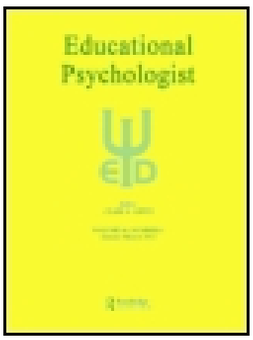

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# Studying Teachers and Schools: Michael Pressley's Legacy and Directions for Future Research

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Much of Michael Pressley's work during the past decade focused on the nature of highly effective, engaging literacy instruction. Michael Pressley believed that studying effective teachers and schools had the potential to influence more engaging and effective teaching, especially in underresourced schools. First, we describe the grounded psychological theories he developed on effective practices for teaching reading and writing, and the positive and motivating classroom environments in which this instruction occurred. His work evolved from a focus on excellent teachers to excellent schools, and he was particularly passionate about developing a theory of effective schools in urban contexts and in isolated rural contexts. Pressley has had major impact on the direction of classroom research with a psychological theoretical perspective, particularly the construction of qualitative case studies. After critiquing the methodology used in this research, we suggest directions for future research.

One of Michael Pressley's favorite places to be was inside an elementary school classroom. Although a prominent scholar in educational psychology, Mike was a humble observer in the classroom. He knew there was a great deal to learn from excellent classroom teachers and dedicated the last decade of his career to fulfilling that interest. During this time, Mike formed many important relationships with classroom teachers, made apparent by the number of teachers who attended his memorial services. These educators were not only research participants to Mike but also close friends; admired heroes; and, importantly, people who shared his determination to understand and advocate for excellent literacy instruction.

Without question, one of the major contributions Michael Pressley made to the field of literacy research was his meticulous documentation of effective primary-grade literacy instruction. Mike was compelled to study effective teachers and classrooms for both professional and personal reasons. He was initially drawn to beginning reading instruction when he saw the struggles his son, Tim, faced in learning to read during his first-grade year in a whole language classroom. As Mike and his wife, Donna, tutored Tim in phonics after school, Mike realized that many students were likely to experience similar difficulties. At the same time, Mike became more involved in the "great debate" between skills instruction and holistic approaches to reading.

Michael Pressley's research on effective literacy instruction was a response to the pro-phonics and pro-whole language reading wars that began in the late 1960s and continued into the 1990s (Chall, 1967). At this time researchers studied primary-grade classrooms because teachers committed to one approach or the other, not because reading achievement in these classrooms was high. Pressley and his colleagues recognized that the classrooms of the most engaging

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teachers were neither solely pro-skills nor pro–whole language (Pressley, 1994). Rather, exemplary teaching required a careful balancing of skills instruction within the context of real reading and writing, and teachers went to great lengths to encourage student academic self-regulation and motivation (Pressley, 2003).

Beginning in the 1990s, Michael Pressley decided to focus on the literacy practices used by outstanding teachers. Collaborating with numerous colleagues, he spent thousands of hours in schools, on a mission to learn "what the future of literacy research could be" (Pressley, 2006b). He believed a large part of the answer to this question was found in the classrooms of excellent literacy teachers and in schools with track records of excellent literacy achievement. In this concluding article, we discuss the evolution of Pressley's work on effective literacy instruction in classrooms and schools and consider what his work means for the future of literacy. We also consider how work on effective instruction can inform preservice teacher education and professional development. First, however, three prominent characteristics that defined Mike's research, especially his research in classrooms and schools, are discussed.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF MICHAEL PRESSLEY'S RESEARCH

An important characteristic of Michael Pressley's research was his approach to new research questions, which he took on often. Pressley immersed himself completely in the topic, modeling for his colleagues and graduate students the epitome of an inquisitive mind. He commented in his address to the International Reading Conference in April 2006, "It was not until the early 1990s that I took the plunge into reading completely, and literally was sucked into the vortex that was the reading war at the time" (Pressley, 2006b, p. 2). Pressley was frequently in classrooms during this time, studying comprehension strategies instruction, and recognized that much of the research circulating about whole language and skills instruction did not describe the reading instruction he observed in the most engaging classrooms. Thus, he immersed himself completely in the research literature, eventually developing a comprehensive appraisal of research on effective literacy practice in *Reading Instruction That Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching* (Pressley, 2006a). Pressley's impressive knowledge of the research on literacy education and active participation in the research community allowed him to advocate in political arenas for more attention to effective teachers and schools.

