read on their own. Watching their interest and absorption in the books during “Read to Self” time was incredible. One of the boys, in particular, looked at that one book with dinosaurs as main characters for the entire “Read to Self” time that day. The next week when I came to Mrs. B.’s classroom, I noticed that she now had an entire section for books about dinosaurs. That morning, when the two aforementioned boys came to exchange their books, they went right for this section, so excited about reading and learning. The power that choice can have upon the motivation of the students in the classroom was never clearer to me.

In addition, Walker also suggests that an effective teacher will have high expectations for all of the diverse students in his or her classroom. This expectation can be seen in Cambourne’s Conditions for Learning, as expectation is one of the eight conditions that Cambourne suggests is necessary for effective teaching and learning (Flint, 2008). Mrs. B. demonstrates this on a regular basis in her classroom. There are students of many diverse ability levels in her classroom, but she finds ways to accommodate each and every learner. While she does not expect the same work out of every student in the classroom, respecting their differences, she expects that every student
will work to the very best of his or her ability in the classroom every day. She pushes each student to read new levels of proficiency and independence in reading and learning.

For an example of this, when Mrs. B. calls her students up to guided reading groups, she often focuses on different strategies with each of the groups of students (or even individual students), but still expects them all to make progress. She does not let a group who is struggling to read and make sense of what they are reading give less than their best effort. Since some groups can read through the decodable books with ease, Mrs. B. can spend ample time on comprehension and other personal connections to the text. At the same time, however, some groups have great difficulty reading even the simplest of decodable books and the phonics lessons that must accompany the reading of their text often takes a much longer time. Even so, Mrs. B. does not merely focus upon decoding with these groups or have low expectations for their literary progress but also makes sure that these students work on comprehension and making personal and authentic connections to the text.

**Critical reflection.** The way in which Mrs. B. works with her students in the guided reading groups is really incredible and very encouraging, as she meets each student at his or her instructional level. The gains that the students receive from the lesson are very great and each student feels successful after leaving the guided reading group because they have been challenged at an appropriate level. I do not think that this practice should change at all because even though some of the lessons are more basic, the higher-level thinking is still connected to these lessons and the students become very engaged with the text, lesson, and with reading and learning.

With regard to the personal choice for books in the students’ book boxes, I think that this is a wonderful idea and certainly encourages the students to read and love reading. One observation I made regarding this practice, however, is that even though the students have had
minilessons on choosing books that are “good fit” and that they can read, I still have seen many
students, over the course of my observations in Mrs. B.’s classroom consistently choosing books
that are much too difficult for them to read because they desire to read books about subjects that
are just not found in the pre-decodable books that they would be able to read with success. While
Mrs. B. certainly needs to keep allowing her students choice in the books that they read and
should continue to allow her students to choose books that they are interested in, it might be a
good idea for her to suggest that one or two of the books that they choose each week needs to be
a pre-decodable book that they can actually read. If she did this, Mrs. B. might meet a bit of
resistance at first because students are used to choosing whatever books that they want to read,
but I think that the students would grow stronger as readers and might even expand their interests
to include subjects that they might not have ever chosen were they not required to look on a
certain shelf for either one or two of their books each week.

**Foster Meaningful Interpretations and Thoughtful Understandings**

Walker (2012) posits that “effective teacher engage all students in reading entire stories
and passages and relating the content to relevant personal and cultural experiences” (p. 29). This,
therefore, helps students to create meaningful interpretations and thoughtful understandings of
what they are reading. Similarly, Rosenblatt broadened Schema Theory to the
Transactional/Reader Response Theory. She notes that readers make sense of what they read as a
result of their background knowledge and will have efferent and aesthetic responses to the text.
She further suggests that, “using literature, we should target our instruction on promoting
children’ aesthetic responses to the text” by eliciting “connections between the text and their own
lives” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 55).

In Mrs. B.’s kindergarten classroom, students’ meaningful interpretations and thoughtful
understandings of the texts they read are fostered through such personal connections between the
texts that they are reading in the classroom and their own lives. Mrs. B. encourages students to engage during literacy activities by asking open-ended and higher-level thinking questions to help students engage in and connect with her read-alouds. Mrs. B. reads chapter books from the Junie B. Jones series that are well above the reading levels of the students in her classroom, realizing that the students are able to cognitively interact with these texts even if they cannot read these texts independently. This mirrors Ogle & Beers (2012) assertion that “students may have different reading abilities, but they can still engage in high-level discussions about topics they care about” (p. 156). As she reads these texts, Mrs. B. will stop periodically to have the students answer higher-level thinking questions. At the kindergarten level, students do not usually offer such answers that correspond to the higher-level thinking required of the questions Mrs. B. presents, so she will include follow-up questions after students have responded, pushing them to deepen their thinking and move to questions on the higher level of Bloom’s Taxonomy.

For example, one day during the reading of a chapter of a Junie B. Jones book, *Junie B. Jones and the Stupid Smelly Bus*, Mrs. B. paused at a critical point in the reading (when Junie B. was locked in school after all of the teachers and students had left for the night) to ask her students how they thought Junie B. Jones was feeling at that moment. One of the students offered that she thought Junie B. was feeling “bad.” Mrs. B. then asked this student to elaborate on this and the student clarified that Junie B. was probably feeling “sorta scared.” Mrs. B. validated this answer and then turned another question to the rest of the class, asking why Junie B. would be feeling sad at that particular moment. One of the students said that she would be feeling scared because she was all alone and it was probably dark and creepy in the closet in which she was hiding. Then, Mrs. B. asked the students if they thought that Junie B. had made a good choice in hiding in school instead of following the class out to her bus and why. After some of the students had the opportunity to explain why they thought this was not a good choice to make, Mrs. B.
encouraged a text-to-self connection, the sort of connection encouraged by Rosenblatt’s Theory (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Mrs. B. took the students further and asked the students if they had ever had a time, like Junie B. when they made a poor decision at first but then learned a lesson about this and about four or five students had the opportunity to share their personal experiences, connecting to Junie B. Jones. After this connection, Mrs. B. had the students predict what would happen in the next chapter. In this way, the students answered both literal and higher-level thinking questions about the text they were reading as a whole class, deepening their understanding of the reading process as a process of gleaning meaning from and connecting to the text.

Walker (2012) additionally notes that “one way to increase thoughtful literacy is by allowing students time to think about what they have read and written” (p. 30). The allowance of wait time can very clearly be seen in Mrs. W.’s classroom. Mrs. W. often will ask a question and, after some students have raised their hands to answer the question will state, “I’m just going to give all of my friends a little more time to think.” As she waits, more hands begin to raise and other students who may not have been prepared to volunteer even a few seconds before are then prepared to offer an answer. In this way, the same three or four students who can process information quickly are not the only students who engage in thoughtful discussion surrounding the literacy experiences present in the classroom, but this invitation is offered to all learners of all ability levels. When those students have the opportunity to think about their responses with adequate processing time, they are then able to contribute to the discussion, which is very empowering for those students, especially if they have not had many opportunities in previous classes to express their thoughts and opinions.

