A few years back, Roehrig, Pressley, and Sloup (2001) observed several kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 classrooms of Reading Recovery–trained teachers. What we discovered in those classrooms was teaching very much affected by the Reading Recovery training the teachers had experienced. In particular, these teachers taught their students to use many of the strategies taught in Reading Recovery, including the following:

- Students were encouraged to reread books to the point of fluency.
- They were taught to use the physical movements encouraged in Reading Recovery, which included pointing to words as they are read, moving from left to right and top to bottom on a page, using their fingers to create spaces between words when writing, and clapping out the sounds of words.
- Students were encouraged to stretch words in order to sound them out and write them.
- They were taught to look for chunks in words (e.g., rimes such as -ate, -ay, and -it) and to use the chunks to read words.
- Students were encouraged to use multiple cues as they read, using letter- and word-level cues to read, but also picture and other semantic context cues to check their reading of text.

The students were taught these strategies while being immersed in teaching that was consistent with Reading Recovery. Thus, there was much writing of individual letters in these classrooms and much attention to letters and their sounds, included as part of reading words. Students repeatedly looked at words and rewrote them in order to acquire their spellings. Teachers previewed books for students and encouraged the reading of appropriately leveled books. Students wrote in response to reading, sometimes with the teacher acting as a scribe. The teachers taught punctuation explicitly. There was much use of cut-up sentences and paragraphs. For struggling readers, there were individual lessons that looked much like Reading Recovery lessons, except that they were shorter, consistent with the 10- or 15-minute individual lessons that are possible for struggling readers in whole classrooms. In short, the literacy mornings in these classrooms were flooded by instruction informed by the Reading Recovery training the teachers had received.

Is this a good thing? For much of the past decade, we and our colleagues have studied intensely the nature of primary-grade teaching that engages students and results in impressive achievement; in doing so, we have had much opportunity to witness both exceptionally engaging and effective teaching and not-so-effective teaching (Pressley, Dolezal, et al., 2003; Pressley, Roehrig, et al., 2003). There are huge differences in the teaching that occur in exemplary versus more typical and weak primary-grade classrooms. Most important in this context, what went on in the primary-grade classrooms headed by Reading Recovery–trained teachers had much more in common with the teaching in exemplary classrooms than in other classrooms.

First, exemplary classrooms are typified by a great deal of instruction and, during the literacy morning, a great deal of instruction about how to read and write. This instruction is quite explicit with lots of opportunities to practice by reading real books and doing writing, often in response to what has been read. Such density of instruction was a fact of life in the classrooms of Reading Recovery–trained teachers. These were instructionally busy places, with the teachers clearly knowing a great deal about how to teach beginning reading and acting on what they knew, filling the morning with instruction.

Second, a hallmark of exemplary teachers is that they monitor students carefully and make instructional decisions on the basis of their observations.
of student reading and writing processes. Such monitoring was transparent in these classrooms. The teachers were constantly attending to how the child was attempting to read and write as well as the strategies the child was using, with subsequent instruction adjusted to the child. Thus, if a child was not paying attention to word chunks during reading, the teacher might have given a mini-lesson, pointing to chunks in words that the student was struggling to decode. With respect to the specific books children were reading, the teachers made certain that the level was well-matched to the youngster: not so easy that the child breezed through the book, but difficult enough that the book could only be read with some effort at first.

Third, a key teaching technique among exemplary teachers is scaffolding, which is providing enough support for students to make progress without doing the task for them. We witnessed a great deal of such scaffolding in the classes headed by former Reading Recovery teachers; these teachers gave gentle prompts and hints to remind students of the strategies they were learning and could apply presently without doing it for them.

Fourth, another hallmark of exemplary teachers is that they encourage their students to be self-regulated (see especially Bohn, Roehrig, & Pressley, 2004). The centerpiece of Reading Recovery is the development of readers who are self-regulated strategy users who move through text on their own, use word attack strategies on their own, monitor their own reading and comprehension, and use writing strategies (from the finger-spacing strategy to rereading their own text to see if it makes sense). The encouragement of such self-regulation in students was apparent in the classrooms headed by the Reading Recovery-trained teachers. Yes, the teachers scaffolded but only when the students required it, backing off and letting the students proceed on their own whenever they could.

Fifth, exemplary classrooms are very motivating, positive places (Dolezal, Welsh, Pressley, & Vincent, 2003; Pressley, Dolezal, et al., 2003; Pressley, Roehrig, et al., 2003). The teaching is so engaging that there is little need to discipline; when discipline does occur, it is effective and everyone moves on quickly. In general, we saw a great deal of such positiveness in the classrooms headed by Reading Recovery-trained teachers.