A second defining characteristic of Michael Pressley's research was his conviction that much could be learned about literacy instruction in the classrooms of impressive literacy teachers. During a keynote address given at the International Literacy Conference in 2003, Pressley stated that

> this is not a position I invented, but rather one I stole! The concept reflects how excellent primary-grades language arts teachers do what they do. . . . My only contribution was to come and document their teaching and find that there was a strong resemblance in pedagogy across such classrooms. (Pressley, 2003, p. 2)

Despite the attention given to beginning reading instruction in the early 1990s, Wharton-MacDonald, Pressley, and Hampston (1998) pointed out a disturbing omission in the research, namely, that instruction in classrooms of expert literacy teachers was largely ignored by reading researchers. Although considerable evidence on professional expertise suggested experts to be a valuable source of information about the tasks they perform (e.g., Chi, Glaser, & Farr, 1988), the instruction of expert literacy teachers had not been documented. Thus, Pressley and his research team approached their work on effective instruction with the intention of documenting, as completely as possible, the practices of the expert teachers and the outcomes these practices had on the achievement of their students.

Not only did Pressley's research draw attention to the experience and knowledge of expert teachers, but it also provided rich qualitative data to a research field that largely focused on experimental research. As such, a third hallmark of Pressley's work was that he embraced theoretical and methodological shifts that occurred throughout his career. His work in classrooms and schools required major methodological changes. Indeed, the majority of Pressley's work on effective literacy instruction involved ethnographic case studies, a significant shift from the quasi-experimental research methods used during his early career in memory and strategy training (e.g., Levin, Yussen, DeRose, & Pressley, 1977; Pressley, Borkowski, & O'Sullivan, 1984), and one that required a great deal of collaboration across many schools and with many scholars.

These three characteristics of Michael Pressley's research were especially influential to his work in classrooms and schools. He approached this work with a strong grasp of the research literature on literacy instruction and motivation and a commitment to bring together many people working on an important question: What happens in the classrooms of truly outstanding literacy teachers?

## FROM THE WHOLE, RATHER THAN THE PARTS

So what does happen in these classrooms? Initially, Pressley and his colleagues surveyed and interviewed teachers nominated as effective by their supervisors. The surveys were composed of open-ended questions about literacy instruction, in which teachers were encouraged to write at length about their classroom practices. Using teachers' responses to these questions, surveys composed of Likert-scale items

were developed grounded in teachers' reported classroom practice. The Likert-scale surveys enabled Pressley and his colleagues to gather data from large numbers of teachers. One of the most impressive findings from the survey research was that these teachers reported no adherence to either whole language or skills approaches (Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996; Pressley, Yokoi, Rankin, Wharton-McDonald, & Mistretta, 1997; Rankin-Erickson & Pressley, 2000). Rather, they reported a very complex picture of literacy instruction, involving a blending of many literacy components. Although the surveys were useful for capturing a glimpse of the complex literacy instruction in outstanding classrooms, Pressley and his colleagues found the self-reports to be a poor substitute for actual observations of classroom teaching.

Pressley and his colleagues used ethnographic methods, particularly grounded theory, to document instruction in exemplary classrooms and schools. In the grounded theory studies summarized in Table 1, Mike and his colleagues initially focused on literacy practices in excellent primary-grade classrooms compared with practices in less effective classrooms (Bogner, Raphael, & Pressley, 2002; Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999; Pressley et al., 2001; Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, Reffitt, & Raphael-Bogaert, 2007; Wharton-MacDonald et al., 1998). Bohn, Roehrig, and Pressley (2004) focused primarily on how effective teachers started the school year. The primary-grade research expanded to consider literacy and engagement practices in upper elementary and middle school classrooms (Dolezal, Welsh, Pressley, & Vincent, 2003; Mohan, Lundeberg, & Pressley, 2006; Raphael, Pressley, & Mohan, in press) and practices of schools with track records of high student achievement in language arts, including a school in an urban district (Pressley, Raphael, Gallagher, & DiBella, 2004), a school that served students with special needs (Pressley, Gaskins, Solic, & Collins, 2006), a suburban school (Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, & Fingeret, 2007), and a rural school (Reffitt & Pressley, 2007). Despite the diverse settings in which these studies were conducted, there was remarkable consistency in the findings that emerged about effective instruction. Although much could be written about this work, and indeed has been written, we offer a brief look at the most consistent and striking characteristics of effective classrooms and schools.

## Effective Literacy Teachers

*Complexity and balance.* One of the most notable findings emerging from this work was that effective literacy instruction requires a lot of skills and strategy instruction in the context of holistic reading and writing experiences. It is important to note the distinction between skills and strategies: We refer to skills as literacy practices that are intended to become routine for students, requiring little conscious thought on the part of the learner, whereas strategies are practices taught to students that encourage active and conscious control over their learning. Pressley and his colleagues first observed this impressive balancing of skills, strategies, and holistic approaches in a study of primary grade teachers in upstate New York (Wharton-MacDonald et al., 1998) and then documented the same finding again in two studies that sampled from more diverse settings (Morrow et al., 1999; Pressley et al., 2001). Instructional density, which describes the amount of classroom time devoted to academic activities, in effective classrooms was very high, with much of the school day used for learning, especially learning to read and write. These classrooms exhibited a diversity of instructional activities—small group, whole group, or partner work—on reading and writing tasks that required a great deal of thoughtfulness on the part of students.

