

How Does Bennett Woods Elementary School Produce Such High Reading and Writing Achievement?

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The authors developed a grounded theory about how a school serving relatively advantaged children produces high reading and writing achievement compared with schools serving similar populations of students. The school's faculty is reading and writing focused, and students experience many books as they receive explicit, demanding instruction (i.e., about how to read words, comprehend, write) connected to content learning. The school offers a positive, motivating environment. In sum, many elements that potentially supported achievement were identified, including explicit teaching of skills in the context of much reading, writing, and content learning, which is consistent with balanced perspectives on reading and writing development. A major hypothesis in the grounded theory is that even with relatively advantaged populations, great efforts may be required to produce high reading and writing achievement.

Keywords: effective schooling, effective teaching, effective literacy instruction, balanced literacy instruction

There has been considerable study of the characteristics of schools that are effective in producing achievement in disadvantaged students (Reynolds, Creemers, Stringfield, Teddlie, & Schaffer, 2002; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000), including the nature of the reading and writing instruction in elementary schools serving disadvantaged students (J. F. Johnson, 2002; Mosenthal, Lipson, Sortino, Russ, & Mekkelsen, 2002; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). Recently, our research group has contributed to such work, studying a kindergarten through Grade 12 (K–12) school with a strong track record in producing high achievement in urban, African American students (Pressley, Raphael, Gallagher, & DiBella, 2004) and a combined elementary/middle school that succeeds with students who have failed in other school settings (Pressley, Gaskins, Solic, & Collins, 2006).

Even schools serving students who are relatively advantaged, however, produce a wide range of academic achievements (e.g., as documented by state or standardized tests). This is the case with the schools surrounding Michigan State University, which prompted us to ask, “What is happening in the highest performing school in this area that is populated with relatively advantaged

students?” When we searched the literature for studies potentially illuminating this question, we found little, especially at the elementary school level (see Shouse, 2002). Thus, we report an in-depth examination of the reading and writing instruction at Bennett Woods Elementary School, an elementary school that outperforms other schools on the Michigan state reading and writing tests. An important purpose of this study was to better understand how this effective school serving relatively advantaged students maximizes achievement and outperforms schools serving similar and more advantaged populations of students. We observed and interviewed in this high-performing school with the goal of identifying as completely as possible the potential elements contributing to students' high reading and writing achievement. We hope this study serves as a starting point for an understanding of how much educational effort might be required to produce maximally positive outcomes with relatively advantaged students. After all, despite the lack of research attention to schools that do an exceptional job, as opposed to an average job, with such students, there are many schools serving such students across the nation. Research on effective schools and classrooms, although predominantly focused on disadvantaged populations, can provide insights for understanding what the Bennett Woods Elementary School does to promote the literacy achievement of its students.

Effective Literacy Instruction

One possibility is that all or most of the teachers in the school are just very skilled reading and writing teachers. At least since the famous first-grade studies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967), there has been recognition that teachers matter in promoting reading achievement. Moreover, in the past decade, there has been increased understanding of the teaching in elementary classrooms that is more likely to produce greater reading and writing achievement compared with teaching in classrooms where reading and writing achievement is not as apparent (e.g., Duffy, 2003; Knapp & Associates, 1995;

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Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001; Pressley, Roehrig, et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2000). There certainly were, however, some understandings about the nature of effective elementary instruction in general (e.g., Anderson, Everson, & Brophy, 1979; Brophy, 1981, 1985) and of reading and writing instruction in particular before the 1990s (see Hoffman, 1991, and Rosenshine & Stevens, 1984, for reviews).

By collapsing results across studies, one can conclude that effective elementary teachers, especially those effective in promoting reading and writing, tend to do the following: They devote much of their class time to academic activity, engaging most students consistently in activities that require them to think as they read, write, and discuss. Effective teachers do explicit teaching (and reteaching as needed) of skills, and this teaching includes modeling and explaining skills, followed by guided student practice. That is, effective teachers show a strong balancing of skills instruction and holistic reading and writing activities. Teacher scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) and reteaching are salient, accounting for a large proportion of such teachers' efforts. Effective teachers connect content learning (i.e., social studies, science, math) to reading and writing instruction. Effective teachers have high expectations and increase the academic demands on their students (i.e., consistently encouraging students to attempt slightly more advanced books and write slightly longer and more complex stories). From the first day of school, effective teachers communicate high expectations for students to self-regulate and take charge of their behavior and academic engagement (Anderson et al., 1979; Bohn, Roehrig, & Pressley, 2004). Effective teachers encourage academic engagement continuously, using many different mechanisms to do so, most of which are ones known to be effective (Bogner, Raphael, & Pressley, 2002; Dolezal, Welsh, Pressley, & Vincent, 2003; Pressley, Dolezal, et al., 2003). Thus, one possibility is that this high-performing school is filled with excellent, effective teachers, ones who use instructional techniques to teach students how to read, write, and discuss in contexts that immerse students in important content knowledge, with all of this accomplished in motivating ways that encourage long-term student engagement.

If this is true, it would contrast with previous observations of instruction in schools. The effective teachers studied in the past have been observed in the context of typical schools, ones in which less effective teachers also teach (for a review, see Pressley, Roehrig, et al., 2003). Even so, some schools are generally more effective than others, and researchers interested in effective schools are particularly attentive to schools producing high achievement in places where such achievement is not to be taken for granted (e.g., in inner-city neighborhoods, in areas of poverty). Most researchers of effective schools have not focused on the instruction in individual teachers' classrooms but rather have provided a great deal of information about the general characteristics of such schools (Hoffman, 1991; Reynolds et al., 2002; Shavelson & Berliner, 1988; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Effective schools have strong administrative leadership, focusing on instruction and academics; continuous reflection on the curriculum and ways to improve it; high expectations for student achievement; a safe, orderly, and positive environment; frequent evaluation of student progress; and positive home-school relationships. Thus, a second possibility is that the Bennett Woods Elementary School is char-

acterized by a strong administration, like other schools described in the effective school literature.

Researchers of effective schools (e.g., J. F. Johnson, 2002; Mosenthal et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2000) who have been more attentive to the teaching in individual classrooms, especially the reading and writing instruction, have added additional insights about effective schools serving at-risk populations. Effective classrooms make reading a priority; small-group instruction predominates; there is time for independent reading; word recognition skills are a focus in Grades 1 and 2; comprehension questions require thought rather than literal recall; skills instruction and holistic reading and writing are balanced; struggling students receive supplemental interventions; teachers receive substantial professional development; there are substantial material resources; and the administration and faculty work through difficulties constructively. In short, schools and classrooms that are effective in developing reading and writing in at-risk populations have a long list of characteristics, reflecting the fact that they must use many techniques to accomplish their goals.

Is just as much effort expended in a high-achieving school serving relatively advantaged students? Does a school serving relatively advantaged students use techniques similar to or different from the techniques used by schools serving at-risk populations? Using these questions as a guide, we were determined to be as exhaustive as possible in our attempt to identify potential elements influencing achievement at the school producing the highest reading and writing achievement in our locality. Bennett Woods Elementary School outperforms other schools in the area and state on reading and writing achievement (i.e., as measured by the state standardized exam), including schools serving similar or more advantaged populations of students. Our goal was to better understand what Bennett Woods Elementary School does to maximize the reading and writing achievement of its students. Thus, we chose grounded theory methods, which require the continuation of data collection and analyses until no new conclusions are emerging (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Method

Students

In January 2005, Bennett Woods Elementary enrolled 296 students (146 girls, 150 boys) in kindergarten through Grade 5. Students' ages ranged from 5 to 12 years. The principal reported that 5% of the students were African American, 4% were Hispanic, 1% were Native American, and 25% had a recent international visa or were immigrants, most from Korea, India, China, or Eastern Europe. Approximately 65% of the students were American-born and Caucasian. Approximately 16% of students qualified for special education services.

The principal described the school as serving predominantly middle-class families; 10% or less of the students were living in poverty, and approximately 5% of students came from affluent families. (According to Standard & Poor's, 9% of the school's students were economically disadvantaged; see www.schoolmatters.com.) The principal described many families as "middle-level professional" (e.g., health care professionals, but not doctors; insurance agents; owners of small businesses), and many students were from two-wage-earner families. The principal attributed the

large proportion of international students to the close proximity of the university; many Bennett Woods students were children of university students or of recently immigrated employees of the university.

The school was selected because it had the highest 2004 combined language arts (i.e., reading and writing) achievement on the state test of schools in the area surrounding the university (which includes a medium-sized city, the surrounding suburbs, and a few middle-class villages): 95% of its students passed the Grade 4 reading test, and 91% passed the Grade 4 writing test. The state averages for 2004 were 79% and 48% passing for Grade 4 reading and writing, respectively. On the basis of a hand review of the state test data, we concluded that only a handful of schools in the state had a level of language arts achievement equal to that of Bennett Woods Elementary School in 2004. Especially notable was the fact that there were many schools in the state serving decidedly more economically advantaged communities that did not score near the Bennett Woods level. The 2005 state test was administered while this study occurred, and Bennett Woods performed highly once again, with 98% passing Grade 4 reading and 84% passing Grade 4 writing (for the entire state, the 2005 passing rates were 82% and 46%, respectively).

A review of the school's in-house standardized test data confirmed high language arts achievement relative to national norms. In April 2005, all students took the Gates–MacGinitie Reading Tests (MacGinitie, 2000). At all grade levels, students averaged well above grade level relative to national norms. Collapsing scores across grade levels showed that 84% of students performed at grade level or better. Only 5% performed more than a year below grade level.

Faculty and Staff

In spring 2004, Bennett Woods Elementary School had 14 classroom teachers in Grades K through 5, a reading teacher, an English as a second language (ESL) teacher, a resource room teacher, an art teacher, and a music teacher. The faculty experience ranged from 10 to 35 years. The class sizes for each teacher ranged between 18 and 23 students. There were two instructional aids, one a licensed teacher with 10 years' experience and the other in her 1st year as an educator. There was a library specialist with 5 years of experience in schools. There were eight teaching interns from the local university, each of whom had completed a bachelor's degree and had served Bennett Woods Elementary for the entire school year until mid-May. All teaching staff were women except for one male Grade 5 teacher.

