

CHAPTER 1

Setting the Stage

To read is to fly: It is to soar to a point of vantage which gives a view over a wide terrain of history, human variety, ideas, shared experiences, and the fruits of many inquiries.

—A. C. Grayling, British philosopher and author

It is the goal of all school systems to ensure that students become literate, as the ability to think and communicate effectively is critical to becoming productive members of society. The school principal plays a pivotal role in this process: Effective leadership unifies a school community and helps it accomplish this goal. Having the necessary leadership skills, effective tools, and background knowledge in literacy gives the principal the credibility to work with school staff as they research, experiment, and implement successful instructional strategies. The growth in professional practices that results has a direct impact on the academic success of the students.

This book begins with the basic understanding of literacy, how instruction has changed over the years, and the role of instructional leader. The foundations established here in Chapter 1 will be supported throughout the text by effective activities and tools a principal can employ within the school community.

DEFINING LITERACY

Literacy has been defined in a multitude of ways. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) expressed it this way in a statement for the United Nations Literacy Debate (2003):

Literacy is about more than reading and writing—it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices, about knowledge, language, and culture. Those who use literacy take it for granted—but those who cannot use it are excluded from much communication in today’s world. (UNESCO as cited in Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004)

With that in mind, for this book, literacy is considered to be the ability of an individual to read, comprehend, make connections, and respond to text and is foundational to success in a text-rich society. A literate person is able to process information and communicate effectively with others in writing, speech, and visual representation, giving, receiving, and making sense of information. The individual is able to function productively within a society where independence requires reading and writing mastery. Functioning in such an environment requires, at the most basic level, the ability to read signs, complete forms, and follow written directions. The demand for much higher levels of literacy, however, is more widely expected.

It is the challenge of school systems to prepare students to succeed and become valued, contributing members of society. Many believe it is through literacy instruction that much of this is accomplished. Through effective instruction in the areas of language development—reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visual representation—students learn to read and interact with text, understand content, formulate their own thoughts, and communicate these thoughts with others. Whatever role an individual has in society, all of these actions occur daily to some degree.

When discussing literacy with the staff you may consider reflecting on the UNESCO definition and the Grayling quote at the beginning of this chapter. Just as establishing what literacy means for the purpose of this book is necessary for you to attach meaning

to the contents, establishing what literacy means to a school community will help attach meaning to a school's literacy initiative.

Since literacy affects progress in all of the other educational disciplines, successful acquisition of literacy skills is paramount. Students well equipped with literacy skills are, logically, more likely to experience success across the curriculum. As a result, there could be a decrease in student dissatisfaction and disillusionment with school and, therefore, a reduction in dropout rates and adult illiteracy. Principals and the school staffs, regardless of subject specialty, face the challenge of delivering the most effective literacy instruction to promote success for all students.

Mastery of skills in effective writing, speaking, thinking, and presentation is required to complement and complete the growth of reading ability (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999).

A BRIEF, RECENT HISTORY OF LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Good educators instinctively strive to improve instruction. This has led to some excellent, as well as some questionable, classroom practices. The field of education has, over the years, weathered many philosophies on instruction and learning. Some have gained more popularity; some have faded into oblivion. Others have been so modified that the original model has been lost. The need to consolidate years of research and practice and to extract understanding of effective instruction and valid strategies was identified by the Congress of the United States in 1997. The National Reading Panel (n.d.), composed of experts from many levels in the field of education, was instructed "to assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read." It was charged with providing a report that "should present the panel's conclusions, an indication of the readiness for application to the classroom of the results of this research, and, if appropriate, a strategy for rapidly disseminating this information to facilitate effective reading instruction in the schools." Since this report was not to be new research but rather a consolidation of research since 1966, it reflected common discoveries and highlighted the most successful and enduring models. The report addressed five general areas: alphabetics, fluency,

comprehension, teacher education and reading instruction, and computer technology and reading instruction.