Critical reflection. The way in which Mrs. B. encourages the students to make personal connections to the text and encourages thoughtful discussion in the classroom is very
empowering for the students and, just like many other practices in which Mrs. B. engages daily, encourages her students to love books and to love reading. One slight alteration to this method that Mrs. B. used that might even make it a bit more effective, however, would be to have the students occasionally use think-pair-share when they are making these personal connections and predictions. As I was observing this lesson, Mrs. B. called on every student that had his or her hand raised throughout the lesson, calling on 12 of the 21 students in her class throughout this one chapter of the Junie B. Jones book, but this meant that nine voices of students who did not raise their hands were left out of this lesson. Some of these students may not have felt comfortable sharing in front of the whole group even though Mrs. B. does create an inviting atmosphere for all students and creates an environment when her students know that mistakes are a part of learning. Even though Mrs. B. does create this environment there still may be some students who are hesitant to speak in large groups for whatever reason. To accommodate for those students, Mrs. B. could use think-pair-share at a few of the pivotal points in the chapter so that all students have a chance to let at least one other person hear their ideas, personal connections, and predictions.

Cultivate Vibrant Discussions

Vygotsky’s Theory of Social Constructivism includes “the belief that children learn as a result of social interactions with others” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 108). He further suggests that “children learn the most about language and corresponding sign systems from the people around them with whom they interact” (p. 109). Relatedly, Walker (2011) also suggests that teachers who cultivate vibrant discussions use “discussion-embedded lessons” which “provide students with opportunities to verbalize their thinking” (p. 30). Teachers who cultivate vibrant discussions through social interactions, therefore, empower their students to question what they are learning and discover and glean new insights together.
The first grade students in Mrs. L’s pull-out classroom come to her because they have already been identified as “at-risk” for reading achievement. In her classroom, however, she still pushes these students to engage in vibrant discussions surrounding the texts that she presents in her classroom as read-alouds. These read-aloud experiences are not random, but still allow the students to richly discuss the texts. For one example, when Mrs. L. was reading the Clifford book, *Clifford Goes to Dog School*, she stopped at various points to ask students questions about how Clifford or the other characters were feeling or to predict what would happen as the book unfolded. At one point, Mrs. L. asked the students how they thought Emily Elizabeth felt when Clifford sat down on top of a man who happened to be walking down the sidewalk at the same time. After she posed this question, this interaction ensued (all names used are pseudonyms):

Heather: “I think she’s mad at him.”
Mrs. L.: “Why would you say that?”
Heather: “Because sitting on someone is, like, bad. He is hurt him probably.”
Casey: “Her face isn’t mad. Her not look mad.”
Mrs. L.: “Casey – great idea! Let’s look at the picture of Emily Elizabeth. What do you see in her face that might give you a clue to how she is feeling?”
Heather: “Like surprised.”
Mrs. L.: “Why do you say ‘surprised’?”
Leanne: “When I get surprised, like a party, my eyes get big and my hands go out like that…she’s got her hands like that.”
Heather: “So, not mad. Maybe she’s surprised ‘cause he sat on him.”

Mrs. L. then went on to praise the students for their use of the picture clues and helping each other to discover a very important detail about the pictures together. Through the social interaction that Mrs. L. encouraged, her kindergarten students became involved in a vibrant discussion and social learning. This sort of read-aloud experience occurs very frequently in Mrs. L.’s room. The aforementioned example of the classroom discussion was something that occurred in her classroom in September. As her classroom is progressing throughout the year, the students are more comfortable with such social interactions and discussions and, thus, the discussions have become even richer and more vibrant, but she always encourages the students
to come to realizations and conclusions on their own, with appropriate, but minimal, prompting. In this way, the students are in control of the conversation and are not only engaged in such vibrant discussions, but are engaged in vibrant discussions of a social nature with their peers.

**Critical reflection.** This conversation between the students in Mrs. L.’s classroom was incredible in that the students who usually struggle with reading and comprehension were making wonderful connections between the pictures and the text. The conversation did, however, stop at Heather’s final comment about the picture and her revised understanding of Emily Elizabeth’s view toward Clifford in this particular scene. I think the lesson could have been even more powerful if Mrs. L. had continued this conversation and discussed the other emotions Emily Elizabeth might have been feeling. While there was, certainly, surprise on her face, her face was also clouded with worry in this picture. This is another emotion that the students could very easily relate to and understand. It is possible that with a little prompting and maybe even some teacher guidance, that the students would have been able to come to this conclusion on their own and that the lesson could have been expanded and the students could have gained and understanding of how two or more emotions can interact and show up on one’s facial expressions and in their words at one time.

**Provide Access to High Quality and High Quantity of Reading Material**

Walker’s (2012) idea of teachers providing their students access to high quality and high quantity of reading material connects well with Schema Theory. Schema Theory proposes that “the more elaborated an individual’s schema for any topic…is, the more easily he or she will be able to learn new information in that topic area” and further suggests that “without existing schemas it is very hard to learn new information on a topic” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 51). The provision of high quality and high quantity of reading material relates to this theory in that the high quantity and high quantity of reading material both encourages students to build their
schema as they are introduced to a different genres and subjects and also builds upon students' current schema and background knowledge as they can select materials in which they are interested and about which they know a great deal.

In Mrs. B.’s kindergarten classroom, her students have access to well over one thousand books in the classroom library for their daily reading in the Daily 5 literacy block. As mentioned prior to this, the students have the opportunity each Monday to select different books to place in their book basket. While Mrs. B. allows her students to select books that relate to their interests, she also encourages them to broaden their horizons and select books that are about different topics so that they can expand their interests. One Monday, one of the students in Mrs. B.’s classroom who is very interested in football had selected five books about football for the week. As Mrs. B. noticed this, she took him back to the classroom library and helped him to find two different books that he might enjoy that were not about football, encouraging him to look at diverse reading materials and hopefully increase his background knowledge and schema through this.

In addition, Mrs. B. also has well over two thousand additional books in her own library for the classroom. This library is comprised of books that are at a level at which the students could understand and to which they could respond, but that most, if not all, would be unable to read on their own. Through her read-alouds, therefore, Mrs. B. introduces the students in her classroom to books about different subjects and books of different genres, discussing the differences between the many different types of texts that one can read and enjoy. Through this, Mrs. B. is expanding the ways in which the students in her classroom are exposed to high quality and high quantity of reading materials throughout the school day.

**Critical reflection.** The library that Mrs. B. has collected over the years for her classroom is a very valuable resource for her students. She has collected these books over the
course of her thirteen years as a teacher and continues to expand her collection each day. While there is not much that I would suggest Mrs. B. change regarding her classroom library, in the Allington (2012) book, the author suggests creating displays showcasing some of the books from the classroom library throughout the course of the year. He notes that teachers should “create classroom displays and change them frequently,” including both genre and topic displays (p. 95). While Mrs. B. does already create seasonal displays, she does not typically showcase certain books, genres, or authors. Even though she is teaching in a kindergarten classroom, I think that she still could make use of showcasing certain books to the students. This might even encourage some of the students who always gravitate toward a certain type of book because of their interests to branch out and get hooked on other books and expand their interests as they grow as independent readers.

**Make Use of Scaffolding**

Walker (2012) suggests that effective teachers “help students carry out tasks that they could not do on their own but could complete with support” (p. 33). Vygotsky’s Theory of Social Constructivism includes his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development. This concept refers to “the ideal level of task difficulty to facilitate learning which…is the level at which a child can be successful with appropriate support” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 109). In order for students to be successful at a higher level of task difficulty than their independent level, the teacher must scaffold the students to reach this point. Scaffolding refers to the appropriate “assistance that adults and more competent peers provide during learning episodes” (p. 109). When teachers can help students to move beyond their current independent level, they can then grow beyond this level to new levels of proficiency and independence.