Researchers

Four researchers conducted this study. The researchers were well versed on the various theoretical perspectives on reading and writing development through instruction and the practices associated with various perspectives. The lead researcher (Michael Pressley) was an experienced educational psychologist with an extensive background in elementary reading and writing education. He was in the school, either observing or interviewing teachers, for 122 hours (113 hours observing, 9 hours interviewing), which extended over 55 visits that were conducted from early January through early June 2005. Two of the researchers (Lindsey

Mohan and Lisa M. Raphael) were advanced graduate students in educational psychology, with 3 and 6 years of experience, respectively, conducting observational studies in schools using the methods employed in this investigation. This was the first study for the fourth researcher (Lauren Fingeret). The second, third, and fourth researchers each spent approximately 50 hours in the school from January through May 2005, and most of their time was spent observing (i.e., only Lindsey Mohan participated in interviewing, doing so with Michael Pressley for one teacher). These observation hours, if anything, underestimate total time spent in the school, because time in the teachers' lounge or hallways, during lunch and recess, or at school assemblies was not recorded, although it typically resulted in informal conversations that were revealing about the school's functioning.

Data Collection and Analyses

Observations

Observations were the primary data, complemented by interviews and document/artifact analyses, consistent with the types of data typically collected and considered in qualitative case studies and grounded theory analyses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The four researchers visited classes, usually for about an hour and typically on a prearranged appointment basis; they also reviewed and gathered documents and other artifacts during these visits (e.g., posters and displays in classrooms, completed student projects). The main question they sought to answer was "How does Bennett Woods Elementary School produce high reading and writing achievement in its students?" Usually, a single researcher observed instruction, but on some occasions two, three, or all four researchers watched the same lesson. The researchers were determined to be sensitive to any aspect of the teaching and learning observed that might impact student achievement. Observations continued until no new insights were emerging about factors that might contribute to achievement at Bennett Woods, consistent with grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Frequently, the observers wrote down comments made by teachers to students, as close to verbatim as possible. At other times, observers would summarize the observed interaction or teaching (e.g., "student seemed puzzled, raised hand, and teacher restated the direction"; "student started taking notes from the text as intended, with the teacher then moving on to another student"). As observers watched lessons, they tried to discern the overall structure of the lesson, where it fit into the larger structure of instruction in the class (i.e., whether it was one lesson of many pertaining to a topic or a wrap-up lesson in anticipation of an accountability measure such as a test or final project), and discourse patterns (e.g., classic teacher questioning, true teacher–student dialogue, direction giving). The responses of students to instruction and the activities of the class were monitored. The researchers closely observed whether the students were engaged during instruction, including whether they appeared to be thinking actively in response to teacher input and demands. There was special noting of teacher behavior or comments that might be expected to impact engagement, which was defined as students being on-task and/or doing work that seemed to require some thoughtfulness on their part (e.g., Bogner et al., 2002; Dolezal et al., 2003; Pressley, Dolezal, et al., 2003). Admittedly, student thoughtfulness is diffi-

cult to capture, but indicators for the observers were that students were doing activities that required thought before action (e.g., making several attempts before making certain progress, sometimes requiring teacher or peer assistance to overcome an impasse). Activities considered not thoughtful included completing workbook pages that were so easy that the child seemed to answer without any effort or paging through picture books rapidly and without seeming to reflect on the contents.

All classroom teachers were observed multiple times by the lead researcher, and most teachers were observed several times by each of the other researchers. On subsequent visits to a class, the researchers noted whether they were seeing more of the same or whether teaching varied from visit to visit. The researchers were convinced that they were seeing teaching as it usually occurred, because they often walked through the school watching through open doors. What went on in class on those occasions looked much like what the researchers observed when they were formally in the classrooms.

Nothing like a behavior checklist was used in this study. Rather, the researchers came to the school and attempted to record everything that might impact achievement. Of course, on the basis of their background knowledge, they had some idea of indicators to watch for, such as indications of the explicit teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (McCardle & Chhabra, 2004); holistic reading and writing (e.g., Weaver, 1994); writing strategies instruction (Graham & Harris, 2005); teaching of content knowledge (Alexander, 2003); and infusing instruction with ways to potentially increase engagement (Pressley, Dolezal, et al., 2003). Even so, coding was open, and categories of observation were developed and refined as the study proceeded, consistent with grounded theory approaches (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Had the researchers attempted to construct a list of factors supporting achievement at Bennett Woods Elementary School in advance of their data collection, the list would have been much less complete than the one that was developed.

Briefings and Interviews

The lead researcher received a briefing about the school by the principal and two teachers in a 1-hour meeting in advance of the study. Over the course of the observations, the lead researcher also attended several meetings where small groups of faculty discussed among themselves current challenges and issues that required attention, most notably on a day in April when the focus was on planning for the next year (which involved the researcher observing parts of a half dozen meetings across the day), a half day in March when the classroom teachers and reading specialist considered the redesigned state test and how they should respond instructionally to the anticipated changes, a half-afternoon meeting at the district level attended by Bennett Woods faculty, and two 45-min meetings of the entire faculty.

There were a number of short, informal interviews with all teachers, especially immediately following observations, that were intended to clarify something that was observed. When the researchers walked through the building, noticing what was occurring, informal discussions with staff members often resulted. Similar informal discussions with teachers occurred in the teacher lounges and on the playground. Students and several parents also struck up conversations with the researchers.

Ten faculty members also participated in formal, semi-structured interviews with the lead researcher. The researchers selected faculty to participate in formal interviews in order to better understand particular elements of the reading and writing instruction at the school (e.g., the lead teacher for the school's writing instruction, the reading specialist) and to clarify individual teachers' instruction (e.g., teachers who did not participate as often in informal conversations). The faculty members were asked to share anything they felt contributed to the school's high achievement. For example, a fourth-grade teacher who was principally responsible for shifts in writing instruction in the school over the past several years talked mostly about that process. The reading specialist chose to address the school's traditional philosophies with respect to reading instruction, the tensions with respect to reading education philosophy that developed because of four teachers who had recently transferred to the school from another school, and how those tensions were being resolved through evolution in the school's approach to reading.

The remaining seven teacher interviews were wide-ranging, focusing on what the teachers did in reading and writing and why they did it, their perceived successes and challenges, the resources in the school available to support reading and writing instruction, their views about areas where improvement could occur, and the relationships among staff, students, and parents. The principal also requested an interview; that interview lasted 2½ hours and covered many topics, but it focused on how she conceived of the reading and writing curriculum and the shifts in it, especially as they related to the performance of students at the school, and the striking improvements in performance on indicators such as the state test since she became principal. She covered the various roles played by faculty in the curriculum development and delivery process. The principal also detailed her perceptions about the student body at the school and their families and the role parents play in their children's education.

Document and Artifact Analyses

The lead researcher carefully studied the district and school curriculum guides, and the district guides were particularly detailed. All of the researchers noted artifacts in the classrooms, for example, displays, posters, classroom library books, books students borrowed from the library, book sets being used as part of instruction, weekly magazines read by classes (e.g., *Time for Kids*), grading rubrics, assignments being sent home, book club unit guides (given to students), unit tests and quizzes, completed student work, student art, and student-authored books. The school provided copies of the monthly newsletter to the researchers, and the researchers regularly read the bulletin board near the school office, which was intended to provide information to parents about the school and community. The researchers purchased a copy of the school's yearbook. The researchers examined project posters on display at events such as family science night and classroom celebrations of achievement. In short, the researchers attempted to examine any object they encountered in the school that might be revealing about the reading and writing curriculum, instruction, and achievement at the school.

Analyses

Case study (e.g., Stake, 2005) and grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) approaches recognize that researchers come to a study with background knowledge that can influence their points of view toward the object of study and that researchers have theoretical sensitivities (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As detailed earlier, the researchers came to the study with disciplinary knowledge in education expected to heighten their sensitivity to school, curricular, and teaching variables that might account for achievement in the school. Beyond their general disciplinary knowledge, however, the researchers knew the previous research on effective schools that was reviewed briefly in the introduction to this article, and, thus, they came to this study with the expectation that they might find many interrelated elements contributing to student success at Bennett Woods Elementary School.

One check on the possibility that the investigators' a priori understandings might be driving their conclusions more than the data was the fact that every general conclusion had to be supported by multiple pieces of data and agreed to by all four researchers. That is, if one of the four researchers could not find evidence in their notes for a conclusion, and all four researchers did not ultimately concur that the conclusion held, it was not included in this report. Thus, a very stringent reliability standard was set with respect to the conclusions offered here. Specific examples to illustrate general conclusions, however, were drawn from the notes of individual researchers. All researchers agreed, however, that all examples typified what was seen at the school with regard to the general conclusion being illustrated.

Michael Pressley took the lead in developing categories of experience that might impact achievement at the school. These categories were developed beginning immediately after the first visit in January 2005 (i.e., data were coded as they were collected, consistent with grounded theory analytic approaches; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Drafts of the categories were then distributed to the three co-researchers for their input and suggestions. The three researchers made corrections and additions to the early and subsequent drafts, which increasingly came to resemble the text presented here in the Results section. In short, consistent with the grounded theory construction ideal (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), data collection continued until no new major conclusions were emerging.

There was substantial triangulation in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), with convergence across types of data (observations, artifact analyses, interviews) as well as across researchers. After the Results section was completed, as another check on the results, all of the researchers reread their field notes in an attempt to identify any information that might contradict any conclusions or raise concerns not detected in the primary analyses (i.e., they conducted negative case analyses; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Although no contradictory data were identified, some concerns about the school did arise in the negative case analysis, and these are taken up in the Discussion section.

There was substantial member checking of the results reported here (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As one check on the results, the principal of the school read the results and offered minor corrections. In addition, each teacher was given the conclusions pertaining to her or his grade level with the opportunity to comment; five teachers offered minor revisions, and five others simply agreed

that the reporting was accurate (four teachers did not respond). Two Bennett Woods teachers read a close-to-finished draft of this article to determine if there were inaccuracies in the facts or misinterpretations about the school and its instruction from their perspectives; they offered only minor corrections, which we included in preparing the final version of this article.

Results

There were a number of factors that potentially combined to account for the high reading and writing achievement at Bennett Woods Elementary School. We begin with the physical and administrative settings that support the curriculum and the instruction delivered. Even so, the overall functioning of the school depends more on the people, and thus the various players in the school take up a larger part of the Results section, followed by the curriculum and instruction, including how the school attempts to motivate students. Table 1 summarizes the potential elements contributing to achievement at the school. Because many of the practices at the school were related to what has been documented in other research to be effective, we note connections to especially pertinent research literature throughout the Results section.

The Setting

There are two parts to the school setting that supported language arts achievement: One is the physical setting and the other, the policy and administrative setting.