After conducting a meta-analysis, the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) found that phonemic awareness and systematic phonics-based instruction were critical to literacy success—components lost in some school districts implementing a whole-language approach to language instruction. The report continued by stating that phonemic awareness and phonics, although crucial, must be accompanied by fluency and automatic application of phonic skills but not at the expense of rich language experiences and appreciation. Local school district programs began to adopt models that included the identified literacy components, covered later in the book, to deliver comprehension language instruction often dubbed the balanced literacy approach. The National Reading Panel report also emphasized the paramount importance of teacher training. Government and local school districts found the report informative and it was instrumental in shaping the direction for literacy initiatives.

Simultaneously, in countries such as Great Britain, Canada, and Australia, research review, program development, and implementation of major literacy initiatives was occurring. From their work on literacy instruction, international leaders such as Dale Willows (Canada), Patricia Cunningham (United States), Marie Clay (Australia), Carmel Crevalo (Australia), and Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (Australia) have emerged to lead, inspire, and sustain the literacy movement.

Globally, many countries concerned with the importance of their students eventually competing on the global market are, based on data, striving to develop effective literacy instruction in schools. An example is the testing of twelve-year-old students in mathematics, problem solving, reading literacy, and scientific literacy conducted under the direction of The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) through the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 43 countries in 2000, 41 countries in 2003, and 58 countries by 2006. The next reading tests are scheduled to take place in 2009. International standards in reading, mathematics, and science established by this process facilitated the comparison of students' levels of achievement. The collection and analysis of these data

has been a contributing factor to the conscientious review and development of literacy instruction.

In most jurisdictions, the importance of basing literacy program decisions on sound research has been recognized, and the term *research based* has become the order of the day. Increasingly, prior to adopting any philosophy and model for instruction, a review and analysis of current research and data has been a critical step in making valid decisions that spend dwindling budgets on a most effective return basis. Educators, as literacy program developers, armed with an acute awareness of the research are able to have informed discussion and formulate possible solutions that can be validated and modified through pilot programs and action research. Whatever the approach, educational leaders, using the findings of literacy experts as well as the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) recommendations, are working to develop comprehensive curricula and programs and effective teacher training to achieve highly literate students.

A commercial product, *The Four Blocks* (Cunningham & Hall, 1999), was a popular beginning point for many educational authorities. Although the whole-language instruction versus phonics-based instruction debate continues, *The Four Blocks* helped bring these approaches together as it identified strategies from both camps that, combined, led to student success. The model has increasingly gained popularity, often modified and generically named balanced literacy. Chapter 2 is a synopsis of balanced literacy and serves as a resource for school leaders who want a deeper understanding of the approach for themselves, the staff, and parents. The materials are presented in a format that can be used by a principal, as instructional leader, to help others understand literacy learning.

The impact of the National Reading Panel has played a major role in the development of initiatives by governments in North America. Planning and implementing literacy instruction is being driven by policies such as No Child Left Behind (2001) in the United States and Education for All (Bernard & Wade-Wolley, 2005) in Ontario. These documents clearly give direction to local school authorities to examine literacy instruction, set targets, train staff, and differentiate instruction so that literacy success is achievable by all students.

THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE: INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER

Effective principals are committed curriculum leaders who are dedicated to making literacy a school priority. (*Early Reading Strategy*, 2003)

A recurring theme in research and literature on literacy initiatives is the importance of the school administrator as an instructional leader. This is leadership that has direct influence on the process of instruction. Although schools can have effective literacy programs and students can succeed without principal leadership, those schools where the principal takes an active role in the literacy initiative have a better chance of improving student achievement. As expressed by Carol Rolheiser, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto:

Where schools have built teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions, where they have created a professional community, where programs have coherence and focus, where teachers' work is supported by appropriate resources, and where leadership exists to both lead and support the work of the school, there we find improvements in student achievement. (quoted in Booth & Rowsell, 2002, p. 15)

By virtue of involvement, the principal endorses improvement in literacy to students, teachers, and community. Deciding to accept the challenges of instructional leadership is a big one for school administrators. Some are content to be only school managers. The decision to be involved in literacy may be personal and out of a sense of professionalism, or the local school district may mandate it. Whatever the inducement, a principal should prepare for the role in order to be most effective. Preparation and a commitment to an initiative are of paramount importance and will contribute to success.

