

The Case for Adaptability as an Aspect of Reading Teacher Effectiveness

In a sixth-grade language arts classroom, the teacher is conducting a lesson on questioning as a comprehension strategy. Although the teacher has focused on questioning throughout the year, she is now modeling questioning in a read-aloud. Next, students are encouraged to track their questions on sticky notes as they read a high-interest article on sea turtles. As she monitors students' work, the teacher notices that three of her lower-performing students are not writing anything on their sticky notes. Seeing this, she adapts her instruction, telling the rest of the class to share two of their questions with a neighbor, while she pulls the three students into a group and does a basic review of asking questions when reading.

In this example, the teacher takes advantage of a teachable moment. She was closely monitoring her students and, noticing students struggling with the task, adapted her instruction to provide targeted, explicit instruction to students who demonstrated the need. In this article, we present this sort of adaptability as an important component of effective teaching.

“Defining” Effective Teaching

Teachers have always been professionals whose effectiveness is judged not only by their administrators, but also by society as a whole. Yet, today, as in the past, defining teacher effectiveness

is unwieldy at best. Conceptions of teacher effectiveness have shifted with the current of the times. For example, at the turn of the century, a “teacher’s good moral standing was typically at the center of their evaluation concerns. Thus, teachers were largely evaluated on their personal characteristics rather than a knowledge base about effective teaching and learning” (Ellett & Teddlie, 2003, p. 103). More recently, research in the late 1970s and early ’80s gave us lists of routines that were associated with student achievement, such as detailed lessons with clear objectives that include introductions (Brophy & Good, 1986). This research provided insight into the procedures that frame effective teaching, but did little to define effective teaching in the complexity of classroom instruction. Today, students’ high-stakes test scores are often used to evaluate teacher effectiveness. This indicator of effectiveness, like earlier conceptions, is flawed. For example, teachers who use a prescriptive curriculum focusing on test-taking strategies may see higher test scores, but is that effective teaching?

We know that a prescriptive, rigid approach to education is not best practice (Pearson, 2007). Rather, research has shown that effective teachers adapt their instruction to meet the needs of diverse students and situations. For example, Ede (2006) stated: “Curriculum must be flexible so that teachers are able to construct lessons that will be of high interest to their unique group of students, and actively engage them in creating knowledge” (p. 32). Engagement is a critical aspect of students’ literacy learning (Wigfield et al., 2008).

Consider the following example. In a seventh-grade language arts class, the teacher brings

Exemplary teachers create a positive classroom environment, incorporate opportunities for discussion, provide explicit strategy instruction, integrate literacy and subject matter, allow for extended reading and writing, and give students choices.

in a pomegranate because many students do not know what it is, and the fruit is essential to a story they are beginning. The fruit intrigues the students, and they pass it around and examine it enthusiastically. Capitalizing on this enthusiasm, the teacher adapts her instruction by pulling up the pomegranate Wikipedia page on the Smartboard and discussing the extensive information provided on the website, as well as her personal penchant for the fruit.

This teacher built upon student interest and continued to expand their background knowledge about a concept central to their reading. Classroom-based research supports this type of adaptability as a component of effective teaching.

Research on exemplary reading teachers has provided much insight into the characteristics of high-quality teachers. For example, exemplary teachers create a positive classroom environment, incorporate opportunities for discussion, provide explicit strategy instruction, integrate literacy and subject matter, allow for extended reading and writing, and give students choices (Allington & Johnston, 2002). Repeatedly, studies identify adaptability as a characteristic of effective teachers. Williams and Baumann (2008), for instance, stated the following:

Excellent teachers demonstrated instructional *adaptability*, or an ability to adjust their instructional practices to meet individual student needs. For successful teachers, this flexibility appeared to be second nature; they were able to sense and respond to diverse students and their changing needs. (p. 367)

Clearly, recent characterizations of effective teachers, both in and out of the field of reading, describe high-quality teachers as flexible, responsive, and adaptive (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; International Reading Association, 2003).