Mrs. W.’s teaching very clearly reflects this theory of Social Constructivism and scaffolding to push students to new levels of independence. During one observation, Mrs. W., a
second grade teacher, was working with her students to complete a vocabulary packet where the
students were to fill in blanks on their sheets using words from the word box at the top of the
worksheet. As they began to work with this, it was clear that almost half of the class was
struggling greatly with this assignment, though it was something that they really needed to learn
and that Mrs. W. did not feel was too far above their current level of achievement. So, Mrs. W.
took a step back and helped the students to understand what the word box was and how to read a
sentence and then look for the appropriate vocabulary word at the top of the page in this word
box. She even walked the students through crossing out words that were used in a sentence so
that the students would not have to read every word again, but limited the number of words that
could be answers for the remaining blanks. Mrs. W. then led the students through the first
sentence, allowed them to complete the second and third sentences on their own, but then came
back to the sentences as a whole group to ensure that the students were all following along and
understanding the concept behind the completion of the worksheet. Finally, Mrs. W. allowed her
students to complete the worksheets on their own.

Through this, Mrs. W. scaffolded her students from complete dependence upon herself as
the teacher (as seen through the students’ work with the first question) to less dependence upon
herself, but still confirming the students’ answers (as seen through the students’ work with the
second and third questions) to complete independence (as seen through the completion of the
worksheet). Through this wonderful use of scaffolding, Mrs. W. led her students through the
completion of an activity that they were initially unable to complete on their own to wonderful
growth and independence.

**Critical reflection.** This lesson was scaffolded very well by Mrs. W. when she noticed
that her students were struggling to complete the assignment she had set before them. I think that
this was a great use of assessing while teaching and then moving to scaffolding so that all of the
students could find success with the task they were to complete. I wonder, however, if there could have been even more scaffolding prior to this point to help make this assignment even more understandable than it already was for the students.

While this activity was something Mrs. W. thought her students should be able to accomplish without too much difficulty, I wonder if Mrs. W. could have presented her students with other worksheets similar to this one, but with easier content, so that the students could first understand the way that the worksheet and assignment was set up so that they would not have to navigate a new type of worksheet with new content as well. In the moment, her lesson was beautiful; exemplifying many moves that a teacher should make when he or she sees that understanding is breaking down within a lesson. For future lessons, however, it might be more helpful for the students to practice with different assignments and the layout of these different assignments prior to working on the assignments with difficult and/or new content and concepts. This sort of pre-planned scaffolding could be very beneficial for the growth of the students in Mrs. W.’s classroom.

**Nurture Motivation**

Walker (2012) suggests that “to encourage competence and confidence, all teachers create a series of consistently successful reading activities for all their students” (p. 33). In a kindergarten classroom at the beginning of the school year, when students are unable to read and write on their own, the successful reading activities in which teachers can engage their students would be primarily read-aloud experiences. Relatedly, Holdaway’s Theory of Literacy Development posits that literacy growth is “a natural process that begins in a young child’s home” and further suggests that “the purpose of using big books is to create a feeling in every child that he or she is sitting on his or her parent’s lap for a story” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 91). When a teacher shows enthusiasm for reading and for books, engaging all students in
reading, even if the student is unable to identify any sight words or even recognize all of the letters in the alphabet, this motivation to read begins to develop in his or her students as well.

In Mrs. C.’s kindergarten classroom, she spends a portion of each and every day engaging her students in a read-aloud experience. When she reads, she reads with animation and often creates different voices for the characters in the books or reads in a sing-song voice. During one of my observations, Mrs. C. read the book, The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything, by Linda D. Williams, to her class. This observation was less than a week before Halloween and reading this book, something in which the students were excited and very interested, fostered motivation for reading in and of itself. As the book builds, the little old lady is followed by more and more parts of a pumpkin ghost and Mrs. C. included physical movements to accompany the repetitive portions of the book. For example, when she read that the head went, “Nod, nod,” she and the students would nod their heads twice. When she read that the pants went “Wiggle, wiggle,” she and the students would squirm in their chairs or on the floor. The students loved reading this book and asked to re-read it after they had finished the text. The students, through the use of this big book, likely received the feeling that they were in a parent or guardian’s lap listening to the story. This created great motivation to read.

Walker (2012) also suggests that “increasing the amount of reading and writing students engage in each day is the first step toward helping them to develop higher motivation” (p. 34). While this is difficult to observe in a kindergarten class at the beginning of the school year, in Mrs. W.’s second grade classroom, this is evidenced through the practice that her students have with “The Daily 5” each day. Every day in class, the students work with Boushey and Moser’s (2006) framework for literacy growth and development and engage in a minimum of forty minutes of independent reading and independent writing during just this block of time each and every day. This also connects with Allington’s suggestion that students should spend ninety
minutes per day reading and that this “recommendation is for time spent actually reading” (p. 54). There are other opportunities for her students to read and write during the course of the school day, but even this small literacy block each day provides the students with a great amount of reading and writing each day. The students can read and write about that which interests them, increasing the students’ motivation for reading and writing and their facility with reading and writing strategies. During this reading time, Mrs. W. conferences with individual students, helping them to identify the strategies that they are using when they are reading and writing and providing them with strategies that they can develop as they are reading and writing to help them become better readers and writers. This attention to individual students’ strategy development helps teachers to “build student competence and confidence by supporting students in the process of active reading and using troubleshooting strategies” (Walker, 2012, p. 34).

**Critical reflection.** There is not much that Mrs. C. could do to more effectively help the students to develop and interest in and motivation for reading. Allowing the students to see the pictures and the words, hear the story read to them, and also engage in different movements throughout the reading of the story helped to reach all three learning styles – visual, auditory, and kinesthetic – and the engagement of her students in the lesson was clear throughout the reading. Ogle & Beers (2012) suggest that “teaching words directly and building strategies for word learning are parts of effective vocabulary instruction” (p. 331) and suggest that teachers should explicitly teach vocabulary through their lessons when reading. Adding a lesson component like this could certainly increase Mrs. C.’s students’ engagement in reading and also increase their engagement in learning new and interesting vocabulary words. This is not something that was necessarily missing from Mrs. C.’s lesson, but was something that could certainly be added to further bolster the effectiveness of the lesson.
With regard to Mrs. W.’s lesson, this sort of independent strategy usage by her students is critical for their development as independent, self-determined readers. I absolutely love her model of one-on-one conferencing with the students. This reflects the ideas set forth by Fountas and Pinnell (2001) where they discuss conferences as times of discussion that “move the student forward as a writer…ensur[ing] that students learn something they can apply to their writing in the future” (p. 79). This sort of empowering interaction with students is wonderfully implemented in Mrs. W.’s classroom.

