

What is effective teaching of literacy?

The craft of teaching is becoming increasingly complex and nowhere is this more evident than in the area of literacy. Effective teachers are capable of ensuring that an increasingly diverse group of students have the literacy skills to cope with the demands of life beyond school in their careers and/or college.

Experts have been debating the best way to teach reading for over fifty years. In reality, there is no single method that will teach all students to read and write successfully. Over the years, various approaches have come in and out of favor in an effort to raise achievement. These include: tighter curricula specifications, prescribing structures for literacy blocks, providing scripts for teaching and increasing accountability, all resulting in minimal impact on the learning outcomes for students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

Classrooms today are complex and dynamic learning environments. Identifying the range of factors that positively impact student achievement has been a major focus of research. There is clear, documented evidence of the most effective features of practice including the degree of the teachers' influence and what they do to raise student learning outcomes (Allington 2002, Hattie 2009).

Literacy teaching can only be described as truly effective when it positively impacts student learning.

Successful teachers are able to skillfully integrate a range of instructional approaches and resources to meet the diverse learning needs of their students.

Dimensions of Effective Literacy Practice

Effective Teachers:

- Understand literacy learning
- Know the standards
- Know their students as learners
- Set high expectations for students and encourage risk taking
- Use a flexible range of teaching strategies
- Engage students in challenging content

We can now say, with certitude, that effective teachers of literacy:

- Know the literacy processes and the pedagogy that determines how their students learn
- Know what their students need to understand and be able to do to meet the Standards
- Know their students as learners
- Have high expectations for their students and encourage risk taking
- Flexibly use a range of instructional practices
- Engage students in challenging learning experiences

Effective teachers understand literacy learning

Effective teachers of literacy have a deep understanding of the complexities and cumulative processes of reading and writing. They also understand the developmental nature of literacy learning.

Effective teachers understand that:

- The pathway to literacy is developmental
- Becoming literate is a social process where students are active learners
- Students take individual and multiple pathways in their learning

It is what happens, moment by moment in their classrooms, that makes a difference to student achievement.

Sheena Hervey, 2013

... our best evidence... is that what happens in classrooms through quality teaching and through the quality of the learning environment generated by the teacher and the students, is the key variable in explaining up to 59%, or even more, of the variance in student scores.

Ministry of Education, 2003

Effective teachers are aware of the complexity of a wide range of texts and the potential challenges these pose for students. They also recognize the sequence of events that occur within the classroom and how it could impact student learning. Most importantly, effective teachers know it is not how much students know, but rather, how they apply this knowledge.

Effective teachers see themselves as life-long learners. They understand the need to continuously update their skills and knowledge in response to the changing world, new research, and emerging information about literacy learning and teaching.

Effective teachers know what their students need to learn

In order to ensure that students are on track for college and career, effective teachers know what literacy skills and understandings their students require.

The new Standards set rigorous expectations for students, and effective teachers understand the instructional shifts in practices that are needed to ensure that students meet these raised expectations. Effective teachers understand that while the standards set common outcomes for students, this does not mean equal input.

Effective teachers know their students as learners

Effective teaching involves knowing the student as an individual. Because reading is a process where students' prior knowledge interacts with print to construct meaning, it is important that teachers understand as much as possible about the students' world. The most important single factor that influences learning is what the learner already knows (Ausubel, 1968).

Effective teachers also know students as literacy learners and collect information from a range of sources on students' strategies, understandings, attitudes and previous learning experiences.

Knowing students as learners requires one to understand the pathways of progress for individual students and the patterns of progress for students as a whole. Therefore, effective teachers need to extensively and continuously develop their knowledge of:

- Their students' individual learning profiles and the implications this has for teaching
- The patterns of progress for students as they become literate
- Their students' literacy practices outside school, as well as in school

Effective teachers recognize assessment as central to their classroom practice and gather data from a range of sources. They:

- Acknowledge their students' prior learning, helping them make connections between new learning and what they already know
- Use ongoing assessment to identify learning needs of students, using this to inform their teaching
- See students' errors and misconceptions as a window into the learning process

Effective teachers strategically gather, analyze, and use information to guide students learning, which is accomplished by their own understanding of literacy learning and what is expected as a measure of success.

Effective teachers have high expectations for students

Effective teachers' positive expectations for, and acknowledgment of, their students' efforts are key factors leading to success in literacy learning. The expectations teachers have for their students are a powerful indicator of success. Students patterns of progress and achievement are impacted by their teacher's expectations. Research shows that students know that they are treated differently and that teachers have higher expectations of some than others (Weinstein, 2002).