Adaptability as an Important Characteristic of Effective Literacy Instruction

An adaptation is an instructional interaction where teachers modify their instruction in response to student needs (Mascarenhas, Parsons, & Burrowbridge, 2010; Parsons, Davis, Scales, Williams, & Kear, 2010). Adaptability is crucial for optimal student learning because adaptations promote student engagement, processing, and critical thinking (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Consider the teacher's decision to further explore pomegranates described above. This teacher capitalized on students' enthusiasm and continued to build their background knowledge about an essential component of the story.

Researchers have labeled adaptive teaching in a variety of ways: "responsive elaboration" (Duffy & Roehler, 1987), "adaptive metacognition" (Lin, Schwartz, & Hatano, 2005), "adaptive expertise" (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005), "pedagogical moment" (Vagle, 2006), and "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Fairbanks, Cooper, Masterson, & Webb, 2009). The research supporting these theories, however, is limited.

Because adaptability is frequently associated with effective teaching, our research team has studied reading teacher adaptability, conducting over 40 case studies in classrooms over the past six years. This research has provided insight into how and why teachers adapt their instruction (Duffy et al., 2008; Parsons, in press; Parsons et al., 2010). What follows are the findings of two studies in middle grades classrooms that advance our understanding of teacher adaptations by suggesting that adaptability affects student comprehension and engagement.

Our Research on Teacher Adaptability

The first study was conducted in four classrooms at a diverse, urban middle school. Data collection and analysis of teacher adaptations followed the established procedures of previous research

Teacher	Adaptation Score	Comprehension Growth
A	16	2.06
B	9	2.4
C	4	0.71
D	1	0.57

Figure 1. Teachers' adaptation scores and their students' comprehension growth

(Duffy et al., 2008; Parsons et al., 2010). Adaptations were identified through observation (unplanned instructional actions not included in the lesson plan) and verified in post-observation interviews. In addition, students' reading comprehension was measured by analyzing their summaries of a reading passage before and after the observation period. The number and thoughtfulness of teachers' adaptations and students' comprehension growth were calculated. If a teacher had a higher adaptation score *and* that teacher's class showed higher reading comprehension growth, it suggests an association between teacher adaptations and student reading comprehension growth.

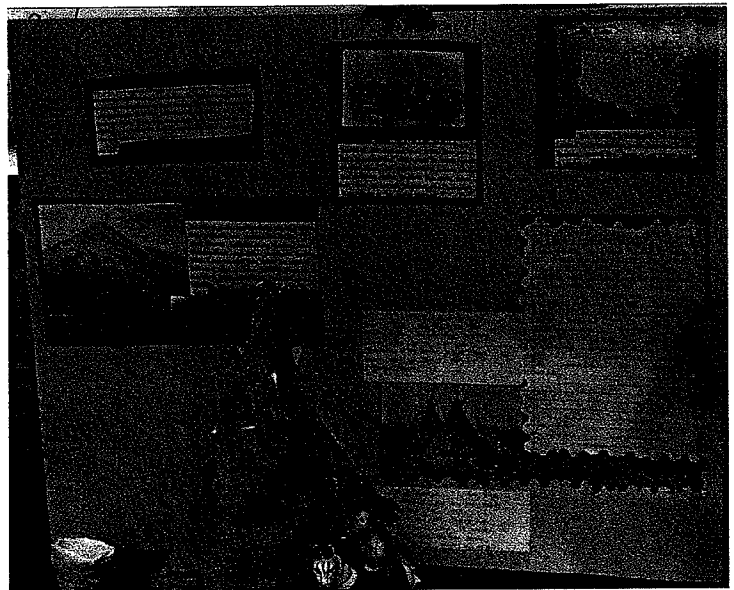
As Figure 1 shows, this study demonstrates a positive association between teachers' overall number of adaptations and students' reading comprehension growth. There is a striking difference in the adaptations teachers A and B made compared to teachers C and D.