Effective teachers taught and modeled many skills and strategies, such as letter-sound associations, word recognition skills, comprehension strategies, vocabulary and semantic context skills, and writing strategies, often to small groups of students showing similar difficulties in their reading and writing abilities. For instance, teachers taught students to use letter- and word-level cues to figure out a word while they taught students to attend to context clues, such as pictures (e.g., Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998). Effective teachers carefully monitored students' use of skills and strategies and retaught in response to students' needs. There were many checks on students' progress as they read, with effective teachers monitoring students' comprehension of text.

The skills and strategies taught explicitly to students varied depending on the students' needs and grade levels, with early primary-grade students receiving a higher amount of skills instruction compared to upper elementary grade students (Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, et al., 2007) and struggling students receiving a higher amount of skills and strategy instruction when needed (Pressley et al., 2006; Pressley et al., 1997). This corroborates recent research on beginning reading instruction that found struggling readers benefited more from skills and strategy instruction, whereas stronger readers benefited from a whole language approach (Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000). Similarly, effective regular education and special education teachers adapted literacy instruction to meet individual student's needs. Most effective teachers, however, reported that classroom life for weaker readers and writers was not that much different from what stronger readers and writers experienced, except they received more intensive instruction during one-on-one sessions (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, et al., 1996; Pressley et al., 1997; Rankin-Erickson & Pressley, 2000).

Most striking about the skill and strategy instruction that happened in effective classrooms was that almost all occurred in the context of authentic reading and writing experiences. Students in these classrooms were exposed to a great deal of children's literature and experienced numerous books across the school day so that the language arts instruction had a literature-driven feel (e.g., Morrow, 1992). These teachers

TABLE 1
Studies of Effective Teachers and Schools

| *Authors* | *Participants* | *Design* | *Measures, Data Sources* | *Key Findings* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Survey research | | | | |
| Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi (1996) | 83 K–2 teachers from 23 states | Survey research based on theories of expertise | Open-ended surveys to construct Likert-scale surveys | Teachers reported balancing many literacy components (i.e., instructional practices associated with pro-skills and pro–whole language approaches). |
| Pressley, Yokoi, Rankin, Wharton-McDonald, & Mistretta (1997) | 62 Grade-5 teachers, 53 reading program directors, specialists, and supervisors from major U.S. regions | Survey research based on theories of expertise | Open-ended surveys to construct Likert-scale surveys | Teachers reported balancing many literacy components in a motivating environment and providing more individualized instruction for weaker readers. |
| Rankin-Erickson & Pressley (2000) | 31 elementary special education teachers from 19 states | Survey research based on theories of expertise | Open-ended surveys to construct Likert-scale surveys | Teachers reported a whole language philosophy, but did direct instruction of literacy skills strategies at least half of the time, especially to students with greater reading needs. |
| Primary-grade literacy instruction | | | | |
| McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston (1998) | 9 Grade-1 teachers from 4 suburban public school districts in upstate New York | Grounded theory with comparison of outstanding and typical literacy teachers | Observational coding of literacy instruction, transcripts of interviews, and artifact analyses | Effective teachers balanced integration of skills and strategy instruction in context of authentic literacy activities, had instructionally dense classrooms, used scaffolding extensively, encouraged self-regulation, had high expectations for all students, had excellent classroom management. |
| Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley (1999) | 6 Grade-1 teachers from 3 New Jersey school districts | Grounded theory | 25 hr of observation of each teacher and teacher interviews | Effective teachers balanced literacy many literacy components in very positive classroom environments. |
| Bogner, Raphael, & Pressley (2002) | 7 Grade-1 teachers in private, Catholic schools in mid-size Indiana city | Grounded theory comparing more and less effective teachers | 17–30 hr of observation of each teacher and teacher interviews | Highly engaging teachers did much more to motivate literacy activity and used very few, if any, practices that may have undermined student engagement compared to less engaging teachers. |
| Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Allington, Block, Morrow, Tracey, Baker, Brooks, Cronin, Nelson, & Woo (2001) | 30 Grade-1 classrooms from New York, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Texas, California Selected the 5 most effective and the 5 least effective teachers at each locale for further study | Grounded theory resulting in a teacher behavior checklist of 221 behaviors. Comparison of the most and least effective classrooms at each locale | 15–30 hr of observation of each teacher and teacher interviews | Effective teachers had excellent classroom management, used positive reinforcement, used balanced literacy instruction, matched task demand to student competence, encouraged student self-regulation, and made strong cross-curricular connections; lowest achieving students in highly effective classrooms outperformed peers in more typical classrooms on several measures. |
| Bohn, Roehrig, & Pressley (2004) | 6 K–2 teachers from 5 schools; 3 in public schools, 3 in private schools in midsized Indiana city | Grounded theory using behavior checklist to rate teachers as more or less effective | 9–12 hr of videotaped instruction during first few days of school; 9-16 subsequent hr of observations and teacher interviews. | More effective teachers clearly established routines and procedures, offered more engaging activities, enthusiastically introduced literacy, had higher expectations, praised students with specific compliments, and encouraged student self-regulation. |
| Engaging primary and middle Grades | | | | |
| Dolezal, Welsh, Pressley, & Vincent (2003) | 9 Grade-3 teachers in 8 Catholic schools in midsized Indiana city | Grounded theory comparing more and less engaging teachers | 8–30 hr of observation each teacher, teacher interviews, and artifact analyses | Highly engaging teachers had students consistently on-task and doing tasks that were appropriately challenging and used as many as 43 potentially motivating practices, while less engaging teachers used up to 17 practices with potential to undermine engagement. |
| Raphael, Pressley, & Mohan (in press) | 9 Grade-6 teachers in two middle school serving suburban/rural classrooms in Midwestern region | Grounded theory comparing more and less engaging teachers | 7–28 hr of observation each teacher, teacher interviews and artifact analysis | Highly engaging teachers in middle school looked very similar to that observed in elementary settings. Highly engaging middle school teachers used 44 instructional practices to support student engagement and less engaging teachers used up to 17 practices with potential to undermine engagement. |