Physical Setting

At the time of this study, Bennett Woods Elementary School was housed in a modern, bright building. The classrooms comfortably seated the students in each class with enough room for work tables and additional reading areas. All classrooms had bookcases for the many books available for students to read and the substantial curriculum materials in active use.

All facilities were attractive, and the library was large and inviting. A point of emphasis is that there were books everywhere in this school, and every classroom had its own well-stocked library. No matter what measure of print richness might be applied to evaluate the Bennett Woods classrooms (e.g., Hoffman, Sailors, Duffy, & Beretvas, 2004; Wolfersberger, Reutzler, Sudweeks, & Fawson, 2004), the conclusion would be that the classrooms in the school were exceptionally print-rich environments. The school had a computer lab, which was complemented by a smaller lab dedicated to a program for struggling Grade 4 and Grade 5 students (the Higher Order Thinking Skills [HOTS] program, covered later in the Results section). There were also several up-to-date computers in each classroom. The school was located near a major university and often availed itself of the resources of the university, including frequent field trips to plays, museums, and arboretum/garden settings on the campus.

Academically Focused Setting

Like any effective school (Teddle & Reynolds, 2000), the school was clearly well administered. School days and weeks were routinized and ran smoothly. The many little commotions that can occur in elementary schools (e.g., book club orders done incor-

Table 1
Importance Rating of Potential Elements Contributing to Language Arts Achievement at the Bennett Woods Elementary School

Element	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Setting		
Physical assets		
Modern, excellent building	3.27	0.88
Many books	4.60	0.51
Proximity to university facilities and cultural opportunities	3.65	0.75
Academically focused setting		
School days/weeks routinized	3.98	0.66
District/school curricula policies specifying a rigorous program	4.40	0.60
Academic special events	3.65	0.99
Frequent assessment and assessment-driven decision making	3.75	0.97
Safe and orderly	4.30	0.73
People		
Students (well-prepared, ready to engage school)	4.45	1.10
Principal	4.25	1.10
Teachers and staff		
Classroom teachers	4.90	0.31
Seeking and taking advantage of professional development	4.45	0.69
Determined to prepare students for state test in ways that enrich curricula	4.20	0.89
Effective support teachers		
Reading specialist	4.50	0.61
English as a second language teacher	4.05	0.89
Resource room teacher	4.50	0.61
Two instructional aids	4.00	0.65
Special teachers complementing language arts instruction	3.70	0.92
Teaching interns	3.55	0.76
Library specialist	3.95	0.76
Parents (participating, supportive)	4.90	0.31
Literacy-focused curriculum		
Students experience many books	4.80	0.41
Much teaching of reading		
Letter-sound, phonics, and word recognition skills	4.30	0.73
Spelling	3.85	0.75
Vocabulary and semantic context analysis skills	4.65	0.59
Comprehension skills and strategies	4.90	0.31
Much writing and teaching of writing		
Practice of printing and handwriting skills	3.10	0.85
Plan, draft, revise model with increasing writing demands each year	4.70	0.47
Practice writing of essays like those on the state test	4.23	0.80
Reading, writing, content learning connections	4.55	0.51
Oral communications and teaching of oral communications skills	4.35	0.59
Positive social environment		
Explicit attempts to motivate reading	4.60	0.60
Teachers' use of many motivational mechanisms	4.80	0.41
Formal prosocial curriculum	4.15	0.67
Inclusiveness	3.95	0.89
Individualized instruction		
By classroom teacher	4.20	0.70
By support teachers (offered constructively with no stigma)	4.25	0.55
Encouragement of self-regulation	4.70	0.47

Note. Importance ratings were made on a scale from 1 (*no importance*) to 5 (*great importance*). Each rating was based on the perceptions of 20 staff members.

rectly, teachers missing important meetings, Internet hookups being inefficient or down much of the time) were infrequent. Also consistent with effective schools, there was a clear academic emphasis, with detailed district and school guides available for each grade level with respect to each subject area, guides often mentioned by teachers as they discussed their content coverage. Moreover, the teachers reflected seriously together on these guides, for example, at the meetings in the spring when potential revisions to guidelines were taken up (i.e., ones desired by particular teachers). The emphasis on academics was obvious during school-wide events that were academically focused (e.g., a March is Reading Month assembly, assemblies celebrating achievement, family science night).

The People

The Students

Several teachers pointed out that the majority of kindergarten students at Bennett Woods had good experiences during the pre-school years that prepared them well for formal schooling. For example, many experienced homes in which there was a great deal of verbal interaction, including book reading. Several teachers were emphatic that having a large proportion of students prepared for school on arrival, who thrived in the school once there, permitted greater attention to the students who arrived not so well prepared or otherwise did not thrive given the regular curriculum and instruction. In fact, most classrooms had only a few (i.e., from 1 to 4) students who were progressing at rates that caused concern, and these students received substantial attention from support staff, as detailed later.

The Principal

Effective schools have effective principals (Teddle & Reynolds, 2000). Teachers and staff at Bennett Woods Elementary School were clear in their praise of the principal, whom they felt had transformed the school in her 6 years there. The teachers remarked often that language arts had received much more emphasis since the current principal assumed her position. An important accomplishment during her tenure was the raising of the reading and writing test scores. In 2005, 2% of students failed the state reading test, compared with 27% of students the year before this principal arrived; in 2005, 84% of students passed the state writing test, compared with only 38% of students the year before this principal arrived. The school went from being a middle-of-the-heap school in language arts to a top performer in the state. We emphasize that at least in the opinion of the teachers with a history at the school, although the demographics of the school changed in those six years, it was in the direction of greater diversity and an increasing proportion of students coming to the school who were likely to need strong support to experience language arts success. Thus, the test improvements occurred in the context of shifting demographics that might have been expected to reduce test scores.

The principal delegated. She clearly allowed the most knowledgeable teacher in the building about reading, the reading specialist, to be in charge of much of the programming with respect to reading, although always in consultation both with the principal and the teachers. The principal also selected a teacher with exten-

sive knowledge of writing instruction to lead the school in its writing instruction, sending the message that this teacher's view on writing was to be valued (e.g., this teacher ran the school in-service program on how writing instruction should adapt to meet the new state testing demands).

The principal had a clear academic focus. She was very aware of what went on in individual classrooms in the school; the researchers observed that she often dropped into classes. In a 2½-hour exit interview with the lead researcher, the principal talked about most of the classes in the school, reflecting on her understanding of the general and differing philosophies of individual teachers and the way these philosophies played out (i.e., the principal was aware of specific practices in the classrooms, practices the interviewer had witnessed). As part of her academic focus, a high priority was to fund as much teacher professional development as possible; she pointed out with pride that her teachers averaged more than 60 hours of professional development each in 2004–2005.

In addition to academic concerns, the principal was also concerned about the prosocial development of Bennett Woods students. Constructive interactions between faculty, between students, and between faculty and students were the goal. In fact, the curriculum and instruction observed at the school were both academic and prosocial, as detailed later in this section.

Teachers and Staff

Classroom teachers who seek out and take advantage of professional development. Professional development was an important vehicle for curricular and instructional improvement, and teachers not only attended in-service development programs but implemented what they learned in their classrooms. For example, when teachers explained their teaching to the researchers, they frequently mentioned how their instruction had been influenced by previous professional development. Everyone seemed to buy into the research-supported perspective that professional development was essential for the school to improve and that professional development in reading and writing instruction can change teaching in ways that impact student achievement (e.g., Consortium on Productivity in the Schools, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Evertson & Smithy, 1999; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996; National Reading Panel, 2000).

The teachers believed so strongly in professional development that they often paid for professional development on their own (i.e., despite the principal's efforts to provide professional development funds, school-provided funds fell far short of teacher demand for professional development). While this study was being conducted, the faculty definitely sought out professional development resources to improve writing instruction, attending several workshops offered in a nearby city. Also circulating among the faculty were materials associated with comprehension strategies instruction, including Harvey and Goudvis's (2000) *Strategies That Work*, Miller's (2002) *Reading With Meaning*, and Zimmermann and Hutchins's (2003) *7 Keys to Comprehension*. The Harvey and Goudvis book was also the subject of a teacher book club, with several members of the faculty meeting biweekly to discuss the content of the book, a form of in-school professional development.

In summary, the faculty were continuing to learn about language arts and the individual students they were teaching, collaborating with each other throughout this process. They actively sought out professional development opportunities and created their own opportunities through self-study and sharing with colleagues. The communication practices among the teachers at Bennett Woods were reflective of an evolving teacher community (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001). That is, many of the teachers were willing to seek out and implement new teaching methods in their classrooms, and these same teachers recognized that their colleagues were valuable resources for their own intellectual renewal. Furthermore, it was striking that all of the professional development that the researchers witnessed or heard about was about language arts.

Teachers were informed about high-stakes assessments and were determined their students would do well. Classroom teachers were determined to prepare their students for the state test and other accountability measures, doing so in ways that enriched the curricula. The faculty had a recent history of preparing students well for the state test, and they had an impact on student performance by aligning their expectations with the test (e.g., see http://www.ccsso.org/projects/Alignment_Analysis/). For example, multiple teachers attributed the school's success on the state writing test to the work of one particular teacher. When this teacher was interviewed formally, she talked about her work to prepare Bennett Woods students for the writing assessment. Several years earlier, she had analyzed the released writing items from the state test as well as the scoring criteria. This analysis included consulting with several individuals around the state known for their expertise in writing and writing as assessed on the state test. This teacher showed the researchers the notebook she had created for other teachers in the building; it provided detailed information about the writing test scoring rubrics. She developed versions of the rubrics for both teachers and parents of students, with the intent that all involved with students get to know what the essays needed to be like in order to earn high grades on the state test. These rubrics covered content and ideas, organization, style, voice, and use of conventions. The notebook also contained strategies that could be taught to students so that they could write the types of essays required on the test.

Shortly before this study began, the state announced new language arts standards for elementary students and that a new state test would be devised that would be based on the new standards. Bennett Woods teachers were on top of these developments. In late March, the reading specialist and informal writing specialist, mentioned above, attended a 2-day meeting focused on the new language arts standards and probable changes in the state test. They obtained the prototype new tests from the state and began to analyze them with respect to content. Shortly after, these two teachers led an all-morning teachers' meeting at the school to provide information to all of the teachers about the new test and changes.