The second project was an in-depth case study of one sixth-grade classroom. The purpose was to examine the relationship between teacher adaptations and student engagement. Two researchers observed the language arts instruction in this classroom weekly across five months. One observer documented teacher adaptations, and the other observer documented the engagement of three target students. The teacher and target students were interviewed weekly. Student work samples were also collected.

Findings illustrated that this teacher frequently adapted her instruction when working individually with students. Also, student engagement consistently increased when receiving one-on-one attention from the teacher; increases were most significant for lower-achieving students. For example, in one language arts block, the students were beginning to write personal narratives. The teacher adapted her instruction five times in less than 30 minutes during conferences with students. She intentionally had conferences with the lower-performing students first to scaffold their writing, helping them get started on their pieces. In one conference with a striving reader who was also an ELL, she adapted her instruction as follows:

I would like to see you really show something special. I feel like you always do things just to get them done. I think there are some moments that really affected you. This is your opportunity to really shine. We're going to share these. I want them to leave thinking, "Wow." I want you to start with three or four moments and then we can pick from those. You're very smart about the world around you.

The adaptations the teacher made during whole-class instruction also seemed to positively impact student engagement. In one observation,



This project demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of instruction in one classroom and the resulting student engagement.

the teacher was teaching a lesson on visualizing. She asked the students to reread the page and write down what they visualized. The students did not understand the task, so she adapted, saying, "OK, let me model it for you." She then read the page again, thinking aloud about her visualizations and how they were shaped by her previous experiences. In post-observation interviews, we described adaptations to the students and asked if the teacher's action changed the way they worked on the assignment. All three students said that this adaptation changed the way they worked on the assignment, articulating how it cleared up confusion. One student said, "I really didn't know what she wanted us to do at first, but when she did that, it helped me see and then I knew what to do." This teacher's adaptability appears to have positively impacted student engagement.

Conclusion

Defining teacher effectiveness is difficult. However, we contend that teacher adaptability is an important component of teacher effectiveness—one that is in line with research and theory on exemplary teachers, that honors the complexity of classroom instruction, and that considers the

teacher's impact on important student outcomes. As the above studies demonstrate, effective teaching must go beyond a script or a set plan in order to meet the diverse needs in every classroom. Students need different things at different times, and a "one size fits all" approach cannot meet those needs. This preliminary research provides encouraging directions for future study and suggests that adaptability is associated both with reading comprehension growth and student engagement.

References

- Allington, R. L., & Johnston, P. (2002). *Reading to learn: Lessons from exemplary fourth-grade classrooms*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Brophy, J., & Good, T. (1986). Teacher behaviors and student achievement. In M. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 328–375). New York: Macmillan.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Bransford, J. (Eds.). (2005). *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Duffy, G. G., Miller, S. D., Kear, K. A., Parsons, S. A., Davis, S. G., & Williams, J. B. (2008). Teachers' instructional adaptations during literacy instruction. In Y. Kim, V. J. Risko, D. L. Compton, D. K. Dickinson, M. K. Hundley, R. T. Jimenez, K. M. Leander, & D. W. Rowe (Eds.), *57th Yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 160–171). Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference.
- Duffy, G., & Roehler, L. (1987). Improving classroom reading instruction through the use of responsive elaboration. *The Reading Teacher*, 40, 514–521.
- Ede, A. (2006). Scripted curriculum: Is it a prescription for success? *Childhood Education*, 83, 29–32.
- Ellet, C. D., & Teddlie, C. (2003). Teacher evaluation, teacher effectiveness, and school effectiveness: Perspectives from the USA. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 17, 101–128.
- Fairbanks, C. M., Cooper, J. E., Masterson, L., & Webb, S. (2009). Culturally relevant pedagogy and reading comprehension. In S. E. Israel & G. G. Duffy (Eds.), *Handbook of research on reading comprehension* (pp. 587–606). New York: Routledge.
- International Reading Association. (2003). *Standards for reading professionals*. Retrieved from <http://www.reading.org/General/CurrentResearch/Standards/ProfessionalStandards.aspx>.