*(Continued on next page)*

TABLE 1
Studies of Effective Teachers and Schools *(Continued)*

| *Authors* | *Participants* | *Design* | *Measures, Data Sources* | *Key Findings* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mohan, Lundeberg, & Pressley (2006) | 8 Grade 4–8 science classrooms from public schools serving Midwestern, middle-class communities | Grounded theory and compared frequency of practices of more and less engaging teachers | 10–20 hr of observation of each teacher and teacher interviews | Highly engaging science teachers used as many as 48 practices with potential to support engagement. Less engaging teachers used as many as 16 practices with potential to undermine engagement. Highly engaging teachers spent a great deal of instruction balancing science discussions with hands-on experiences and encouraged students to be autonomous in their learning. |
| Effective schools | | | | |
| Pressley, Raphael, Gallagher, & diBella (2004) | Providence-St.Mel School: K–12 independent school serving urban African American students | Portraiture methods and grounded theory | 20 full school days of observation of instruction and questionnaire data from school faculty | The school's success was attributed to strong administrative leadership, talented and dedicated faculty and staff, well-behaved students, high accountability, academic focus, safe, orderly, and positive environment, extensive test preparation, mentoring college admissions, and active parents, financial donors, and alumni. |
| Pressley, Gaskins, Solic, & Collins (2006) | Benchmark School: Grades 1–8 private school serving middle to upper middle-class students who have learning disabilities in reading | Portraiture methods and grounded theory | 18 full days of observation of instruction and an author that was at the school full-time; briefings and teacher interviews, artifact analyses | The school's success was attributed to organization of school, the caring and positive community of parents, learners, and teachers, extensive resources used well by classroom teachers, evidence-based instruction with well-developed curriculum, motivating instruction, and a reflective school faculty. |
| Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, & Fingeret (2007) | Bennett Woods: K–5 public school serving predominantly middle-class suburban families | Portraiture methods and grounded theory | 270 hr of observation of instruction, teacher interview, artifact analysis | The school's success attributed to physical and academically focused setting, dedicated and effective principal, classroom teachers, and support teachers, active parents, literacy-focused curriculum, positive social environment, and a school where teachers seek professional development and are involved in decision-making process. |
| Reffitt & Pressley (2007) | Manistique: K–5 distributed in 3 public schools serving working- and middle-class families in a rural community | Portraiture methods and grounded theory | 120 hr of observation of instruction, teacher interviews, artifact analyses | The school's success attributed to literacy-focused curriculum, teaching through direct instruction with heavy skills focus in primary grades, experienced and dedicated teachers and support staff, distributed leadership among teachers, and strong home–school connections. |



created a physical environment that alone communicated a positive a message to students about reading and writing. Classrooms had large libraries of excellent children's literature with one or more designated reading areas, and the bulletin boards and hallways were literally covered with students' work. Within the context of reading great literature and writing compositions, effective teachers did direct teaching of strategies to the whole class and even more teaching of strategies to small groups during "mini-lessons." Students were given opportunities to read alone and with reading buddies, and they often selected the books they read. Indeed, students in these classrooms typically had "book bins" containing 10 or more books, with at least half of those books being read from at some point during a single school day (e.g., books used in science and/or social studies, books for silent reading, books of poetry, books being read aloud during "snack time").