The teachers did more than prepare their students for tests. They analyzed and used the assessment results to inform their instruction with individual students. The Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests were given to every student in the school in spring 2005, and there were other tests targeted at particular grade levels (e.g., Grade 2 students took the Iowa Test of Basic Skills; Hoover, Hieronymus, Frisbie, & Dunbar, 1993). The reading specialist analyzed the

results of each reading test and provided the information in an understandable way to classroom teachers. The lowest performing students on these standardized reading assessments were targeted for remediation, and the reading specialist was in charge of seeing that this occurred. In her interview, the principal was emphatic that she believed that much of the school's success reflected such targeting of resources. Beyond the standardized testing, every classroom included frequent curricular assessment, often designed to mimic anticipated high-stakes accountability. Just about every composition was graded against a rubric, which is consistent with how writing is graded on the state and other high-stakes writing assessments.

Effective support teachers. In addition to the classroom teachers, Bennett Woods Elementary School had support staff who worked extensively with the students who most needed it, including a reading specialist, an ESL specialist, a resource room teacher, and two instructional aids, both of whom were college educated and one of whom was a licensed teacher. At least four or five students in every class, except kindergarten, received some assistance from one or more support teachers. Students who needed the most support received as much as 90 min of such teaching a day, typically either tutoring or small-group instruction. The school recognized the achievement that follows from tutoring and small-group instruction, especially for struggling students (e.g., Hiebert & Taylor, 2000; Scruggs & Richter, 1985; Slavin, 1989).

Among the support teachers, the reading specialist was most salient in promoting reading and writing achievement. Struggling readers met with her four times a week in 30-min, small-group sessions, each of which included all of the struggling readers in the child's classroom. These groups ranged in size from 2 to 7 students. At the primary level, the focus of the instruction was basic reading skills, with individual word recognition emphasized in Grade 1 and decoding of real text increasing in prominence with advancing grade level, consistent with models of beginning reading intervention that work with many struggling beginning readers (see Torgesen, 2004). In Grades 4 and 5, the reading specialist delivered a computer-based program known as HOTS (i.e., Higher Order Thinking Skills; e.g., Pogrow, 1992), which emphasized problem solving and comprehension. For students at all grade levels, the reading specialist also provided some support for writing. For example, during small-group meeting time, she helped primary-level students with writing assignments they struggled with in the regular classroom. A great deal of writing also occurred in the context of the HOTS program.

Classroom teachers strongly believed that students benefited from remediation, and they pointed to tangible evidence of this. For example, one first-grade teacher talked about a struggling student who, with the help of the reading specialist, was decoding at a second-grade level at the end of first grade. Also, all but one of the students in the resource room had performed at grade level on recent standardized tests, and the teachers credited the resource room teacher with this accomplishment.

Special teachers complementing language arts instruction. There was an art teacher, a music teacher, and a physical education teacher, and the art and music teachers were especially active in connecting with the language arts curriculum. Thus, the art teacher often came up with art projects that connected with the curriculum (e.g., paintings inspired by literature such as David McKee's [1989] *Elmer* and Maurice Sendak's [1988] *Where the Wild Things*

Are). The art was posted in the classrooms and hallways, and it was changed as new themes were covered and new books read by the students. The music teacher identified music that related to curricular themes, for example, teaching a dozen American folk songs corresponding to the different U.S. regions that Grade 3 students were studying.

Teaching interns. The local university has a fifth-year, full-year teaching intern program. Eight interns served Bennett Woods Elementary School while this study was being conducted, an unusually large number of interns for one school. The researchers asked the university supervisors why there were so many interns at the school, and the supervisors pointed out immediately that Bennett Woods Elementary was a very good school with a long history of its teachers providing quality internship experiences for university students. These eight interns de facto increased the teaching staffing considerably in the classrooms they were serving. The school demanded much from these interns, and they delivered, providing many carefully prepared lessons and participating in extracurricular activities with students.

Library specialist. The school had a full-time library specialist. Each class visited the library once a week; the librarian read a book or story and discussed books available in the library. After the story, students selected books to check out. The library specialist was aware of the content being covered in the classroom and had books on display reflecting current units being covered in the various classes. The specialist worked to expand the materials in the library and was the main point person in the school's adopt-a-book program, which encouraged students, parents, and staff to provide half the funding for a book, with matching funds to be provided by the school district.

Parents

The school invited parental participation, and most parents actively participated, which is consistent with evidence that parental involvement improves student achievement (e.g., Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000; Miller & Kelley, 1991; Taylor & Pearson, 2004). For example, the family science night was packed with families and teachers participating in many science activities and reading the dozens of student-constructed science projects. Parents came to classroom celebrations of learning (e.g., Grade 2 parents joined their students for a Dr. Seuss celebration). They attended school-wide special assemblies and events such as the "lunch buddies" celebration.

At all levels, many of the homework assignments were designed for students and parents to work on together; for example, rubrics went home so that parents could give meaningful support and feedback on their children's writing assignments. Completed work went home regularly in every classroom, including completed essays (with feedback from teachers), graded tests, and other artifacts of learning. In every class, students took home daily planners, which reminded them of their homework but also provided a communication to the parent about what was expected of the student. Many of the teachers also sent home weekly newsletters, which let the parents know what was happening in the classroom and included homework for the week as well as news of upcoming tests and other big events. Newsletters often included suggestions as to how parents could assist their children with schoolwork.

The school maintained a parent e-mail listserv, which provided messages to parents several times a month. About half the teachers in the school also maintained classroom Web sites, which contained a great deal of information about the curriculum and classroom events. Parents received report cards two times a year. Although parents received information about performance in all areas of the curriculum, the greatest amount of information was provided about reading and writing.

In summary, there were multiple lines of communications and opportunities for interaction between families and the school. Because the researchers always checked in and out of the office, they also had an opportunity to witness communications between the school office and families. The staff consistently knew the parents' children, listened carefully, and interacted constructively to respond to the parents' concerns.

Summary

Bennett Woods Elementary School was a community of interacting players. What these players were immersed in, more than anything else, was a reading- and writing-focused curriculum that was delivered in the context of a very positive school environment. The specifics of the curricular policies supporting reading and writing and the positive tone at the school are addressed in the remainder of the Results section.

Reading- and Writing-Focused Curriculum

Reading and writing definitely were the focus at Bennett Woods Elementary School, and there were three especially salient indicators of that focus: Students experienced many books, students were explicitly taught a great deal about reading, and students wrote a lot and were also taught much explicitly about writing as they did so.

Students Experienced Many Books

The norm at every grade level was for students to be reading several books at a time, consistent with the perspective that voluminous reading and exposure to literature positively affect reading (e.g., A. E. Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001). In the primary grades, each student had a book bin of 10 or more books currently being read at school. Although the book bins mostly included books personally chosen by the students, the bins also contained books being read during language arts or content-area units. In the fourth and fifth grades, students tended to keep their current books in their desks, and the typical student had several chapter books in progress at a time (i.e., some of these were assigned as part of language arts or content-areas lessons, whereas other books were for personal reading time).

In kindergarten and Grade 1, there was some reading of decodable books, although students also read many books that are excellent children's literature. After first grade, however, all of the books being read by students would be considered quality children's literature. Virtually all of the whole-group and small-group reading material, beginning in kindergarten, consisted of excellent children's literature, and these reading experiences motivated students to read other pieces of children's literature. For example, in one second grade, a few of Marc Brown's Arthur books were read

in a group, but more were available in bins in the classroom, and, if students finished those, there were more Arthur books in the library. A central part of Bennett Woods Elementary School's reading instruction involved reading multiple titles by well-known children's authors. The second graders cycled through all the Dr. Seuss books and all of Peggy Parish's Amelia Bedelia titles. As a fourth-grade teacher read Lynn Panagopoulos's (2003) *Journey Back to Lumberjack Camp* to the class, the individual class members read Panagopoulos's (1993) *Traders in Time*.

Every day in each Bennett Woods classroom, the teacher read aloud to the students, usually from books that were more advanced than the average books read by students in the grade level. These readings were always done with enthusiasm by the teacher and with great expression, and they were almost always complemented by discussion with the students about the story and ideas in the text.

Reading instruction went well beyond reading of and exposure to excellent children's books, however, and the various aspects of the school's formal reading instruction are covered briefly in the next subsection. Even so, most elements of reading instruction at the school occurred in the context of reading great stories and books, so the reading instruction had a literature-driven feel to it in most classrooms. Although there was a basal series available, it was used extensively in only one Grade 1 class and not at all after Grade 2.

Teaching Reading

Letter-sound, phonics, and word recognition skills. The district emphasized letter, sound, and word study at kindergarten and Grade 1, consistent with modern perspectives on effective beginning reading instruction (e.g., National Reading Panel, 2000). Thus, during every observation of kindergarten, a large proportion of time was devoted to the letter of the week—reading, writing, and thinking about words that began with the letter and its associated sound. The kindergarten teacher also called attention to rimes in words and modeled using rimes to read new words. There were frequent discussions about confusing letters, such as *p* and *q* and *g* and *q*.

By second semester, when this study was conducted, there was substantial word study (i.e., teaching students to sound out words) in each of the three Grade 1 classrooms. One Grade 1 teacher accomplished much of the word study with workbook exercises, consistent with a specification in the school recommendations. The other two Grade 1 teachers taught phonics in context, which is consistent with whole language approaches, with which they strongly identified (e.g., Dahl & Freppon, 1995). For example, they urged students to "stretch out" words to sound them out and to use the "word wall" to figure out words analogous to "word wall" words. In all the Grade 1 classrooms, students played phonics games. Reading instruction seemed to be paying off for most first graders, and most students were observed reading at least grade-level books during the second semester of first grade; many were even reading Grade 2 level books by the end of the school year. Beginning in kindergarten, there was a concern with developing the most frequent words encountered in reading as sight words (i.e., beginning with the color words and the most common high-frequency words in kindergarten). There were word walls of

such words in every primary-grade classroom, and they continued to expand as the year progressed.

There was some phonics instruction during reading in Grade 2—typically in the form of reminders to sound out words. There was even less phonics instruction in Grade 3 (e.g., students did some make-a-word work; P. M. Cunningham, 1994). Because most Grade 2 and Grade 3 students were reading fluently, there was no longer a need for phonics instruction.

Spelling. Although there was much more letter- and word-level instruction in the primary grades, instruction in phonics and letter-sound regularities also occurred in the context of spelling instruction through Grade 5. There were weekly spelling tests in every class in Grades 1 through 5, and the words for each spelling lesson focused on several of the common (and sometimes confusing) spelling patterns (e.g., *-dge* and *-ge*). Because the school used a basal spelling series, there was systematic coverage and review of all the common sounds in English.