**Promote Self-Regulated Learning**

Walker (2012) suggests that “effective teachers support students as they read so that they can become independent learners” and “take responsibility for their own learning” (p. 34). Students need to learn to decrease their reliance upon the teacher and begin to engage in learning on their own, creating their own goals and motivation for learning. This domain connects with Cambourne’s theory regarding the conditions for oral language development and learning. Cambourne notes that there are eight conditions that are present when children acquire language for the first time and that “these conditions provide a powerful framework for developing and maintaining language and learning” (Flint, 2008, p. 42). According to Cambourne, the eight conditions that teachers should have in place in their classrooms are feedback, responsibility, approximation, use, demonstration, immersion, expectation, and engagement. Promoting self-regulated learning connects with at least seven of those conditions including responsibility, approximation, use, immersion, expectation, engagement, and feedback, though one could even argue that demonstration, while it is not self-regulated learning in and of itself, can lead to self-regulated learning. When these conditions are in place, students experience wonderful gains in their thinking and learning and students are empowered to learn on their own through self-regulating their own learning.
In Mrs. P.’s first grade class, most lessons have the eight conditions embedded within the lesson itself. For one example, during an observation, Mrs. P. was working with students on the application of reading strategies to make sense of what they are reading. When the students were reading on their own, they were assigned to practice using these strategies and then when the students came to the teacher, they discussed their use of each strategy over the time that they were reading independently. They also discussed how their strategy helped them to become a better reader and make sense of what they were reading. During the reading conferences, Mrs. P. talked with the students about their successfulness with the strategy that they were supposed to be practicing on their own. This gave the students ownership of their learning and required them to regulate their own learning as the teacher was relying on them to report back to her their degree of successfulness with each reading strategy that they discussed in the individual conferences. This also required the students to be involved in self-assessment and helped empower them to become more independent and self-determined readers and learners. This is one of the purposes of reading and writing conferences as determined by Fountas & Pinnell (2001).

**Critical reflection.** The students in Mrs. P.’s class are very self-motivated and her teaching practices promote self-regulated learning very well. The students are presented with the strategies initially, have time to practice the strategies on their own, and then have accountability for reading with the strategy as they need to relate the strategy back to the teacher during their individual conferences. Mrs. P. noted that, as the year goes on, certain students need these individual conferences less frequently because they eventually can self-regulate their learning and reading progress without having the teacher keep them accountable as often, but that she determines the amount of time that lapses between conferences based upon her own understanding of her students. I love this model of pushing students to become responsible for
their own learning and reading development and hope to use a similar model in my classroom in the near future.

Create a Responsive Environment

Exemplary teachers “use a variety of group structures and encourage collaborative interactions” (Walker, 2012, p. 35). As previously noted in the section on cultivating vibrant discussions, Vygotsky’s Theory of Social Constructivism states that “children learn the most about language and corresponding sign systems from the people around them with whom they interact” (p. 109). This domain also connects with that particular theory as these interactions of which Vygotsky speaks are interactions between teachers and students and between students and students as well. As such, these interactions can come about as a result of the collaborative and flexible grouping that a teacher includes in his or her classroom. Vygotsky’s Theory of Social Constructivism is, therefore, a theory that connects to Walker’s idea of the creation of a responsive environment.

In Mrs. B.’s kindergarten classroom, the students are grouped in many different ways throughout the day. Some groupings are based on student ability level, while others are heterogeneous grouping practices, but all encourage collaborative thinking and learning. One day when I was observing this classroom, I took note of the ways in which Mrs. B. grouped her students for different activities throughout the day. First, when the students came up to work with the teacher during “The Daily 5,” they were separated into guided reading groups based on ability level. Some students knew all of the letters and were already beginning to read very simple sight words while other students could identify only about five or six letters. Because of this large gap, Mrs. B. put her students into groups based on their abilities and then presented her instruction from where the students were. Each of the three leveled groups received a different guided reading book and lesson within the guided reading time. When the students were engaged
in “Read to Someone,” also a component of “The Daily 5,” Mrs. B. had the students paired in such a way that a more advanced reader was put with a less advanced reader. They both read different books to each other and were able to interact, talk, and help each other throughout the reading process.

Later in the day, Mrs. B. had the students work on a collaborative letter matching game/puzzle in groups of four. Mrs. B. chose the groups for the students, as a teacher often will at the kindergarten level, but the students were grouped heterogeneously. In each group, Mrs. B. placed one high reader, one struggling reader, and two students whose reading abilities were in between the other two students in the group. In this way, the students worked together with students of different letter recognition abilities and collaboratively completed the matching game/puzzle in this way. Finally, the last grouping structure that I observed that day was when Mrs. B. put the students into partner groups for their math game nearer to the end of the day. The students were, again, placed with partners, though these partners were different because there are some students who excel in reading but struggle in math and vice versa. The two students worked together, again, to learn and complete the math game.

Walker (2012) additionally notes, within this domain of creating responsive environments, that exemplary teachers’ assessments are individualized in that they are effective for reaching all learners and empowering all students to participate in the literacy activities of the classroom. This would certainly fit with the Piaget’s Theory of Constructivism as this theory stresses the “importance of the child as an active organism as he or she progressed in cognitive development” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 77). Because a child is viewed as an active organism in this theory, the implicit connection would be that the teaching must also be particular to the individual child as well as no two students are exactly the same. This sort of understanding of each child in the classroom is consistent with the principle of individualizing assessment and also
assessing while teaching. Each student is different and brings different resources to the classroom. It is the job of the teacher, therefore, to design assessments and instruction that match up to each student’s particular learning needs.

In Mrs. B.’s classroom, to go along with the previous example, she puts her students into these different collaborative grouping structures based upon the assessment of her students. The aforementioned math game for which she grouped her students into different pairs was actually a grouping that was determined based upon the assessment of her students. At the beginning of the unit where Mrs. B. was teaching the numbers six through nine, she pre-assessed her students to determine where they were in their identification of the number words, numerals, and pictorial representations of the numbers six through nine and built her lessons and grouping structures off of this assessment. Mrs. B. similarly assesses her students for literacy and science lessons and builds her grouping structures for those two subjects off of those assessments in a way similar to what she had done with her math game.

**Critical reflection.** Mrs. B. is very effective in her grouping of the students and these different grouping structures and collaborative learning create great learning environments for the students. The gains that these students have as they learn with and from their peers are clear and great. Initially, too, students at the kindergarten level likely should be grouped for guided reading groups according to ability level. As her students progress throughout the year, though, Mrs. B. said that she continues to keep them in the same sort of ability groups, though the students may switch in and out of groups depending upon their progress throughout the year. I wonder, however, if there would be any way Mrs. B. could use heterogeneous grouping in these guided reading groups, teaching a strategy that students could employ over several different leveled books. Although this is often very difficult with younger and less experienced readers, this could be something that would empower her students in their reading progress.
Assess While Teaching

Walker (2012) notes that teachers should “share students assessment data as part of making instructional decisions” (p. 36). For effective teachers, assessment should inform instruction. Thorndike’s Law of Effect, of the Principle of Reinforcement is a theory that can be seen reflected in the domain of assessing while teaching. This theory posits that “if an act is followed by a satisfying change in the environment, the likelihood that the act will be repeated in similar situations increases” and, conversely, “if a behavior is followed by an unsatisfying change in the environment, the chances that the behavior will be repeated decreases” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 35). This theory is consistent with the idea that teachers need to assess their students while they are teaching because if a teacher is not actively assessing his or her students, he or she will not know whether or not to affirm or gently correct the behaviors, answers, and or understanding produced by his or her students. According to this theory, then, if students were to produce the correct behavior, answer, and/or understanding and not have this affirmed by the teacher – creating a satisfying change in the environment – this correct behavior, answer, and/or understanding may not be strengthened. This theory is showing, therefore, that teachers cannot always wait until the end of their lesson to complete the assessment portion of the lesson, but must also be assessing their students actively as the lesson progresses and the students are learning and interacting with the content presented.