When you entered effective classrooms, the writing that occurred in these classrooms was apparent everywhere, from student-generated "big books" to poems displayed on the bulletin boards, to short stories displayed in the hallway. Effective teachers devoted a great deal of language arts instruction to the teaching and practice of writing (see Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, et al., 2007). Students in these classrooms engaged in several types of writing during the school day, such as journal writing during science class, revising short stories in their portfolios, writing in response to a book recently read, and working on larger classroom projects. Teachers had students do a great deal of composing using variations of a plan–draft–revise model (e.g., Graham & Harris, 1994), and

students developed "sloppy copies" before writing a polished piece.

Students were encouraged to monitor their writing using extensive rubrics. The rubrics became more demanding across the school year and were intended to support individual improvement in writing rather than comparative evaluations between students. The rubrics were also used to guide peer and parent feedback on compositions, so that students typically received feedback on a single piece of writing from several of their classmates, parents, and teacher (Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, et al., 2007). Moreover, effective teachers encouraged students to share their compositions during "author's chair," where classmates eagerly provided feedback to the student author. Indeed, a notable difference between more and less effective classrooms was the disparity between the writing of the strongest and weakest student writers, which was far greater in less effective classrooms (Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, et al., 2007).

*Scaffolding and individualized instruction.* A second finding from effective classroom research was that balancing literacy components depended a great deal on the individual needs of students. Effective literacy teachers identified individual needs for each student, even students who did not struggle to read and write, and provided just enough support so that each student made progress on their reading and writing (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). For instance, effective teachers divided their students into reading and writing groups, with reading groups chosen by reading needs (e.g., comprehension, expression) and writing groups chosen by writing needs (e.g., learning to write an exciting topic sentence, word choice; Wharton-MacDonald et al., 1998). During whole group instruction, scaffolding was a critical tool for effective teachers and teachers provided individualized mini-lessons on an as-needed basis (e.g., Pressley et al., 2001).

Effective teachers communicated individually appropriate high expectations for all their students and supported their students in meeting those expectations. As such, it was common to observe effective teachers encouraging students to read slightly more challenging books and write slightly longer compositions than ones written in the past. There was a clear message to all students that they could be successful at reading and writing. This message began from the first day of school and continued throughout the school year, with demands for reading and writing improvement increasing over the year (Bohn et al., 2004).

Effective teachers also used resource teachers and other adult volunteers effectively. At any given time, effective classrooms included one or more resource teachers, aides, or volunteers working with small groups of students on mini-lessons targeting the reteaching of a reading or writing skill or strategy. By identifying potential areas for remediation early, effective teachers developed a plan for students to receive the remediation they needed using all the resources available to them.

*Superb management and self-regulated learning.* Effective teachers were competent classroom managers who developed a positive, proactive management plan from the first day of the school year. In fact, little to no disciplinary events were observed in these classrooms, with only minimal redirection used to get students on task. From the beginning of the year, effective teachers established rules and routines for classroom behavior and consistently upheld these standards across the school year (Bohn et al., 2004). They established a predictable pattern of expectations for behavior, so that students knew what to expect and were aware of consequences of misbehavior. When misbehavior did occur, effective teachers used positive tactics to redirect behavior rather than resorting to punishment or scolding, and they minimized misbehavior and chaotic transitions by developing organized plans for each activity.

An important goal that effective teachers had for their students was to help them become independent and active thinkers. Academic self-regulation occurs when students set goals for their learning and engage in planning, monitoring, and controlling their progress (Pintrich, 2000), which was a critical practice encouraged in effective classrooms. Effective teachers modeled their own metacognitive awareness about their planning and monitoring strategies to students and then encouraged students to do the same in their own work. Not only did effective teachers encourage students to use strategies, but they also had students evaluate the effectiveness of their strategies and make adjustments if needed (Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger, & Pressley, 1990). Effective teachers supported metacognitive thinking by asking students to explain their strategies to other classmates during whole class and small-group discussions.

*Positive motivating environment.* An important contribution Pressley and his colleagues made to the effective school literature was to link effective instruction to motivational processes and student engagement. Although the research on effective primary-grade literacy instruction had found these classrooms to be positive and engaging places (Morrow et al., 1999; Pressley et al., 2001; Wharton-MacDonald et al., 1998), researchers did not explicitly focus on how effective teachers motivated literacy activities in their classrooms. Thus, Bogner et al. (2002) documented the motivational practices in first-grade classrooms and found that effective teachers used as many as 47 motivational mechanisms to motivate literacy activities, which Pressley and his colleagues later referred to as *saturation.* Moreover, they found that doing anything less than saturation would likely lead to less engagement from students.

Prior to Pressley's work on motivation in literacy, other researchers had found startling trends that students' motivation to read declined over the elementary school years (e.g.,

Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; McKenna, Ellsworth, & Kear, 1995). Thus, Dolezal et al. (2003) conducted a second grounded theory study in Grade 3 classrooms and found remarkable similarities to the first-grade classrooms in Bogner et al. (2002). They noted that the most engaging teachers used as many as 43 mechanisms to motivate their students, again supporting the idea that effective teachers saturate their instruction with attempts to motivate students.