Vocabulary and semantic context analysis skills. Vocabulary was taught continuously. Students had many opportunities to figure out the meanings of words on the basis of internal (e.g., prefixes, suffixes, root words) and external context clues (Sternberg, Powell, & Kaye, 1983), and much of this figuring out occurred in the context of discussions rich in vocabulary. Basically, whenever a word was encountered that was not likely to be known by the students, the teacher stopped and discussed the word. Often, the teacher asked students to tell what they thought the word meant, and the definition was then refined as the teacher reflected on the candidate definitions and solicited more attempts. For example, when explaining the characteristics of a summary, a fourth-grade teacher informed the class that they should describe only the main ideas rather than every single detail because the summary could get redundant. The teacher then questioned the class about the word *redundant*, asking them to explain first what the prefix *re* meant, and students' knowledge that it meant repeating was used to explain the meaning of the entire word.

In Grades 1 through 3, there was strong emphasis on using semantic context clues to determine unknown words. One exercise in which the teacher displayed a passage on an overhead projector with some of the words covered over was observed in all three grade levels. The class attempted to guess the covered words on the basis of the context clues; the teacher wrote down the guesses, eventually revealed the words, and then reflected on why the words made sense given the context clues. This activity was engaging for students, and most students raised their hands for most of the covered words. In third grade, students were given explicit lessons about how to infer the meaning of a word from context clues.

Read-alouds typically included discussions of vocabulary encountered in the text. Spelling instruction also occasioned vocabulary teaching, and the published spelling materials included exercises that required the students to know the meanings of the words (e.g., cloze exercises, make-a-sentence exercises). In addition, during every spelling test, the teacher always used each word in a sentence as it was being presented, a sentence that often explicitly stated the definition of the word (e.g., "Her *curfew* was midnight. She had to be home at that time.").

Content lessons also included substantial teaching of vocabulary, which is consistent with the nature of excellent content-area teaching (e.g. Carlisle, Fleming, & Gudbrandsen, 2000). For ex-

ample, a money lesson in first grade covered *penny*, *nickel*, *dime*, and *quarter*. When the second grade studied the parts of the eye, students were taught and tested on the names of every part of the eye, and such content vocabulary came up often in the weeks that followed their introduction during content lessons. Content vocabulary coverage intensified with increasing grade levels. When teachers in the upper grades began large units of study, they presented a list of vocabulary for each unit (e.g., for the Grade 5 unit on solar energy, there were 21 vocabulary items). Moreover, there was accountability with respect to the content vocabulary at the upper grade levels, as could be seen in the unit tests, which included items tapping the definitions of the unit vocabulary.

By Grades 4 and 5, vocabulary learning was also a central part of the language arts curriculum. The more informal coverage of vocabulary while reading trade books, which typified the primary grades, was replaced by more formal vocabulary expectations in Grades 4 and 5. Thus, novels being read by the entire class in Grades 4 and 5 were accompanied by formal lists of vocabulary. Whereas word walls in the primary grades focused on words that students needed to be able to read, words walls in Grades 4 and 5 focused on vocabulary words that students needed to know.

In Grade 5, students had a "Wonderful Words and Phrases" book, which was intended to help them vary the words they used in their writing but also exposed them to hundreds of vocabulary words—connectives, words representing sounds, words representing movements, synonyms for the basic colors, 300 ways to say *said*, adjectives, adverbs, and homophones. The book also included pages for students to record their own "wow words," words students encountered that they did not know previously.

Comprehension skills and strategies. The emphasis on learning the meanings of vocabulary words was consistent with a more general emphasis that reading was about understanding and making meaning. The students frequently heard remarks such as "The most important part of reading is getting the message." Moreover, the teachers taught the students how to get meaning, encouraging them to use comprehension strategies. Thus, as one first-grade class read a basal story about a bluebird being afraid, a little girl remarked that she had been afraid when she was on a trampoline. The teacher responded, "You made a text-to-self connection. You thought about how your life connects to the text." There were many occasions when the Grade 1 teachers made such a comment when a student reacted to a text, citing text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections. Similarly, teachers noted when students self-corrected, for example, remarking after a self-correction, "Did you re-read that? Good strategy." The Grade 1 teachers also encouraged the use of imagery, with the teachers often asking, "Did you picture that in your mind?" In general, in all the grades, teachers often modeled and reinforced making connections (i.e., using background knowledge to do so), making predictions, and constructing images, which are consistent with diverse perspectives on comprehension strategies instruction (e.g., Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Miller, 2002; Pressley et al., 1992).

Teachers also modeled and taught other strategies. For example, Grade 2 students were frequently asked to report the questions that occurred to them while they read (e.g., writing them down as they read and then bringing them to the reading group), as well as to note the connections they made and the images that occurred to them. Third-grade teachers continued to prompt students' use of connecting, constructing images, and questioning as they read. In

particular, Grade 3 students were encouraged to use reciprocal teaching strategies (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) as they read chapter books together—that is, they were encouraged to make predictions, ask questions, seek clarification (especially of unknown vocabulary words), and summarize. Cuing and discussion of strategy use continued in fourth and fifth grades with the expansion of strategies instruction. Thus, two researchers observed a thorough lesson in Grade 4 on summarizing in which the teacher explicitly made the point that summarizing is different from retelling. There were also observations in Grade 4 of students being encouraged to make inferences about characters by closely reading the text for clues about the character's traits and personality. There were lots of reminders to activate background knowledge before reading, and these continued through fifth grade. For example, before having students read a story about the moon, a Grade 5 teacher prompted the students to activate their prior knowledge, which later proved crucial in the students' being able to figure out the mystery portrayed in the story.

The Bennett Woods Elementary School teachers assessed their students' understanding of what they read, frequently by asking them comprehension questions as they read a text or after the text was read, strategies consistent with Mehan's (1979) and Durkin's (1978-1979) observations (as well as with more recent analyses; e.g., Fisher, 2005) that teachers often ask such comprehension questions. They also had students write the answers to comprehension questions following a reading, and students frequently responded to the questions on the basis of story grammar elements. Other times the questions were tailored to the particular reading, and there were sometimes as many as 10 questions, each of which required a sentence or two to respond. At the upper grade levels, students sometimes were required to respond to informational texts by mapping them out, for example, by identifying the causes and effects specified in the reading.

There was a consistent approach across grades to prompting students to pay attention to the important parts of stories (i.e., to use the story grammar elements to understand a text; e.g., Stein & Glenn, 1979). Beginning in Grade 2, book reports required the students to provide information about the characters, setting, problems encountered, and the ending of books read. At the lower grade levels, the reports required a response of only a sentence or two to each story grammar category, and students were able to complete a book report sheet in a single sitting. More was required in the fourth and fifth grades; fourth-grade book reports required four or more paragraphs, and fifth-grade reports were longer still.

Assessment of students' understanding of informational texts was frequent at the upper elementary grade levels, including information in the social studies basal texts. For example, after reading a short section of the social studies text covering union activity during the Great Depression, Grade 4 students were required to construct notes for how people made it through the Great Depression and what labor unions did for workers. These questions then appeared on the unit test. While Grade 5 students studied the American Revolution, in part by reading a social studies text, they analyzed many causes and effects of the Revolution (e.g., Why did the colonists form the Committee of Correspondence? What was the effect of the Committee?) as well as practiced distilling main ideas and supporting details from text and summarizing the text. Questions testing their understanding of some of the causes and

effects, main ideas and details, and summaries then appeared on the American Revolution unit test.

Although many times the comprehension questions posed to students were ones that had a right (or at least likely) answer, there were also occasions when questions required much more in the way of interpretation by students, especially during the reading of literature. For example, one memorable lesson on haiku in a Grade 5 class included interpretation of about a half dozen poems by the students. The discussion of each involved about 3–5 min of students offering differing interpretations and reflecting on different possibilities. The students reflected much as they wrestled with the possible meanings of the short poems, discussing their feelings and especially the images the poems evoked and noting the personifications in the poems.

Summary. There was much explicit teaching of reading, from letter and sound skills through word recognition, spelling, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies. There also were many checks on progress in reading, and teachers monitored student read-alouds daily, meaning that a teacher listened to a child read at least several times a week. The students also were asked many questions about what they read, which provided a steady stream of data to the teacher about students' reading comprehension. Although much of the reading instruction took place in time allocated to language arts, there was also explicit teaching of reading in the content areas as well. The most salient reading–content connections, however, were through literature, with students always reading and hearing texts connected to current content themes. Reading instruction, content instruction, and children's literature were tightly connected at Bennett Woods Elementary School (and writing, too, as covered in the next section), which is consistent with models of reading instruction validating the positive impact on reading achievement of strong, conceptual instruction through literary connections (e.g., concept-oriented instruction; Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004; also see Palincsar & Duke, 2004).

One more point should be made about reading instruction, however. Consistent with the finding that high language arts achievement depends, in part, on mature oral communications (e.g., Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003), Bennett Woods Elementary students participated in academic conversations every day, beginning in kindergarten. It is true that many of those conversations were conventional classroom discourse, during which the teacher asked questions, the students responded, and the teacher evaluated and reacted to their responses (Mehan, 1979). Nevertheless, many of these conversations required real thinking on the part of students, for example, when students made predictions about what might happen in a story on the basis of clues in the story up until that point. Much more interesting, however, was the fact that Bennett Woods Elementary School teachers expected their students to drive conversations at least some of the time and, more important, that they taught them how to do so. For example, in Grade 3, students were taught to use reciprocal teaching strategies (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) to drive their discussions of books being read; the students made predictions, asked for clarifications, asked questions in general, and constructed summaries during such discussions. Also, before the Grade 3 parents visited for the celebration of learning about the ecosystems unit, the students received a lesson on how to discuss their work with parents and other visitors. The researchers observed the students engaged in quite lively discussions with their

visitors during this celebration—their own parents, other parents, other teachers, and the district superintendent.

During the book club discussions in Grades 4 and 5, students were taught how to keep the discussion interesting—by looking at their notes in their journals to stimulate questions, by choosing to talk about interesting points in the book, and by asking about unfamiliar vocabulary words. They were also asked to reflect before coming to book club meetings on what they could do to get the conversation going, how to show respect for others in the group, how to encourage others to join in the conversation, and how to avoid problems that occurred before. Although the initial book club discussions were short, they became longer and livelier after the teachers provided lessons on book club discussions.

Writing and Teaching of Writing

Beginning in kindergarten, Bennett Woods Elementary School students do a great deal of writing and receive a great deal of writing instruction, which is consistent with substantial data showing that elementary-level students can be taught writing and that such teaching has an impact on writing achievement (for reviews, see MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2005). There was not a single observation of any classroom in which there was no evidence of writing and/or writing instruction, either in the form of writing and writing instruction activities that were observed or recent artifacts of writing (e.g., rough drafts in the teacher's "in" bin; newly posted, recently completed writing).