According to Elaine McEwan (2002):

Instructional leaders must be knowledgeable about learning theory, effective instruction, and curriculum—the power within the educational force. In addition, instructional leaders must be able to communicate and represent to the students,

teachers, and parents what is of import and value in the school. They must be a symbolic force. Finally, instructional leaders must be skilled in the actual construction of a culture that specifically defines what a given school is about. The educational, symbolic, and cultural dimensions are critical to leadership in the school setting. (p. 6)

Once the challenge to be an instructional leader has been accepted, a principal needs to take an objective look at what skills, knowledge, and expertise he or she has to offer. Through personal reflection, an individual can determine personal readiness and then set about gaining the skills and knowledge they lack. Sometimes it is not until you are heavily involved in a literacy initiative that you realize what information you need.

Reflection can happen in a number of different ways and venues. Attending a conference or workshop can serve as an excellent starting point as it can offer some insight into the current developments and strategies for literacy instruction. Attending literacy in-service sessions with staff is highly productive as you receive a common message, reducing time required in follow-up decision-making discussions for information sharing while demonstrating your interest. An even more in-depth reflection can happen as an individual reads professional literature—the reader can set the pace, reread passages that inspire or challenge, and return to sections that may initially appear to have less meaning but are clarified later in the work. Even though the reader may not totally agree with all that is written, the advice and strategies of experts in the field are invaluable.

In schools where the principal is the only person in an administrative position, he or she can feel isolated. This isolation can make dialogue with other administrators on issues that impact their success as instructional leaders in literacy a greater challenge. Professional book discussion groups where leaders gather on a scheduled basis to review articles, chapters, and whole books on leadership can be very successful—especially for those who are isolated. This is the basis of a professional learning community of administrators that offers the principal an opportunity to discuss the role with others while not compromising relationships with the school staff. This strategy equips the principal with the knowledge and support to approach a literacy initiative with

confidence. After returning to the school, the principal will be more prepared to be an instructional leader in the school's professional learning community.

Regardless of where or how a school principal acquires his or her understanding of literacy and leadership skills, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2001) presents these six standards in *Leading Learning Communities: NAESP Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*:

1. Lead schools in a way that places students and adult learning at the center.
2. Set high expectations and standards for the academic and social development of all students and the performance of adults.
3. Demand content and instruction that ensure student achievement of agreed-on standards.
4. Create a culture of continuous learning for adults tied to student learning and other school goals.
5. Use multiple sources of data as diagnostic tools to assess, identify, and apply instructional improvement.
6. Actively engage the community to create shared responsibility for student and school success.

There are many other challenges principals may face in their quest to be effective instructional leaders in literacy including time, resistance from staff, and community skepticism. Suggested ideas, strategies, and tools to help you overcome many of these obstacles are covered in future chapters.

SUMMARY

Combining the principles of instructional leadership, the historic perspective of literacy instruction, the specific requirements of the language curriculum set in legislation, and the local school district literacy initiatives, a school principal can be prepared to utilize the ideas and tools in the following chapters to work with

the many aspects of the school community toward ever-increasing student achievement.

For those not familiar with literacy instruction through the balanced approach widely used in school districts, Chapter 3 will serve as a summary of the approach. Even those with a good understanding will find useful professional development tools to use with staff members requiring this knowledge in order to deliver excellent language instruction to the students. Some of the materials can even be used to support the understanding of other approaches to literacy instruction as they reinforce the concept that language instruction requires addressing many components that work in harmony.