In Pressley's Thorndike Address to the American Psychological Association, he described saturation as

> engaging primary-grades teachers do something every minute of every hour of every school day to motivate their students, using every conceivable motivational mechanism to do so—from praising specific accomplishments (e.g., Brophy, 1981) to reminding students how well they perform when they try (e.g., Ames, 1984; Weiner, 1979) to encouraging constructive possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; e.g., imagining themselves going to college). (Pressley, 2005, p. 141)

As Pressley's grounded theory studies of engagement continued, he and his colleagues developed a comprehensive appraisal of the motivational practices observed in primary-grade classrooms across multiple studies of exemplary teachers and published a book devoted specifically to the topic (Pressley et al., 2003). They continued to document motivational mechanisms in highly engaging middle school classrooms across several content areas, repeatedly finding that truly outstanding teachers used close to 50 motivational practices to engage their students (Mohan et al., 2006; Raphael et al., in press).

During this time, Pressley and his research group developed criteria for rating student engagement in classrooms. The criteria were initially constructed inductively, first by grouping teachers in terms of similar student engagement and then determining the percentage of student on-tasks behaviors that described each group of teachers. Standards for engagement were high, with high engagement levels described as 90% of students on task 90% of the time. Anything less than this type of engagement was considered to be moderate or low engagement. The criteria remained similar during subsequent studies, with highly engaging classrooms repeatedly characterized as ones with high percentages of students on task. The on-task behavior was a judgment call of the observers, who scanned each classroom every 10 to 15 min and recorded the number of students who appeared to be engaged in the task at hand.

In addition to on-task behavior, researchers also noted the cognitive demands of tasks. Cognitively demanding tasks were appropriately challenging tasks that required students to think before responding (e.g., thinking and planning before writing, reading books that were slightly challenging), with student behaviors giving clear indication as to whether tasks were too easy or too hard (i.e., finishing assignments quickly without effort or expressing obvious frustration with the difficulty of a task). Pressley and his colleagues used ratings of cognitive demand to distinguish the classrooms where student engagement levels remained high on appropriately demanding tasks from the classrooms where student engagement levels occasionally reached high levels on less demanding tasks (e.g., Dolezal et al., 2003).

Although the criteria was useful for characterizing the on-task behaviors of students in less and more engaging classrooms, one obvious limitation was that without measurement of student perceptions of their own engagement, Pressley and his colleagues could talk little about student motivation beyond behavioral engagement in tasks and observed task demands.

## Literacy Achievement in Effective Schools

After years of observing more and less effective classrooms, Pressley realized it was probable that students experiencing effective and engaging literacy instruction during 1 year of school would likely not experience this type of instruction in subsequent years, prompting new questions about the literacy programs in whole schools. Were there schools in which students consistently receive effective literacy instruction every year?

To answer this question, Pressley and his research team identified and studied four schools with superior track records for high literacy achievement of students (i.e., as measured by standardized reading and writing assessments and high school graduation rates). Pressley and his colleagues first studied Providence-St. Mel School, a private, K-12 institution in Chicago, serving predominantly African American families from low-income neighborhoods (Pressley et al., 2004). The school was chosen not only for its superior track record of high literacy achievement of students but also because 100% of students graduated high school and were accepted to 4-year colleges, which had been the case for the past 25 years.

The second study looked at Benchmark School, a school Pressley had previously researched because of the outstanding strategy instruction provided to their students. Benchmark is an independent elementary and middle school located in Pennsylvania serving students from middle- to upper middle-class families who had previously failed in other educational settings (Pressley et al., 2006). Although students enter Benchmark with many reading and writing difficulties, after attending Benchmark their literacy achievement improves substantially; almost 100% of Benchmark students go on to graduate high school and attend college.

The third school, Bennett Woods School, was a public elementary school located in Michigan and chosen because it produced some of the highest achievement on the state reading and writing assessment (i.e., in 2005 the passing rate on the Grade 4 reading test was 98% compared to a state

average of 82%, and the passing rate on the Grade 4 writing was 84% compared to a state average of 46%). Although the school served a relatively advantaged population of students (i.e., middle to upper middle class), the reading and writing achievement was remarkably higher than the achievement of students in schools serving similar or more advantaged populations (Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, et al., 2007).

Fourth, Reffitt and Pressley (2007) studied kindergarten through Grade 5 at Manistique Areas Schools, located in the rural Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The Manistique schools consisted of three schools serving primarily working- and middle-class families and was similar to Bennett Woods in that the schools were chosen for the exceptional levels of student achievement on the state reading and writing standardized assessments. In 2005, 96% students met or exceeded the reading and writing expectations at the first school, 94% met or exceeded expectations at the second school, and 100% met or exceeded expectations at the third (i.e., the state average was 69% student met or exceeded the expectations).