In Mrs. P.’s first grade classroom, her teaching and assessment practices exemplify those of a teacher who regularly assesses her students while teaching. One day, when I was observing her classroom, I came in during a lesson on nouns and adjectives. Mrs. P. was introducing these concepts to the students for what seemed like the very first time for many and throughout the lesson, she was giving the students examples of these types of words as well as encouraging the students to produce additional examples on their own – both verbally and through a short, written
piece that the students were completing for an assessment of this activity. Although this assessment was to be turned in at the end of the lesson, this was not, however, the only assessment that took place throughout even that one lesson. Mrs. P. began by asking the students to identify nouns and adjectives that she produced and then had the students verbally produce some of their own. As students responded to these verbal prompts, Mrs. P. kept a little index card on the books that she carried in her arms and on this she wrote down the names of students who might need additional help with either or both of these two concepts in three small columns on the index card. She used the back of the index card on which to write the names of the students who seemed to be grasping the concept of nouns and adjectives very well. This was not something that the students could see, but was something that Mrs. P. used for her benefit only.

When the students began to work on their writing piece incorporating the active use of nouns and adjectives, Mrs. P. continued to circulate the room, encouraging those students who were correctly understanding the concepts presented and gently correcting those students who were still struggling to use nouns and adjectives appropriately in their own writing. As she circulated the room, she continued to add names and make adjustments to the index card she was keeping on her person. As this short lesson came to a close, Mrs. P. had the class move their desks into four small groups, based upon her information that she had been recording on the index card to either challenge the students who were not receiving a challenge from this lesson or help the students who were struggling gain a better understanding of the concepts with which they seemed to be struggling. This was a wonderful example of assessment during teaching and the ways in which that helped the students to be challenged and the benefits that the students received from this sort of lesson were truly incredible.

**Critical reflection.** The way in which Mrs. P. assessed her students while she was teaching was incredibly effective and wonderfully successful. The way in which she observed all
that her students were learning as they were grappling with the content she was presenting ensured that all of her learners were receiving instruction necessary for each individual in the class. A particular strength of the method was that Mrs. P. did not just seek out students who needed remediation and a re-teaching of the material, as I have observed many times in other classroom, but also looked for students who were not being challenged appropriately. CAST (2012) noted that “as educators, our goal is not simply to make information accessible to students, but to make learning accessible. This requires resistance and challenge” (p. 2). Relatedly, she did not seek out only the struggling students, but looked for all students for whom the lesson was not at an appropriate level, successfully reaching all of the learners in her classroom. Mrs. P. clearly demonstrated that she does not “teach to the middle,” but teaches to each and every student’s instructional level. This is not only effective with regard to her instruction, but empowering for every learner as he or she is able to find success in the lesson.

**Integrate and Balance Instruction**

“Effective teachers balance explicit instruction with authentic literacy activities” (Walker, 2012, p. 37). Integrating and balancing instruction additionally connects very well to Luke and Freebody’s Four-Resource Model. In this model, the theorists posit that “in order to read proficiently and effectively, readers need to develop their repertoire of practices for interacting with texts” (Flint, 2008, p. 105). Students then engage in four practices – code breaking, reading as text participant, reading as text user, and critical practices. This integrates instruction in that, as a code breaker, the student looks at the text in relation to the patterns of words and conventions of the language, looking at “alphabetic awareness, phonemic awareness, spelling, word building, [and] conventions of text/sentence structure” (Flint, 2008, p. 105). The reader then reads as a text participant, connecting their schema to the text and looking at the way text is structured in order to help the reader gain meaning from the text. The reader moves then to
reading as a text user with the ability to use different texts for different purposes. Finally, the reader engages in critical practices looking beyond what is explicitly stated in the text to the underlying principles and views that may or may not be stated in the text – looking for the voices, positions, and interests that are included and those that are left out (Flint, 2008). In this way, the teacher realizes that reading is more than just decoding, connecting to the text, using a variety of texts for different purposes, and looking critically at texts, but is a combination of the four. When teachers can balance their instruction in this way and can also integrate other subjects into their students’ reading experiences, their instruction becomes much more powerful and useful for the students.

In Mrs. M.’s pull-out classroom, when she works with the second grade students in her classes, they often focus a great deal on the code breaking practices, as mentioned above. They focus on the sounds that letters make individually and together, how letters form words, words form sentences, and sentences form stories. Her basal series requires her to teach in this way as she follows a scripted curriculum. She could stop here and just focus on this component of reading with the students, but she does not because she realizes that reading is more than just code breaking and if she were to stop there, her students would be missing out on one of the valuable understandings about reading. She, therefore, pushes her students beyond the code breaking practices and balances her instruction ton include reading as a text participant and reading as a text user.

For an example of this sort of teaching and balancing of instruction, during one lesson with the two second grade girls in her afternoon special education class, Mrs. M. was required to work with her students on the short vowel sounds. They began the lesson with the scripted curriculum, identifying the letters and the letter sounds, repeating words with short vowel sounds and then identifying these vowel sounds following the repeated production of the sounds. The
basal series ended the lesson there. The students were to then engage in a workbook page where they were to, again, identify and produce the letters that made certain short vowel sounds. Mrs. M. did lead her students through the workbook page as was mandated by the curriculum, but she then took them to authentic texts to practice what they were learning. Because these students are very behind in their reading progress, she used a very simple decodable book that she printed off of the computer entitled *Cats*, but through this text, the students were able to read a connected text while learning about short vowel sounds.

Mrs. M. encouraged the students to look at the cover and then look through the text with a picture walk and discuss what they noticed in the pictures, predicting what book might be about. She encouraged both of the girls to discuss their experiences with cats and pets, allowing them to enter into the role of text participant and draw on their background knowledge. Then, Mrs. M. helped the students to determine what kind of text they had read. She asked the girls if it was informational, telling them information about cats, or narrative and telling them a story just for fun. This story was actually an informational text about cats, and during and after the reading Mrs. M. discussed the content presented in the text, helping the students to learn content-area vocabulary, such as the word “mammal.” In this way, Mrs. M. was not only balancing, but integrating her instruction, bringing science concepts into the reading classroom.

Throughout this entire lesson and lessons that are similar to this, Mrs. M. is beginning to help the students that different texts serve different purposes and, eventually, this will aid them in their own selecting of texts appropriate for their tasks and goals. Through helping her students to not only use code breaking practices when reading, but also read as a text participant and text user and incorporating science into the reading experience, Mrs. M. was both integrating and balancing instruction.
**Critical reflection.** While it was clear that Mrs. M. took her students through three of the four aspects of Luke and Freebody’s model, Mrs. M. did leave out the fourth aspect, that of including critical practices in reading. I did not, actually, witness this in any of Mrs. M’s lessons throughout my observation time in her classroom. I am not sure as to why this might be the case, but I do think that some teachers believe that students are not ready for higher-level thinking like critical practices would entail or that they should, at least, master the basics of reading prior to attempting to think in such an abstract way. I am unsure that if this is the case with Mrs. M. and her classroom instruction. For students with more severe special education needs, this might be the case. I do, however, think that students are able to make these sort of critical connections. In my first grade student teaching placement, my cooperating teacher discussed privilege and the voices that are present and absent in texts with her students in many lessons and they were able to not only understand, but apply, this to their own independent reading as well. Therefore, while I do think that Mrs. M.’s lessons are incredible examples of a teacher integrating and balancing instruction, I think that her lessons could be strengthened even more if she took her students even one step farther and helped them to engage in critical practices when reading.