Thus, Grade 1 students often wrote in response to reading, and teachers requested between one and several sentences in these responses. On one occasion, after reading a story, the first graders had to write three sentences about the nature of the main character; the teacher encouraged students to use picture clues to do so as well as to make inferences based on the behaviors described in the text. Following the reading of another basal story, the students composed lists of the best and worst things the main character of the story did. In general, the spelling and mechanics in these sentences were good, and Grade 1 students were beginning to use rubrics to check and edit their writing.

Grade 2 writing was longer and more demanding. Some basic writing skills instruction continued, such as some practice of printing, and more advanced basics were also practiced, such as writing questions starting with 'wh- words' and composing one-sentence answers to questions. Much more salient, however, was a strong emphasis in Grade 2 on writing paragraphs and up to several-pages-long compositions within a plan, draft, and revise model. Thus, students were prompted to brainstorm before attempting a draft. After drafting, they self-edited, using a rubric to do so. By mid-year, students were writing four- to eight-page books connected to content topics being covered (e.g., Martin Luther King, "My Eyes"), with each page of these little books having one sentence. From there they moved on to page-length paragraphs, letters for correspondence, and written responses to books.

In March, the researchers watched the Grade 3 students write about a time when they had showed determination. The students planned, drafted, and revised this essay over about 2 weeks. They were provided a graphic organizer to assist in their planning that had four circles—one for a definition of determination, one for commentary on what determination is not, one for personal exam-

ples of determination, and one for examples that are not determination. This was complemented by a prewriting activity sheet that led the students through brainstorming about determination: The students reflected together on when they would show determination, what would make them determined, and whether they ever did something that seemed hard (or fearful) at first. There was a similar prompting sheet for drafting, which directed students to write about when they showed determination or when they did something that was hard. After they drafted and even redrafted their essays completely, students used a revision checklist that had nine questions about supporting ideas, mechanics, and word choice, among other things. The researchers noted that often in Grade 3 the students were using editing checklists without teacher prompting to do so, for example, as peers helped one another edit drafts.

Through such planning, drafting, and revising, students received explicit lessons about writing along the way, and many such lessons on various aspects of the writing process were observed in Grade 3. Thus, there was a lesson when the teacher put a student's draft on the overhead projector (with the student's permission) and, in interaction with the class, edited the paper. This editing especially focused on rewordings that would grab the reader's attention better than the wordings in the draft, which is consistent with an emphasis in Grade 3 on word choice during writing. For example, at a point in the draft where the student talked about "a good way," the class thought of alternative words that were less "worn out," such as "a wonderful way" or "an awesome way." The teacher openly praised the writer for using a simile ("I also watched my parents. They were like pros."), which is consistent with an emphasis in Grade 3 on using similes from time to time to make text more interesting.

The Grade 3 students also did much longer and more complicated writing projects. For example, from mid-January until early March, they worked on reports about specific animals as part of a unit on the relationships of living things. These reports had eight sections (e.g., habitat, eating habits, dangers and defenses), each of which had been planned, drafted, and revised according to rubrics, which included attention to word choice and variety, sentence fluency, whether all the points in the paragraph were on the topic, and writing conventions. The students found material for their reports by searching several books and taking notes. Their note taking was assisted by prompts provided by the teacher about information that might make sense to include in the paragraph on the particular topic. Each of these sections resulted in about a page of writing; the final drafts, which were coherent and mechanically excellent, were then word-processed by the students. Throughout this revision process, the Grade 3 teachers urged students to include specific details in their writing, and the Grade 3 students did so.

In Grade 4, the researchers observed much writing in response to text, which was intermingled with writing lessons and sometimes stand-alone lessons on particular skills. There were occasional worksheet assignments on specific points (e.g., a "What is a Noun?" worksheet). There were occasional lessons on particular skills that students had not yet mastered (e.g., several days of lessons and practice on how to use quotation marks). There was some practicing of correcting the grammar in a short piece written by someone else. For the most part, however, writing lessons took place in the context of real writing. So when one of the Grade 4

teachers gave the reading lesson on summarizing discussed earlier, it was the first part of a lesson on writing summaries, in particular, of books. The teacher and class reflected on how a person who had not read the book should be able to understand the main points of the text from a good summary. During the lesson, the students practiced constructing a summary of a page-length article and began to think about how they would be using what they were learning about summarizing to write a book report in the near future. The next day, the teacher modeled constructing a summary of DiCamillo's (2001) *Because of Winn-Dixie*, a book recently read by the class.

In the fall semester of Grade 4, teachers reported that students had considerable practice writing the types of essays that would appear on the state test. Such practice also provided an opportunity to review and build on strategies taught and practiced in Grade 3. In the second semester of Grade 4, the researchers observed quite a bit of writing driven by participation in "book club" discussions (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, George, Hasty, & Highfield, 2004). Students in a class read a book (some of the reading was done independently, some as partner reading, and some as teacher read-aloud) and were given writing activities associated with the reading. Sometimes writing consisted of responding to questions about the reading, and responses were from one to a few sentences long. Sometimes the writing response involved analyzing the text, for example, for a character's traits or the characteristics of the setting. Often, students generated their own questions, writing them out as well as composing answers. There were lessons on how to formulate good questions (e.g., focus on the major themes, questions, and characters of the book) and good answers (e.g., support your ideas with information from text). There were also longer writing assignments, for example, writing a letter to a character in the book. After reading and writing in response to the book, as part of book club, students would then discuss in small groups what they had read and their written responses. In short, the book club format provided substantial practice in writing and more opportunities for writing instruction, and the writing was connected both to reading and to subsequent student discussions of the book read.

In Grade 5, there continued to be a great deal of writing in response to literature. For example, the researchers listened to a Grade 5 teacher read a story, and the students were required to answer (for homework) some comprehension questions, with the expectation that each answer would be a paragraph long and include supporting details to defend it. More generally, the Grade 5 students often read novels and wrote in response to them. Thus, in one of the Grade 5 classes, the researchers were present as students drafted paragraphs describing their own "bridges to Terebithia" (Paterson, 1987). There were lots of book reports in Grade 5; typically they were composed of long paragraphs detailing the setting, character, plot, and analysis of genre, sometimes totaling three to four single-spaced, word-processed pages.

An important emphasis in Grade 5 was interesting word choice, a theme begun in Grade 3 but expanded greatly by Grade 5. The researchers witnessed multiple lessons on word choice. In one, a Grade 5 teacher displayed on the overhead projector the opening paragraphs of a variety of books that were familiar to the class. During the lesson, the teacher reflected on how the author used wording to make the opening paragraph inviting and exciting to readers. The researchers also witnessed several lessons during

which students read draft paragraphs to the class and in which discussion ensued about the "wow" words they had used, with peers often offering suggestions for additional improvements in wording.

In general, the Grade 5 final drafts reviewed by the researchers were also impressive with respect to organization, sentence fluency, voice, and mechanics, perhaps because there was instruction targeted at all these aspects of writing, and students were urged to draft and revise with these characteristics of good writing in mind. Thus, the researchers witnessed a Grade 5 lesson on voice, during which the teacher read parts of three children's books to the class—Tolhurst's (1994) *Somebody and the Three Blairs*, John Scieszca's (1996) *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*, and Anthony Browne's (1998) *Voices in the Park*. As the teacher read the stories, she and the students reflected on how the authors used wording, phrase selection, dialect, and other devices to convey different voices. This reading, reflection, and instruction went on for about 40 minutes. Then the teacher broke the class into four small groups, and each group was assigned to write about attending a baseball game, using dialogue to do so: Each group was assigned to write from a different perspective (i.e., a child who was a baseball fan and thrilled to be at the game, a child who hated baseball and was not, the parents of these children, and a vendor at the game). In less than 20 minutes of drafting and revising, each group produced a paragraph with strong voice consistent with the writing perspective assigned.

Although the researchers were impressed that even during first drafting, the Grade 5 students were aware of issues such as voice and word choice, the really impressive final drafts were largely a product of the demanding editing in Grade 5. The Grade 5 students regularly engaged in self-, partner, and teacher editing. The Grade 5 editing conferences tended to be longer and more demanding than those at the younger grade levels.

In summary, there was a progression of writing demands and instruction with increasing grade levels. By the end of Grade 5, the students responded with impressive writing to demanding assignments. Thus, in late April, Grade 5 students received a lesson introducing Van Allsburg's (1984) *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, which consisted of 15 drawings, each somewhat mysterious and fantastic and accompanied by just a label and a sentence. The assignment was to write a story about one of the pictures, one that did not solve the mystery but included enough clues so that the reader could do so. The story also had to be good in every way that writing can be good, from having complete sentences and correct use of conventions to having a strong, clear voice expressed with appealing words in sentences that flowed well individually and as they connected to the rest of the story. After a week of drafting, revising, and fine tuning, the students' stories did exactly that.

Every Bennett Woods Elementary School student had a writing portfolio, which included writing they had completed independently. These portfolios were passed from teacher to teacher as students progressed through school to provide each student's new teacher with an idea of the child's progress in writing. The researchers read several of the Grade 5 students' writing portfolios. In every case, the progression from grade to grade was impressive, with final products that were interesting, well-organized, and mechanically sound.

A Positive School Environment

Explicit Attempts to Motivate Reading

The teachers believed that awareness of and access to books would go far in motivating students to read (e.g., Elley, 2000). They wanted to excite their students about reading, and the main purpose of the read-alouds was to do so. As one second-grade teacher put it, "I basically will do anything to get them to love reading, because I think reading is the most important thing." In fact, across the school, there were multiple indications that the teachers were willing to do much to encourage students to read. For example, most teachers bought classroom library books for their rooms, because the district funds did not go far enough to permit an excellent classroom library.

Throughout the study, reading incentive programs were ongoing (Gambrell & Marinak, 1997). Thus, in January, students were asked to have their parents document every night that they read for 20 minutes at home. Students who did so for every day of the month attended a half-hour party during a school day in early February, which included a special treat (a donut and a beverage) and the opportunity to select a book to own from an array of the best of children's literature. Similar incentive programs occurred in March, April, and May. More than 70% of the students earned the incentives on each occasion.