This applies to older students who have not yet mastered reading and writing, and to students who are learning to both speak, and become literate, in English. Effective teachers' expectations are high, appropriate, clearly articulated, and:

- Clearly expressed
- Shared with, and informed by feedback from all partners in the student's learning
- Reflected on and reviewed

High expectations go hand in hand with creating an optimal learning environment that generates an atmosphere of trust,

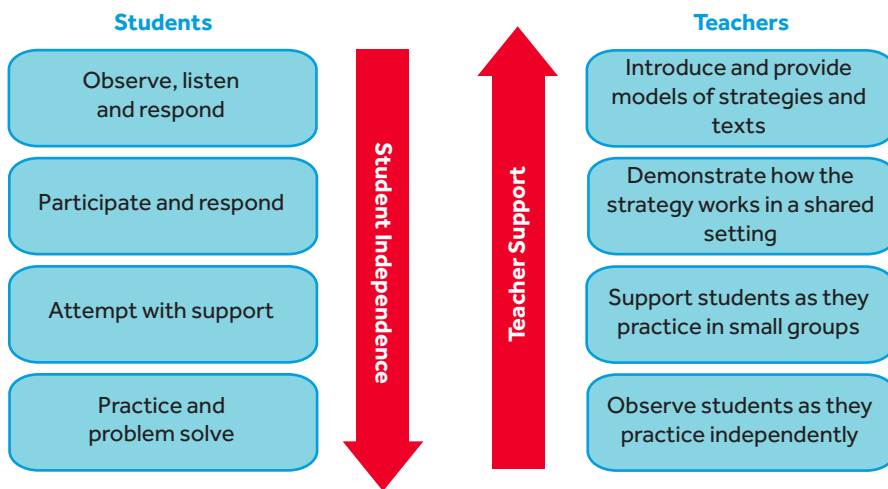
approximations and providing informed, genuine, and encouraging responses, teachers let students know that they believe they will learn. While teachers can create the conditions that foster learning and demonstrate strategies for learning to occur, the students have to actively engage in the process. The program needs to be interesting enough so that students want to be engaged in the learning.

Effective teachers also create learning environments that are alive with purposeful print and where students have access to reading, and creating, a wide range of texts.

Effective teachers are firmly convinced that they are responsible for student learning and consistently bend their efforts towards doing a better job every day.

Steele, 2009: 185

Gradual Release of Responsibility



where it is understood it is OK to make mistakes and self correct because mistakes are the essence of learning.

The social setting that teachers provide is equally as important as the physical environment. Research shows that the quality of the instruction makes a difference *and* more than that, that it is the interaction between the teacher and student, most especially the feedback the student gets, which is essential (Hattie, 2003).

Learning to read and write involves taking risks. This is more likely to happen if students feel that their attempts will be valued. Teachers need to help students see that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process. By accepting their

Effective teachers use a range of instructional strategies

Effective teachers flexibly use a range of instructional practices to meet the diverse needs of the students in any class. These strategies are the tools of effective practice and teachers should plan for whole class, small groups and independent work. Within these contexts, effective teachers will provide a varying degree of support that reflects the needs of the students and the challenge in the learning. This gradual release of responsibility will come through reading and writing, to shared and guided reading and writing with the students, leading to independent reading and writing by the *students*.

Effective teachers:

- Routinely and explicitly demonstrate how proficient readers and writers make meaning of, and construct, texts
- Demonstrate skills and strategies in a variety of ways to cater for different learning styles
- Demonstrate the use of reading skills and strategies across all learning and expect students to use them in all content areas
- Provide opportunities for students to discuss texts, developing appropriate language for meaningful talk
- Support or guide students as they practice the skills and strategies demonstrated
- Provide daily opportunities for students to independently practice skills and strategies in authentic contexts
- Encourage students to self-reflect and goal set

Successful literacy learning and teaching involves a shift in responsibility from teacher to student, with new learning introduced in the most supportive setting. Effective teachers create a balanced program where there is a range of instructional practices which offer students varying degrees of teacher support.

Effective teachers engage students in challenging learning

While teachers can create the conditions that foster learning and demonstrate strategies, for real learning to occur, students need to be active participants. The program needs to be interesting enough to make students want to engage in the learning.

One of the greatest challenges for teachers of literacy is ensuring that students have the comprehension strategies needed to cope in the increasingly complex world of print.

The Literacy Common Core State Standards acknowledges this and have placed an increasing emphasis on making students ready for the complexities of texts they will face both in and out of school.

Effective teachers are able to provide the appropriate challenge for each of their students. They understand that learning takes place in the 'zone of proximal development.' It is in the struggle that new learning occurs.

We need to help students develop the stamina and resilience that comes from engaging them in challenging tasks where they read and write for authentic purpose.

References

Alton-Lee, A. (2004). *Using best evidence syntheses to assist in making a bigger difference for diverse learners*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Au, R., Watkins, D.W., Hattie, J.A.C., & Alexander, P. (2009). Reforming the depression model of learned hopelessness for academic outcomes. *Educational Research Review*. 4, 103-17

Ausubel, D.P. (1968). *Educational Psychology: A cognitive view*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston

Boykin, A. W. & Noguera P. (2011) *Creating the opportunity to learn: moving from research to practice to close the achievement gap*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD

Hattie, J. (2003, October). *Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence?* Paper presented at the Australian Council for Educational Research Annual Conference on Building Teacher Quality, Melbourne.

Hattie, J.A.C. (2009). *Visible Learning: A synthesis of 800+ meta-analysis on achievement*. London: Routledge.

Ministry of Education (2003). *Effective literacy practice*. Wellington: Learning Media

Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers. (2005). OECD: Paris

Steel, C.F. (2009). *The inspired teacher: How to know one, grow one, or to be one*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD

Weinstein, R. (2002). *Reaching higher: the power of expectations in schooling*. MA: Harvard University Press.