**Grouping Practices**

**Whole-Class Instruction**

According to Graves, Juel, and Graves (2007), “whole-class instruction is useful when you wish to reach all students at once” (p. 81). Behaviorist theories can connect well with the idea of whole class instruction, especially the idea of Direct Instruction. When teaching through the lens of Direct Instruction, teachers “explicitly focus children’s attention on specific reading concepts such as phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension skills, and…emphasize discrete skills and subskills perceived as necessary for students’ reading success” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 40). Because this theory and idea of Direct Instruction focuses on the necessity of learning basic
skills prior to learning more advanced skills, this theory lends itself well to whole-class instruction. Since these subskills are necessary for all students, it would be appropriate, then, to often teach skills like this in a whole class setting.

During my observations, I observed many effective lessons where the teachers employed the use of whole class instruction. One example of this was in Mrs. C.’s kindergarten classroom. While there were times when she would present instruction in small groups, for her entire group of sixteen students, she often used a whole group structure, at least for an initial introduction of the lesson, strategy, or concept. One day, she began with a whole group lesson on sequencing a story. They re-read the story (introduced in a lesson recorded in a previous domain) *The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything* and then sequenced that story as a whole group using picture cards to designate different parts of the story and teacher modeling and guidance as they built the pumpkin ghost just like the author did in the story.

**Critical reflection.** As noted by Graves, Juel, and Graves (2007), “when teaching the entire class as a single group, teachers tend to teach to an imaginary mean; that is, they gear their instruction to what they perceive to be the middle range of interest, attention span, personality, ability, and so on” (p. 80). This sort of instruction is often ineffective for those students who do not fit exactly into the mean range, leaving many students without the challenge or supports necessary for learning. This did not often happen in Mrs. L.’s class because she would move from whole-class instruction to small group work for clarification of the lesson, strategy, or concept that they were learning. There were, however, a few times (not including the aforementioned lesson) where the entire lesson was taught in the whole group and never clarified in smaller groups. A drawback of using only whole-class instruction seems to be that this instruction does not always meet the needs of every learner in the class while small groups allow for differentiation that whole-class instruction often does not. I think that it is more beneficial for
teachers to always move from whole-class to small group instruction than assuming that all students have understood the lesson presented to the whole group.

**Small Group Instruction**

Small group instruction reflects many constructivist theories in that social learning and collaboration are essential to this type of instruction. This sort of instruction can specifically relate to Schema Theory in that students in small groups are often grouped according to their prior knowledge and interests, connecting the students learning to their schema, or background knowledge. The premise of this theory is that “everyone’s schemas are individualized” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 51). In this respect, the smaller grouping structures allow for the greater individualization of the students’ learning styles, preferences, and ability levels. These structures also allow for teachers to note and clarify any misconceptions that students may have about their learning. In addition, Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, and Elbaum (2001) suggest that “students in small groups in the classrooms learned significantly more than students who were not instructed in small groups” according to their meta-analysis of small group instruction in the classroom.

To continue with the previous example with whole-class grouping, after Mrs. C. presented the lesson on sequencing the events of a story with the whole class, she then read another book (a pre-decodable book entitled *The Pumpkin Seed* from an online database) had the students split into small groups to complete a similar activity on their own. As the students were working together, Mrs. L. and the aides in her classroom circulated around the room, assisting where necessary and assessing the students as they worked. While the students were working in smaller groups, Mrs. L. was able to work with individual students and help them to clarify misunderstandings and go over concepts that individual students did not understand with regard to sequencing the story.
Homogeneous grouping. When in small groups, there were many instances where I witnessed homogeneous grouping. As previously mentioned, when Mrs. B. leveled her kindergarten reading groups according to reading ability, this was demonstrative of homogeneous grouping. Her students were in a group with other learners similar to themselves with regard to learning and their reading achievement. In this way, lessons could be presented to a smaller group that would meet all of the students in the group instead of teaching to the middle of students and leaving other students’ of differing ability levels out of the learning experience.

Heterogeneous grouping. Although there were instances in Mrs. B.’s classroom where she used homogeneous grouping, she often used heterogeneous grouping as well. When her students engaged in “Read to Someone,” another component of Bushey & Moser’s (2006) “The Daily 5,” students were intentionally grouped heterogeneously according to ability level, also reflecting Deliberately Heterogeneous Groups so that the students could read different books to each other and sit and read with someone who had similar interests and thus liked to read similar books. The students loved this time when they could read with a friend and this also reflected the Engagement Theory in that this increased intrinsic motivation to read as the students learned to love the texts that they were reading together.

Other heterogeneous grouping structures. In the course of my observations, I did not witness formal cooperative groups, interest groups, literature groups or literature circles, or project groups. Similar to the aforementioned heterogeneous grouping structures, these structures also reflect Schema Theory and Engagement Theory, helping students to build and expand upon prior knowledge while developing motivations for learning. I believe that the reason that I did not witness these types of grouping structures throughout my observations was that the classrooms in which I observed were lower elementary classrooms – kindergarten through second grade and those grouping structures are often seen in upper elementary classrooms. While
this seems to be normal regarding my own personal observations, I do not believe that this always has to be the case. In my student teaching placement, I witnessed students in second grade engaged in literature groups and benefiting greatly from this grouping structure. I think that the teachers that I observed, while very proficient and effective, could further strengthen their practice by including these different types of heterogeneous groupings in their classrooms.

**Critical reflection.** It was clear to see how moving from whole-class to small group instruction can be beneficial for students. When this shift occurs, students are able to complete the activities on their own, using their own understandings and do so in such a way that teachers were able to see their students’ misconceptions and guide them along in their learning. Small group instruction provides many more opportunities for teachers to differentiate their instruction and for students to receive more individualized instruction. While there are many benefits to many different kinds of small grouping structures, it seems as if there is no single best way to group students. Rather, when teachers use different types of grouping structures and have flexible groups where students can move from group to group as they progress and as different types of instruction are needed, it seems that students derive the greatest benefit. As a teacher, it will be most effective, then to have a variety of grouping structures in the classroom – both whole class and small group instruction and homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping.

**Theoretical Perspectives and Dispositions**

Teacher dispositions are those teacher behaviors that make teachers effective. Dispositions are those “affective characteristics or social and emotional behaviors” that “affect the classroom climate and therefore affect students” (Stronge, 2007, p. 22). The teacher who is caring, runs her classroom with fairness and respect, interacts with his or her students both regarding their in and out of school lives, has enthusiasm and motivation and a positive attitude toward teaching, and teaches and reaches learners of all different abilities and diversity
exemplifies effective teacher dispositions in his or her classroom (Stronge, 2007). These dispositions go beyond the ways that teachers actually teach their students with regard to their pedagogical knowledge and discuss the other characteristics of teachers that, although they are not often explicitly taught in many cases, still greatly affect the students and their achievement in the classroom.