Teachers' Use of Many Motivational Mechanisms

In effective classroom and school environments, educators do much to motivate students (i.e., using many different positively motivating mechanisms) and little to undermine motivation (e.g., Brophy, 1981, 2004; Pressley, Dolezal, et al., 2003). In general, the researchers consistently observed teaching with the potential to be highly motivating to students. For example, teachers expressed enthusiasm for what was being covered, praised specific accomplishments of students (Brophy, 1981), scaffolded students who needed assistance to make progress (Wood et al., 1976), matched tasks and demands to the levels of individual students (i.e., teaching in the student's zone of proximal development; e.g., Vygotsky, 1978), encouraged students to use powerful strategies and attribute their success to the use of the strategies (Borkowski, Carr, Relling, & Pressley, 1990), used cooperative learning often (e.g., R. T. Johnson & Johnson, 1989), and connected curricular coverage to the students' lives and worlds in general (see Pressley, Dolezal, et al., 2003, for a review of motivational mechanisms that can occur in classrooms). Almost every page of field notes contained one or more examples of at least one of these mechanisms occurring in the class being observed.

Formal Prosocial Curriculum

In most Bennett Woods Elementary School classrooms, most of the time, the tone was very positive. This was consistent with a school-wide commitment to constructive, prosocial interactions. Susan Kovalik's five life-long guidelines (i.e., trustworthiness, truthfulness, active listening, no put downs, and undivided attention; see <http://www.kovalik.com/founder.htm>) organized the school's approach to character education, and this approach probably contributed to the overall positive feeling in the school. Several teachers supplemented these guidelines with Kovalik's

(1982) 18 social and personal life skills (e.g., caring, initiative, patience, cooperation). More generally, the school and the teachers consistently promoted a prosocial community.

This began in kindergarten. Thus, the kindergarten class recited daily a special pledge, "I pledge that I will do my best and be kind to other people." It continued in Grade 1 and beyond. In second grade, the daily morning meeting ended with a chanting of "Every kid is unique." Second graders were often reminded to "listen with your eyes, ears, heart, and undivided attention." When second graders read aloud, they were reminded to wait until they knew that the class was actively listening. Third-grade students were sometimes asked after recess to talk about how classmates demonstrated the life skills during recess, and in general, they had no trouble coming up with examples. One third-grade teacher consistently reminded students to think about whether characters in stories and novels showed the life-long guidelines or skills. Students in the fourth and fifth grades organized a "caring leaders money collection," raising money for Tsunami disaster relief. The teachers also added prosocial themes to curricular discussions when they could, and the researchers observed student and teacher discussions of perseverance and determination as students studied topics such as the Civil War and slavery. Students were tangibly rewarded for acting in ways consistent with the guidelines; for example, behaviors consistent with the guidelines were often cited as the reason a student was selected for the "lunch buddies" award.

Inclusiveness

Teachers went out of their way to find ways to include all students in activities, which is consistent with the position that inclusion promotes achievement (e.g., Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1994; Carlberg & Kavale, 1980). For example, one researcher was in a kindergarten classroom for a full hour observing a child participate in many ways, completely unaware that the child was blind. A Grade 5 vision-impaired student participated much like other Grade 5 students except for using a machine that enlarged text and pictures.

The teachers seemed especially determined to include recently arrived international students. Such students were sometimes asked how life in their home countries differed from life in the United States (e.g., "Do you have Thanksgiving or something like it in Korea?"). Teachers offered additional support to such students (e.g., more time to work on spelling, more help as students worked on rough drafts), and standards were adjusted appropriately. For example, in younger classes, English language learners sometimes would write a few words when classmates were writing a sentence or two. In the older grades, a few sentences or a paragraph would be acceptable as classmates wrote several paragraphs to several pages. Many international students, and especially those recently arrived, also received additional help from the support teachers.

Individualized Instruction

There was commitment to individualized instruction. For example, a first-grade teacher typically administered two different spelling lists/tests on the basis of her students' pretest scores, with a longer and more challenging list for students with higher pretest scores. The first- and second-grade teachers divided their classes into multiple guided reading groups on the basis of the students'

particular learning difficulties (e.g., comprehension, expression, word identification). A second-grade teacher constantly modified her lessons on the basis of the learning needs of her students, providing differentiated reading groups as well as differentiated math assignments. Some of the first- and second-grade teachers attended to individual student learning needs by strategically seating struggling students together in close proximity to the front of the classroom, making it easier for the teacher to monitor these students and provide assistance.

The researchers noted how constructively support was offered to students. For example, sessions with the remedial reading teacher were referred to as “going to book club.” Also, the resource rooms were well equipped and attractive (e.g., the reading room and the resource room had many, many attractive volumes of children’s literature, and the centerpiece of the reading room was a very comfortable couch that was inhabited by stuffed animals, so these were appealing places for the students). The researchers noticed that supported students often dropped by to visit their support teachers before and after school and during recesses. There was no stigma that the researchers could detect associated with going for instruction in the support classrooms or for interacting with the support teachers.

Encouragement of Self-Regulation

Although support was available as needed, the teachers encouraged their students to assume responsibility for their learning in ways that should positively impact motivation and self-regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Beginning in first grade, teachers spoke of the importance of “making plans” and encouraged students to plan their work carefully. First- and second-grade teachers also provided their students with reading choices (e.g., reading alone, reading with partners), with the most salient choice being that students could choose many of the books they would be reading (albeit, sometimes with help). Grade 1 and 2 classrooms also included learning center activities, and students were expected to regulate themselves at the centers. In the latter grades, the teachers expected even more responsibility from their students. By third grade, students were making the decisions of whether to edit their writing on their own or to work with a peer and whether to buddy read on a particular day or to read alone. Moreover, assignments often demanded even more in terms of self-regulation, from planning to execution. Thus, each third-grade student was responsible for leading the class discussion of a chapter from the latest book club novel. The third-grade teacher prepared students for their leadership roles with prompting questions from the “leader’s guide,” which included various comprehension strategies (e.g., summary, clarification, questions, predictions), but ultimately, the student led the group. In the fourth and fifth grades, the responsibilities of student leaders during book club increased. Fourth- and fifth-grade student leaders were responsible for leading the discussion in small peer groups, establishing goals for the discussion, and reflecting with their peers on the group’s progress.

An important part of self-regulation includes monitoring and reflecting on performances and behaviors. The researchers observed all of the teachers encouraging their students to reflect on their learning efforts. For example, students self-regulated their writing with rubrics beginning in Grade 1, and there were more

expansive rubrics in the upper grades. Third-grade students reflected on their learning efforts in response to teacher prompts (e.g., “What went well today?” “Who can share?”). With increasing grade level, prompted self-reflections became more demanding (e.g., “Does your first sentence really grab the reader’s attention? . . . and if it doesn’t, why not?”).

Summary

The efforts to create a positive learning environment were all interrelated, and all were focused on the goal of encouraging individual students as much as possible, especially encouraging them to become constructive class members and self-regulated learners. That is, the positiveness was not a passive acceptance of the students, but rather an affirmation of accomplishments and a simultaneous demand that the students continue to grow in their prosocial conduct and self-regulated learning.

Supplementary Investigation

There are many elements in interaction at Bennett Woods Elementary School that potentially contribute to the language arts achievement observed there. Are some of these elements more important than others? We felt that the staff of the school might be able to inform us on this critical issue. Thus, in fall 2005, the staff was asked to complete a questionnaire on which they rated the elements in Table 1 with respect to their importance in accounting for the high language arts achievement at the school, with a rating of 1 indicating *no importance* and a rating of 5 indicating *extremely important*. Twenty members of the staff completed the survey, including all but 2 of the 14 classroom teachers who were observed (two teachers retired) plus support teachers, the principal, and the instructional aides. Their mean ratings are contained in Table 1.

Most striking was that most of the elements in Table 1 were considered to have at least *much importance* in producing achievement, which emphasizes that the staff agreed that producing language arts achievement involves contributions from all the players in the school and many curricular and instructional decisions made at the school and district levels. Even the two lowest rated items—having a modern, excellent building and practice of printing and handwriting—received ratings in the *some importance* category.

Discussion

The intent of a grounded theory analysis is to produce a theory and associated hypotheses, in this case about how a school serving a middle-class, relatively advantaged population produces high reading and writing achievement. The overarching hypothesis that emerges is that a large number of elements supporting achievement are aligned at the school—that is, the people, a strong literacy-focused curriculum, and a positive social environment. All of these factors in combination are required to produce the very high achievement at Bennett Woods Elementary School.

The first tenet of the theory is that the people of Bennett Woods Elementary School definitely mattered, with the principal, in particular, clearly making language arts achievement a high priority in the school and placing faculty who could co-lead in positions to do so. The principal also directed discretionary resources in ways to

support reading and writing instruction, for example, providing funding for a huge expansion of the number of books in the library and for field trips connected to reading experiences (e.g., buses and tickets for several classes of students to attend a play at the university based on a well-known piece of children's literature). Other people at Bennett Woods Elementary School also mattered, including the faculty and staff, who definitely shared the principal's vision for language arts as a priority in a highly academically focused school, one in which state, district, and self-imposed expectations with respect to language arts teaching were embraced. The teachers' enthusiasm for learning more about language arts and how to deliver quality reading and writing instruction was apparent from their commitment to professional development and their reflection with their colleagues on the curriculum and its improvement for the next year and beyond. It also helps that the preponderance of Bennett Woods Elementary School students arrive at the school well prepared for kindergarten, which permits a generous allocation of available remediation resources to students who require assistance.

Next, the language arts curriculum was strongly balanced with respect to skills instruction and holistic reading and writing experiences. The balancing in the primary grades especially makes sense relative to recent, analytical conceptions of balance. Both Connor, Morrison, and Katch (2004) and Juel and Minden-Cupp (2000) reported that more intensive skills instruction results in greater primary-grades reading achievement for students with weak reading skills; in contrast, more holistic instruction results in greater primary-grades reading achievement for students with stronger reading skills. At Bennett Woods Elementary School, the students receiving remediation received a large dose of skills instruction. More typically achieving students and those with strong reading skills received more holistic reading and writing instruction. That said, there was substantial teaching of reading and writing skills and strategies across the elementary grades, with teachers consistently explaining, modeling, and scaffolding the word recognition, comprehension, and composing strategies that are part of skilled reading and writing (Duffy, 2003). There were also strong connections across the curriculum from year to year, so that the language arts experienced by a student meshed as the student progressed through the grades. There was careful thinking about what should happen in each grade with respect to every aspect of the curriculum and strong commitment by the faculty to deliver a curriculum that cohered across the years.