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

The Case for Adaptability as an Aspect of Reading Teacher Effectiveness

The article mentions how teachers can adapt their instruction to meet the needs of their students. Teachers can also differentiate their instruction. The ReadWriteThink.org Strategy Guide "Differentiating the Reading Experience for Students" shares approaches that can be implemented to differentiate the reading experience for students depending on their age, interests, and ability.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/differentiating-reading-experience-students-30103.html>

—Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org

- Lin, X., Schwartz, D. L., & Hatano, G. (2005). Toward teachers' adaptive metacognition. *Educational Psychologist, 40*, 245–255.
- Mascarenhas, A., Parsons, S. A., & Burrowbridge, S. C. (2010). Preparing teachers for high needs schools: A focus on thoughtfully adaptive teaching. *Bank Street Occasional Papers, 25*, 28–43.
- Parsons, S. A. (2010). Adaptive teaching: A case study of one third-grade teacher's literacy instruction. In S. Szabo, T. Morrison, L. Martin, M. Boggs, & L. Raine (Eds.), *Building literacy communities: The 32nd yearbook of the Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers* (pp. 135–137). Commerce, TX: ALER.
- Parsons, S. A., Davis, S. G., Scales, R. Q., Williams, J. B., & Kear, K. (2010). How and why teachers adapt their literacy instruction. In S. Szabo, M. B. Sampson, M. Foote, & F. Falk-Ross (Eds.), *Mentoring literacy professionals: Continuing the spirit of CRA/ALER after 50 years* (Vol. 31, pp. 221–236). Commerce, TX: ALER.
- Pearson, P. D. (2007). An endangered species act for literacy education. *Journal of Literacy Research, 39*, 145–162.
- Vagle, M. (2006). Dignity and democracy: An exploration of middle school teachers' pedagogy. *Research in Middle Level Education Online, 29*(8), 1–17.
- Wigfield, A., Guthrie, J. T., Perencevich, K. C., Taboada, A., Klauda, S. L., McRae, A., Barbosa, P. (2008). Role of reading engagement in mediating effects of reading comprehension instruction on reading outcomes. *Psychology in the Schools, 45*, 432–445.
- Williams, T. L., & Baumann, J. F. (2008). Contemporary research on effective elementary literacy teachers. In Y. Kim, V. J. Risko, D. L. Compton, D. K. Dickinson, M. K. Hundley, R. T. Jimenez, K. M. Leander, & D. W. Rowe (Eds.), *57th Yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 357–372). Oak Creek, WI: NRC.

Seth Parsons is an assistant professor in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. **Baxter Williams** is an assistant professor in the College of Education and Applied Professions at Western Carolina University. **Sarah Burrowbridge** is a sixth-grade teacher in Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia. **Gary Mauk** is an assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

2012 CALL for CEL Award for Exemplary Leadership

This award is given annually to an NCTE member who is an outstanding English language arts educator and leader. Please nominate an exceptional leader who has had an impact on the profession through one or more of the following: (1) work that has focused on exceptional teaching and/or leadership practices (e.g., building an effective department, grade level, or building team; developing curricula or processes for practicing English language arts educators; or mentoring); (2) contributions to the profession through involvement at both the local and national levels; (3) publications that have had a major impact.

Your award nominee submission must include a nomination letter, the nominee's curriculum vitae, and no more than three additional letters of support from various colleagues. Send by **February 1, 2012**, to: Wanda Porter, 47 Puukani Place, Kailua, HI 96734; wandrport@hawaiiantel.net. (Subject: CEL Exemplary Leader).