In some respect, however, these dispositions are still connected to theories about educational thought and practice. A theoretical perspective is similar to a teacher’s belief about his or her students, teaching, and learning. Thompson (2007) notes, of the theoretical perspectives that undergird teachers’ practice in the classroom, that “we unconsciously filter virtually everything we experience through our belief systems” (p. 31). Through studying intercultural studies, I learned that the definition of culture is that it is a lens through which we see the world. I think that this definition works very well with regard to the theoretical perspectives that teachers have toward teaching as these theoretical perspectives are lenses through which teachers see students, their practice, their job, and teaching in general.

**Theoretical Perspectives of Teacher Participants**

All of the teachers mentioned throughout these observations seem to have a Constructivist theoretical perspective which “emphasizes the active construction of knowledge by individuals” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 74). All teachers that were observed in this study taught to their students as individuals – differentiating instruction and incorporating student interests where they were able to do so. Almost every domain and teacher practice was framed with a theory that either stemmed from or was very compatible with Constructivism with the exception of Thorndike’s Law of Effect, or the Principle of Reinforcement. The latter principle, demonstrated in Mrs. P.’s second grade classroom, would be much more compatible with a Behaviorist Theory, though Mrs. P. also exemplified practices more consistent with a
Constructivist perspective during the domain of promoting self-regulated learning. Throughout my previous observations and, when speaking with the teachers involved, I believe that the teachers all do seem to have a Constructivist perspective when teaching in the classroom. Mrs. B. even noted that she believed in “students forming their own understandings of what they are learning” and in having “students work together to learn and grow in the classroom” (Brechtel, 2012). Similarly, Mrs. W. noted that “students learn differently” and that it is her job to “make sure each student learns – whether that means helping him [her]self or finding another student who is able to do so” (Wess-Rishel, 2012).

**Teacher Participant Dispositions**

Throughout all of my observations in the classroom, I was able to see all of the aforementioned dispositions enacted in the teachers’ daily practice. For most teachers, I was able to even see each of the six aforementioned dispositions exemplified at one point in the day. For the purpose of providing grounded observations, however, since there were six teachers in my observations and six dispositions, I have allocated one disposition for each teacher. This is not, however, to suggest that the teacher only demonstrated that single disposition, for almost every teacher demonstrated every disposition during the course of my observation.

**Mrs. P. and reflective practice.** Stronge (2007) describes reflective practice as “a careful review of and thoughtfulness about one’s own teaching process” (p. 30). In my observations in Mrs. P.’s classroom, it is clear that she focuses a great deal upon the effectiveness of her own instruction in the classroom, the effects of her teaching upon her students, and changing her instruction, if necessary, based upon the needs of her students. Even the previous anecdote demonstrating how Mrs. P. assesses her students while she is teaching is a good example of how Mrs. P. reflects upon her own teaching to inform her future teaching and the instruction that she presents in the classroom each and every day.
One day after Mrs. P.’s students had left for library, I had the opportunity to sit down with her and discuss some of the practices that I had observed in her classroom, specifically discussing her use of assessing while teaching to inform her instruction and instructional groupings. During that time, Mrs. P. showed me her plan book and how she always included reflections for each lesson. These reflections were sometimes reflections about her own teaching practice and other times were about certain materials that she needed to remember to get for future lessons. For example, one reflection that she had made was that she needed to remember to put students into groups during a lesson before giving out the instructions because when she did this in the opposite order, she had to repeat the instructions anyway. She said that this short reflection will help her next year when she gets to the same unit in her classroom. A reflection about materials could be seen in another lesson where she had the students use their crayons to color in a picture of the flag (a color-by-number activity with addition and subtraction problems), but noted that, in the future, she should use colored pencils because the lines were too small to use crayons accurately and keep the papers neat. Throughout both types of reflections, Mrs. P. is becoming a better teacher – for herself and, ultimately, for her students.

Mrs. W. and attitude toward teaching. A teacher’s attitude toward teaching is show through “a teacher’s dedication to students and to the job of teaching” and when teachers “exude positive attitudes about life and teaching” (Stronge, 2007, p. 29). When speaking with Mrs. W. about her theoretical perspectives and teacher dispositions toward teaching, she noted that she thought the most important thing a teacher had to do in the classroom was have a good attitude toward teaching and his or her students, regardless of the way that he or she is actually feeling. She even said to me, “Every day I come into my classroom, no matter how I am feeling or what I am thinking about from home, I have to put that aside, remember that these kids are my responsibility, and have the most positive attitude toward teaching that I can possibly have.”
These kids need to know that, right then, they are my top priority and that I love teaching so much” (Wess-Rishel, 2012).

One day, the teachers had a faculty meeting before school and were discussing the changes to the curriculum as a result of the Common Core standards. The teachers were a bit confused, frustrated, and overwhelmed, but when Mrs. W. went to her room, she put all of that aside, smiled for the students, and joked around with them having a great time in spite of everything that was going through her mind at the time. In the faculty room and even in passing in the hallway, one can almost always see Mrs. W. smiling and she usually has something positive to say to either her students or another teacher in the hallway. It is clear that Mrs. W. loves teaching and loves her students. This is clear both to her students and to the other teachers in the building. Her attitude toward teaching affects both her students and the other teachers in the building as they begin to have this same attitude when they walk into the classroom and as her positivity rubs off on them. Her attitude is literally contagious!

**Mrs. M. and fairness and respect.** Effective teachers show, model, advocate for, and practice fairness and respect in their classrooms. “Students expect teachers to treat them equitably – when they behave as well as when they misbehave – and to avoid demonstrations of favoritism” (Stronge, 2007, p. 25). In Mrs. M.’s classroom, her students know that they will be treated fairly and with respect. The students know the rules and, through her modeling, they are able to discriminate between equality and fairness in practice. One day when I was in Mrs. M.’s classroom, four kindergarten students were completing their morning calendar with the help of Mrs. M. and before they began printing the date, one of the girls realized she did not have her pencil grip on her pencil and came over to get that from a basket by the window. When she was over there, I asked if any of the other students needed a pencil grip and she said that they did not. One of the girls over with Mrs. M. overheard me and said, “We don’t get those ‘cause we don’t
need them and Carrie [pseudonym], but if we ever do need them, Mrs. M. can get us one, too.”

This was a perfect example of a student realizing that her teacher was very fair, giving each student what he or she needed, and learning to discriminate between fairness (where everyone gets what they need, though this might look different for all people) and equality (where everyone receives everything exactly the same regardless of need).

As her students learn about fairness and respect, they model this to others around them. Even that little girl explaining how others always get what they need in Mrs. M.’s classroom is a very big step for a kindergarten student in learning to get along with others. Because her students see this sort of fairness and respect modeled on a daily basis, both explicitly and implicitly, the students then practice this in their own interactions with each other, helping them to grow in their maturity.

**Mrs. L. and enthusiasm and motivation.** Mrs. L. has wonderful enthusiasm for teaching and interacting with her students on a daily basis. Teachers who promote enthusiasm and motivate learning support “positive relationships with students and…encourage[e] student achievement” (Stronge, 2007, p. 27). These teachers go out of their way to help their students to love learning and the time that they spend in the classroom and this affects the way that their students respond to their teaching as they begin to have great enthusiasm toward learning and motivation to do well in the classroom.