Last, Bennett Woods Elementary School students experienced a consistently positive environment, one that encouraged them to strive to grow as readers and writers. Their growth was fostered by instruction and demands matched to their individual needs and capacities, and students were encouraged to work in a self-regulated fashion. Caring teachers make a huge difference in students' lives (Noddings, 2003; Wentzel, 1997); Bennett Woods teachers genuinely cared about their students' academic and personal needs.

In summary, the successes at Bennett Woods Elementary School reflect years of immersion in a well thought-out curriculum that is delivered in an inviting way by teachers who work hard to figure out how to deliver the curriculum well, in ways that connect to the needs of all students. The curriculum has taken years to develop and is informed by the latest instructional advances being showcased in professional development, and the curriculum continues

to improve as teachers reflect on their experiences and emerging demands and expectations. The principal, faculty, and staff were highly committed to all students at Bennett Woods Elementary achieving at as high a level as possible. One proof of the commitment is that a high proportion of class time was spent engaged in activities requiring high teaching effort (i.e., direct explanation, modeling, and scaffolding). Another is that the teachers worked overtime to participate in professional development that improved their teaching. Thus, much that is summarized in Table 1 boils down to a well-qualified and determined faculty and staff delivering high-quality language arts curricula in ways likely to motivate students to engage in learning to read and write and in actual reading and writing.

The Challenge of a Comparison Condition

One obvious criticism of this work is that it is impossible on the basis of the case study alone to know which of the elements in Table 1 occur only in schools producing high achievement and which ones are most causal with respect to the achievement in the school. One strength of previous work by our research group at the classroom level was that comparisons of effective and ineffective classrooms were possible, with our previous work having between 9 and 29 classrooms, depending on the particular study (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, et al., 2001; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998). Given the resources required to analyze a school, it was not possible to conduct a study comparing several schools. What we intend to do in the short term is to identify more schools producing very high achievement relative to otherwise similar schools and analyze them. Thus, if we see the same instructional elements again and again in other schools that produce high achievement among relatively advantaged students, confidence in the hypothesis advanced in the last subsection will increase.

The staff's commitment to language arts achievement was summarized well in this comment from a third-grade teacher new to the school in 2004–2005, who had substantial experience in other schools before coming to Bennett Woods Elementary School:

The teachers at BW are dedicated beyond that of most schools. Many are at school on weekends, or late at night. Continuing education is not just a requirement of the [state], but something that most look forward to, and are continually searching for. There is not a teacher in this building who is content to sit back and use the same old "stuff" from the previous year. In addition to that, we work together, sharing information, successes, and, of course, expectations (in a kind and gentle way) for the upcoming grades. The effort that the teachers here put into their jobs is astounding.

Another way to reflect on Bennett Woods Elementary School in comparison to other schools is with respect to recently adopted state standards, which rival the most demanding state standards in the country (see www.achieve.org). As this study was conducted, the Bennett Woods faculty worked to adjust to the new state requirements, as modifications needed to be in place the year following this investigation. These adjustments were not difficult for the Bennett Woods teachers, however, reflecting the fact that the district-specified and actual school-enacted curricula covered well the language arts competencies that the state expected elementary schools to teach. The biggest challenge for Bennett

Woods faculty was that genre-coverage expectations as a function of grade level were very different in the new standards compared with the old, so a great deal of activity occurred during spring 2005 that centered around identifying books that could represent the genres to be taught at each grade level. That activity continued into the summer.

That the new standards did not seem a big deal was surprising to the lead investigator, who had co-chaired the state committee to change the Kindergarten to Grade 8 standards and, in that role, had attended many meetings where he heard much complaining from many schools that the new standards simply demanded too much change for them. That sentiment was not detected at Bennett Woods Elementary School, reflecting the fact that the school was already close to teaching the curricula that the state felt should be taught in all schools.

Suppose that we are right that many elements are required in interaction to produce high achievement, even in a neighborhood that is not socioeconomically disadvantaged. If so, then even one of those elements missing might matter, and thus, there are many ways to be a weak school, just as in previous work on effective teaching, it was found that there were many more ways to be an ineffective teacher than an effective one (Pressley, Dolezal, et al., 2003). For the present, however, we will focus on mapping the characteristics of very effective schools and forgo documenting the characteristics of ineffective schools, including their potential variability. Perhaps the bottom line is that we feel a much greater need to document where schools could and probably should get, rather than to document additionally what happens in schools when they do not work well, which has received a great deal of attention over the decades.

Once we have an understanding of what goes on in effective schools, the challenge will be to attempt to transform less effective schools to be like more effective schools. As that effort occurs, there will be opportunities to test whether such transformation is causal with respect to academic achievement, something not possible in a grounded theory analysis. Before it would be justified to get to such a causal analysis, however, it is necessary to have a tenable hypothesis about what needs to happen in a school for it to be highly effective, and grounded theory analyses, such as this one, provide a good means for such hypothesis generation.

Reservations

We conducted a negative case analysis of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which involved each investigator reflecting on the conclusion of a close-to-finished version of the results. The investigators did so by rereading their field notes to detect any observations or data that would contradict conclusions in the results. Only slight revisions in the results occurred because of this review. An additional goal was identifying concerns about the school. In fact, we had some.

Not All Extremely Engaging Teachers

When we applied the criterion used in research on *very engaging* teachers (i.e., that at least 90% of students be engaged in academic activity requiring thoughtfulness at least 90% of the time; Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, et al., 2001; Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998), the majority of teachers at Bennett Woods

Elementary School did not meet the criterion. More positively, five of the classroom teachers did meet this stringent criterion, according to at least three of the four researchers. Seven other classroom teachers would have been in the *moderately engaging* category in the previous work (i.e., clearly the majority of students were thoughtfully engaged the majority of the time), with these teachers more near the top of the category than the bottom—in these seven classrooms, much of the time, most of the students engaged in thoughtful activity. These seven teachers varied enough so that it is not possible to point to any one characteristic that could be improved. Thus, in some classrooms, it might have helped if there was greater connection from activity to activity. In others, transitions were not as smooth as they could have been. Some of these teachers could have monitored their students better.

Finally, two teachers raised real concerns for the observers; all four researchers agreed that the majority of their students often were not engaged. These teachers consistently assigned tasks to students that were easy, tasks that did not require much thoughtfulness, so that although most of their students were on task most of the time, often they were doing tasks not requiring much thinking on their part (e.g., doing workbook pages without any need to pause to figure out answers; coloring). For completeness with respect to this point, we add that, although we observed the reading specialist, the English-as-a-second-language teacher, the resource room teacher, and the teacher aids less completely and systematically than the classroom teachers, all five of these individuals seemed very engaging, albeit they were working in one-to-one and tutoring situations.

Too Much Testing

The teachers shared our second reservation: There was just too much testing, demanded by multiple political pressures at the district, state, and national levels. The state testing consumed much time for students in Grades 4 and 5 in January, with preparation for the state test receiving substantial attention in the late fall of the school year. The Gates–MacGinitie Reading Tests came in the spring, and some grades also had to take the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, so there was testing occurring somewhere in the school for most of the month of April. Beyond the sheer volume of the testing, the teachers reported that some students had strong, negative reactions to the testing, and there were several reports of students crying or being otherwise observably upset when they perceived they could not meet testing demands. The teachers were also concerned about the forced testing of students very new to the country. The teachers at Bennett Woods Elementary School reported feeling powerless in the testing system, unable to make input that would be taken seriously. The researchers found themselves feeling that, in multiple ways, all the testing at Bennett Woods had serious down sides, at a minimum distracting the teachers and students as it consumed resources (i.e., time and money) that could have been used for other purposes.

Squeezing Out Content-Area Instruction

One reason that there was enough time for all the language arts instruction that occurred at Bennett Woods Elementary School is that social studies and science were sacrificed somewhat. This was particularly pronounced at the primary-grade levels. Most of the

Bennett Woods teachers had the day's schedule written on the front blackboard. Sometimes the scheduled social studies and science just did not happen: If there was a need for more time for reading or writing, the time was taken at the expense of social studies or science. Yes, there was lots of reading and writing connected to the social studies and science themes in the primary grades, but, still, the formal time intended for these content areas sometimes went elsewhere. In the upper elementary grades, the students changed classes for math, science, and social studies, and thus the scheduling of these content areas was more formal. Still, at the April meeting, a main point of discussion was cutting back science at Grades 4 and 5 in the next school year because of the increasing demands with respect to reading and writing. In these discussions, the teachers were clear that the most important part of the accountability system was language arts and that if other content areas had to be reduced to accommodate language arts, so be it. Although science performance on the state test did not seem to suffer from less concern with science instruction, because the school showed very high marks on the Grade 5 state science test, social studies performance did suffer, because the passing rates in social studies were much closer to the state average than were the passing rates for any of the other tests that the school took.

Not Much Time for Collaboration

As much as the teachers interacted and cooperated over curricula and the general smooth running of the school, several of the teachers remarked that the staff did not have enough time to reflect together and that many of the connections were made "on the fly." The observers saw that, for example, as decisions were made about which books would be read by entire classes next year, the reading specialist had many quick and short discussions with classroom teachers.

Staff Tensions Over Curricular Directions

The school was still experiencing some tension following a merger with another school, which had forced four primary teachers to move to Bennett Woods Elementary School in 2003–2004. This was especially problematic because the other school had a predominantly whole language philosophy at the primary level, whereas Bennett Woods Elementary School had more of a skills emphasis, although in the context of reading a great deal of literature and composing. This tension seemed especially high at the beginning of the study; it was mentioned at the initial briefing, by several faculty in passing comments as they explained their curricula to the observers during observer visits to classrooms, and by several faculty in formal interviews. The concerns seemed less pronounced by the end of the study, however. One reason may have been that, for the second year in a row, standardized test scores in the classrooms of the teachers identifying with whole language were as good as those in the other classrooms.

Summary and Significance of the Study

Even this school, with so many positives, had some challenges to face. The challenges did seem small, however, relative to the many strengths in the school and the generally smooth running of the school and individual classrooms. More work like that reported

here can go far in illuminating what goes on in effective schools. The critical elements (i.e., people, a strong literacy-focused curriculum, and the positive social environment) that contributed to Bennett Woods Elementary School's high achievement are validated by other research and theory on effective schools, literacy instruction, and educational motivation (e.g., Duffy, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Taylor et al., 2000; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). This study is part of a series of studies investigating the critical elements that contribute to the effectiveness of schools in different contexts. Delineating the factors that are present in schools with high achievement can inspire school-wide reform, research-based initiatives, and future quasi-experimental investigations of causality. Although there is a need for more such work on schools that serve disadvantaged populations well, there is also a need to study schools like Bennett Woods Elementary.

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