A first conclusion emerging from this work was that the success of these schools could not be explained by looking at the number of exemplary teachers in each school. Yes, these schools had higher proportions of exemplary teachers compared to other schools, but they also had teachers who were considered less effective and less engaging. Pressley and his colleagues concluded that exemplary schools included both classroom-level and school-level factors that contributed to their success. It was Pressley's hope that as more studies of effective schools emerged in the literature, cross-case analyses of these schools would occur. An entire book could be devoted to doing this cross-analysis, but we offer some general conclusions from this work in what follows.

*Impressive leadership and professional development.* The research on effective schools has repeatedly documented the strong leadership and administration in these schools and the safe, orderly, and routinized schedule of the school day (Firestone, 1991; Reynolds, Creemers, Springfield, Teddlie, & Schaffer, 2002; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Furthermore, effective schools are characterized as ones that are well managed, both at the school and classroom levels (Evertson, Emmer, & Worsham, 2002). Pressley and his colleagues found the leadership of principals and teachers to be a critical component in the effective schools they studied. In Pressley et al. (2006) and Pressley et al. (2004), they found the school administrators had impressive knowledge of research on literacy education and motivation (e.g., the principal of Providence-St. Mel based her decisions about teacher praise on the work by Jere Brophy). The administrators were knowledgeable of the curriculum occurring in each classroom and could cite the teaching philosophy of all the teachers in their school. Although these studies found principals to be impressive administrators, except in Reffitt and Pressley (2007), they also found that the principal shared much of the leadership responsibilities with classroom teachers. In fact, Reffitt and Pressley found leadership came almost exclusively from classroom teachers. In short, in effective schools, classroom teachers are involved in the decision-making process, and thus a distributed but unified leadership developed in these schools.

Professional development was a central component for improving teaching practice. The majority of teachers in effective schools were committed and eager to seek as much professional development as they possibly could, sometimes paying for the programs at their own expense. For instance, at Bennett Woods School, teachers averaged at least 60 hr of formal professional development a year and spent even more time at school engaging in informal professional development activities, such as a teacher book club that circulated books such as the Harvey and Goudvis's (2000) *Strategies That Work* (Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, et al., 2007). One possible reason that teachers engaged in so much professional development at these schools was that principals gave teachers choices for their professional development experiences and time to share what they learned with colleagues (e.g., allowing teachers to do "training sessions" with their colleagues). The support for improving teaching practice in the school came from both the principal and the classroom teachers.

*Academic focus and well-balanced literacy curriculum.* As Pressley and his colleagues studied effective schools, they not only focused on the organizational and leadership factors that influenced the success of students but also paid attention to pedagogical practices informed by psychological theories (e.g., scaffolding and metacognitive awareness, etc.). There was frequent evaluation of student progress and early actions for remediation, which corroborates previous work on effective schooling (Reynolds et al., 2002; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Students' reading and writing performance was tracked across the elementary years, for example, students had writing portfolios that were passed along to each of the child's teachers.

Prior to the studies conducted by Pressley and his colleagues, some effective school researchers (e.g., Johnson, 2002; Mosenthal, Lipson, Sortino, Russ, & Mekkelsen, 2002; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000) noted characteristics of the literacy curriculum in effective schools serving at-risk populations. Combined with Pressley's research at the school level, the literacy curriculum in effective schools resembled much of what was observed in the classrooms of expert literacy teachers. Classrooms in these schools had abundant reading and writing materials that were easily accessible by students and teachers. Reading and writing were a priority, sometimes to the detriment of other content areas (e.g., Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, et al., 2007). Reading skills and strategies were explicitly taught and mostly in the context of authentic reading and writing experiences (i.e., some classrooms focused more on skills instruction and less on

whole language instruction). Each year, the school faculty and administrators evaluated the current literacy curriculum, reflecting on possible changes together and working though disagreements constructively. Most often this reflection occurred in the context of what was expected of students on standardized assessments, but it also focused on new developments in reading research and new curriculum materials available to teachers and schools.

*Positive and engaging environment.* The teachers and administrators at effective schools did a great deal to motivate their students to engage in academic tasks. Indeed, many of the teachers in effective schools used positive motivational mechanisms and few mechanisms that might undermine engagement. The general atmosphere in effective schools was a positive one, and teachers and administrators showed genuine care and dedication to the well-being of their students (e.g., pedagogical caring; Noddings, 1984; Wentzel, 1997). For instance, Bennett Woods School adopted a schoolwide pro-social curriculum using Kovalik's (1982) five lifelong guidelines: trustworthiness, truthfulness, active listening, no put downs, and undivided attention. Every teacher in the school taught the five guidelines to their students and reinforced them every day. In addition, several teachers used Kovalik's social and personal life skills. The schoolwide approach to pro-social curriculum created positive atmosphere for students and teachers alike.