In Mrs. L.’s class, she circulates around the room when the students are working to point out appropriate behaviors that the students are exhibiting as well as to praise them for their achievement and hard work. When she does this, her students just beam with pride. They are excited to complete the work because they know that it will be appreciated and that they will have their efforts recognized and praised. One day when I was observing, when the students were completing a puzzle of the letters of the alphabet, two students were working side by side
on the floor and one had already finished the puzzle while the other was only up to the letter “T.” The student who had finished his puzzle turned to the student who was still working and, without prompting, said, “Come on, Brady [pseudonym], look how far you are. You’re almost done.” In my observations, I have more often seen students bragging because they had finished first instead of encouraging others who were slower than they were. This sort of an attitude toward learning is, I believe, a direct result of Mrs. L.’s daily wonderful enthusiasm toward teaching and encouraging words and actions.

Mrs. C. and social interactions with students. Stronge (2007) suggests that “a teacher’s ability to relate to students and to make positive, caring connections with them plays a significant role in cultivating a positive learning environment and promoting student achievement” (p. 26). In Mrs. C.’s classroom, the first few minutes of the day are always moments where Mrs. C. connects with each student who walks into her room, asking them about their night and morning, and allowing them to talk to her while she listens. She maintains an appropriate teacher to student relationship, but gets down to her students’ level and lets them know that she is there to listen to them and to understand them. She lets them know that she will take the time to get to know them as a person. Each morning, her students come in with something to share with her and know that they will get a few moments of attention each morning and, really, throughout the day as well. Because they love and respect her, they listen when she is teaching, rarely try to talk over her, and, for the most part, accept responsibility for their actions.

Mrs. B. and caring. Mrs. B. exemplifies a caring teacher. While there are many different facets of a caring teacher, I think that one overarching characteristic of a caring teacher would be that a caring teacher has “an overall love for children” (Stronge, 2007, p. 23). A caring teacher listens to students and loves them as people.
One morning when I was observing in Mrs. B.’s classroom, she had a student come in crying because his older brother had said something very nasty to him on the bus. He was actually unable to even repeat whatever his brother had said because he was sobbing so much. Mrs. B. knelt down to his level, listened to what she could understand through his sobbing, and just hugged him. She could have told him to stop crying or that he needed to learn not to let others’ words bother him. She could have downplayed this incident or tried to rationalize what the older brother had said or how the older brother’s angry emotions could have gotten in the way, but she did not do any of that. She just hugged him – affirming his sadness and loving him and encouraging him in the fact that he was lovable and important enough to hug.

**Critical Reflection of Dispositions**

The teachers that I observed demonstrated the teaching dispositions that enabled them to become better and more effective teachers. In all instances, connecting with the students beyond teaching the content helped the teachers to become more effective teachers. This helped their students to love learning and get excited about school, have their basic social and emotional needs met and cared for prior to thinking about learning, and helped the classrooms to run more smoothly. This shows that a teacher must not only know his or her content, but be aware of his or her own dispositions and theoretical perspectives in order to be an effective and powerful teacher.

Tomlinson & McTighe (2006) note that

“quality curriculum should play a central role in meeting the core needs of students for affirmation, affiliation, accomplishment, and autonomy, but it is the teacher’s job to make the link between the basic human needs of students and curriculum. Although the physical, mental, and emotional characteristics of students vary between kindergarten and high school, their basic needs as learners and human beings do not. These basic needs continue to govern what young people look for in schools and classrooms” (p. 16).
A teacher’s job extends so much farther than teaching content because, ultimately, teachers are teaching students. This is where teacher dispositions fit into effective teacher practice. A teacher must not only be an effective teacher in the area of content knowledge and mastery, but an effective teacher must be one who loves children and his or her work and colleagues, and creates an environment where everyone around them knows that they are valued, appreciated, important, cared for, and loved.

**Conclusion**

The time that I spent observing teachers in this particular primary school proved to be very beneficial and helped me to grow as a future teacher. Observing the teachers in this building in various literacy (and even non-literacy related) situations gave me many different ideas about procedures and content-related lesson plans that I can hopefully employ in a classroom someday. Seeing the ten domains, grouping practices, and teacher dispositions that I had read about in practice helped to make the readings more powerful, authentic, and impactful. These observations took my understandings of the reading to the next level – the evaluation level. Instead of merely reading, understanding, comprehending, or even applying what I was reading to my own classroom, the observations in conjunction with the readings allowed me to take my understandings of these effective practices, procedures, and dispositions even further so that I had the opportunity to not only recognize the practices that were present in each of the classrooms in which I observed, but evaluate those practices against theory and the assigned texts. Between connecting theoretical perspectives to Walker’s (2012) ideas and observing effective teachers in action, I was able to move my understanding of these domains, grouping practices, and dispositions to a place where I feel comfortable enacting them in my own classroom someday.
Mrs. B. took me aside and asked me one day, “Am I even exemplifying any of those effective literacy practices you are looking for?” That completely shocked me because Mrs. B., out of all the teachers, seems to be one who so very clearly exemplifies the most of the dispositions in almost every lesson that she presents in the classroom. This really confirmed for me that I do not, as a teacher, need to put down each of these practices in each lesson plan but that the more skilled and confident I become as a teacher, the more these will work their way into my lessons naturally. These effective literacy practices, while they certainly can be studied and intentionally applied to teaching situations, are also practices that stem from teachers’ best practices in the classroom in general.

As Walker (2012) noted, effective teachers will, naturally, engage all of their learners, making use of scaffolding and ensuring that each student is being challenged appropriately and is showing growth through the lessons that are presented in the classroom. Effective teachers will push their students beyond literal and lower-level understandings to meaningful and higher-level understandings and interpretations. They will encourage vibrant discussions in the classroom – both between themselves and the students and within smaller groups of students and promote students’ self-regulated learning. Effective teachers will create a responsive classroom environment which nurtures students’ motivation and where lessons are built off of the assessments that the teacher has conducted while teaching to enhance and inform future instruction. Finally, effective teachers also integrate and balance instruction, using a wide range of high-quality reading material to meet all of their specific goals for their students.

Mrs. B. was clearly exemplifying all of these and more throughout her daily interactions with the students and since she was incorporating these ten domains unintentionally, this gives me hope and empowers me for my future classroom. Although I am very thankful that I have studied this and will intentionally incorporate these ten domains into my classroom, I am also
very encouraged that teachers who have never read Walker’s text still exemplify practices that can be related to many of these domains on a daily basis. This does not mean that I should not give explicit attention to each of these domains, but that, first and foremost, I must work to be a caring and effective teacher. Some of these domains will require more attention than others and will require me to think more deeply about how to be an effective literacy teacher in the classroom, but there are others that will come naturally.

In summation, the effective literacy practices set forth by Walker (2012), the use of a variety of purposeful grouping practices, and appropriate teacher dispositions in the classroom together create a classroom environment where teachers can teach and students can learn. The most important thing in the classroom is our students – more than anything else. Tomlinson & McTighe (2006) suggest that “the student is the focal point of our work as teachers” (p. 12). These practices, grouping arrangements, and teacher dispositions are not ends in themselves, but a means to an end. They are a means to helping students to become empowered through literacy instruction and a means to helping students to become more independent, self-determined, strategic readers and learners. They will help our students to become independent and grow in ways that they never would have grown otherwise. They empower our students to believe in themselves and become world-changers. They are what separates a good teacher from an outstanding teacher and are all that I desire to do and be in my own classroom.
References