In short, the classrooms headed by the Reading Recovery-trained teachers looked very much like the classrooms of exemplary primary teachers we have studied. In making this point we should note, however, that in the study of Reading Recovery-trained teachers, we made no attempt to assess the reading achievement in these classrooms. One of the challenges for those associated with Reading Recovery is to determine just how effective Reading Recovery-trained teachers are when they return to the classroom. In this era of high accountability even in the primary grades, it should be possible to do some low-cost evaluations of the achievement in classrooms headed by teachers trained in Reading Recovery versus achievement in other classrooms. All that is required is to look at gain scores in primary-grade classrooms as a function of whether the teacher has received training in Reading Recovery. We suspect that such classrooms are likely to have higher achievement gains than in many other primary-grade classrooms.

In the exemplary primary-grade studies, the classrooms observed differed in the degree of student engagement. This was associated with differences in achievement as measured several different ways: level of books read, quality of writing, and in some studies, standardized test performance (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001). Some teachers were effective: their students were consistently engaged in reading and writing so that by the end of the year they could write several pages with good mechanics and spelling as well as read books above grade level. Two other groups of teachers were less effective, with student engagement either more variable (typical teachers) or consistently low (ineffective teachers); student reading and writing were similarly less impressive. In addition, the standardized reading test scores of effective (i.e.,
Given that the classrooms headed by Reading Recovery–trained teachers were much more like the exemplary classrooms than the bottom 70% of primary-grade classrooms, there is very good reason to expend resources to evaluate the impact of Reading Recovery training as professional development for classroom teachers.

Over the years of observing primary-grade classrooms, 30% at most fell into the exemplary category. Another 30% produced such low engagement and little evidence of achievement that we termed them weak classrooms. The 40% or so that were in the middle, sadly, seemed closer to weak than exemplary in many cases. We concluded, based on this work, that there is very real concern for the quality of primary-grade literacy teaching in this country. There needs to be some hard thinking about what can be done to transform the bottom 70% of primary-grade classrooms so that they are more like the best 30%. Given that the classrooms headed by Reading Recovery–trained teachers were much more like the exemplary classrooms than the bottom 70% of primary-grade classrooms, there is very good reason to expend resources to evaluate the impact of Reading Recovery training as professional development for classroom teachers.

In making the recommendation for serious evaluation of the impact of Reading Recovery training as professional development, we do so confident that this is a model with some stretch. For example, Roehrig et al. (2001) observed kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 classes. The way the model was adapted was different at each grade level. The emphasis on letter and very beginning reading skills at kindergarten gave way to much more emphasis on reading of actual books at Grade 1. By Grade 2, the approach was used mostly as an in-class tutorial approach for the students who were struggling the most. Thus, we concluded that the professional development at least could stretch to cover kindergarten through Grade 2.

About the Authors

Michael Pressley currently is a member of the faculty of the College of Education at Michigan State University. He has published over 250 articles, chapters, and books. His writing reflects a wide range of interests and expertise, from work on children's memory, to research on the development of cognitive monitoring skills, to his studies of effective reading instruction. His book Reading Instruction That Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching has received considerable critical acclaim and is a leading seller in the area of literacy research, now in second edition. His most recent books include Learning to Read: Lessons From Exemplary First-Grade Classrooms and Comprehension Instruction, both published by Guilford. Mr. Pressley is a leading expert in primary-level literacy education.

Alysia D. Roehrig has a Ph.D. in developmental psychology and is currently an assistant professor of educational psychology and learning systems at Florida State University and the Florida Center for Reading Research. Her research interests are in the areas of teacher quality and effective elementary teaching (related to improving literacy development and fostering student motivation).
It is easy to arrive at false assumptions about a process as complex as learning to read. Firstly, we are likely to average a vast amount of evidence in order to arrive at a program decision. Secondly, we may do this on the basis of superficial or highly selected observations. Thirdly, our assumption may be the result of an oversimplified, logical analysis of the task which bears little relationship to the ways in which individual children learn.

*Observing Young Readers* (1982) p. xi

Reading is a complex process in which the child must develop “control systems to manage the different types of information and to manage the assembly of working systems needed to get the problem-solving done.”

*Change Over Time in Children's Literacy Achievement* (2001) p. 128

**References**