Another notable motivational mechanism used in effective schools was the use of schoolwide reward programs, especially those focused on promoting reading among students. Students at Providence-St. Mel received points for appropriate behaviors and achievement and exchanged points for prizes, such as extra time at recess, pizza parties, or the end-of-school picnic. Bennett Woods used reading incentive programs each month, in which students received special treats and books when they logged enough reading time in a given month. Although tangible rewards, such as incentive programs, can potentially undermine students' intrinsic motivation to read, the programs used in effective schools focused on students' individual improvement in reading and gave rewards that encouraged even more reading by students (e.g., giving students books as rewards for reading).

Thus, the four effective schools studied by Pressley and his research team were characterized by impressive leadership and professional development; strong academic focus and well-balanced literacy curriculum; and positive, engaging environments. These descriptions of effective schools, along with those about effective literacy teachers, were part of Mike Pressley's legacy. However, multiple questions follow: Does documenting what is effective enable other schools or teachers to become effective? Can the literacy instruction observed in classrooms of excellent teachers be taught to other teachers, and if so, how?

## Critique of Methodology

In Pressley's earlier work on effective teachers, he used multiple methods of data collection, including survey research and observational studies, with the design for survey research based on theories of expertise. He and his colleagues began using grounded theory methodology in the late 1990s when they continued examining effective teachers and again in more recent research on effective schools. With all of the invaluable impacts of Pressley's work, the limits of his methodological choices should be recognized as a means to inform other scholars and graduate students.

*Theoretical approach.* Instead of the hypothetico-deductive approach used in other research on instruction, Pressley used theories of expertise to inform his methodological choices (Chi et al., 1988; Ericsson & Smith, 1991; Hoffman, 1992). Pressley assumed effective teachers had at least a tacit understanding of the elements of their teaching and could respond to focused questions about their expertise. Yes, one way to understand the practices of effective teachers is to ask them by using questionnaires, but a weakness to this approach is that self-reports do not always correspond to actual behaviors. As Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996) pointed out in his study on effective primary-grade teachers, surveying alone does not provide insight into the teachers' individual implementations of effective practices. The survey approach also did not explain how the elements of effective literacy instruction, such as planning and impromptu instructional decisions, are blended on a daily basis.

Because Pressley and his colleagues wanted to understand actual classroom behaviors of exemplary teachers and the survey research did not provide this type of data, they implemented grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which allowed for extensive description and coding of teaching behaviors. They used observational coding of instruction, transcripts of interviews, and artifact analyses to draw conclusions about effective instruction in classrooms and schools. Although grounded theory allowed for rich descriptions of these settings, it could not provide information about the effect of certain variables on the achievement and engagement of students. In other words, as in the Providence-St. Mel case study and similar studies, there were no quantitative analyses to predict exactly which teaching practices termed as "effective" were the ones that had significantly positive impacts. Rather, the characteristics identified in these effective schools studies represent the practices that Pressley and his research team observed and classified as effective or ineffective. Further research is needed to understand how individual teacher or school practices impact student achievement and, thus, what practices are truly effective.

*The question of videotaping.* Pressley and his colleagues did not use videotaped or audiotaped observational data. Instead, they relied on ethnographic field notes as their

primary means for recording data and then subsequently coded these notes to draw conclusions. It was Pressley's belief that the use of video equipment would interrupt the natural flow of the classroom, and thus he did not think videotapes were worth the constraints imposed by Institutional Review Boards. Unfortunately, the eye, even the trained eye, cannot capture and record fast enough the spontaneous complexities in a classroom. Videotapes and audio-recordings, however, can slow down the fast pace of classroom practice and allow researchers to notice aspects of practice not remembered from memory or initially noticed. Furthermore, without video- or audiotaped observations, additional challenges are encountered when researchers review, analyze, and synthesize the qualitative data.

As in most qualitative research, Pressley included teacher interviews as a secondary source of data. These interviews focused on clarification of teaching practice and relied on the teacher's memory of specific classroom events. Although teachers can share insights into their practice without recorded observations to reflect upon, even the most effective teachers are limited in their ability to discuss their practice from memory alone. In this way video- or audiotaped observations can be used not only to assist teachers in recalling specific events but also as a tool for careful examination of teacher and student behaviors.

On the other hand, written notes are easier to synthesize than video or audiotapes. It is all too easy to drown in too much video and audio data, and transcripts from both take extensive time to transcribe and analyze well. With observational notes, salient features from these whole class observations stood out, and Pressley's team was able to categorize lists of effective teaching behaviors relatively quickly. However, if Pressley's team had used videotapes or audiotapes, they would have been able to view incidents across classrooms more readily and add verbatim transcripts of interactions between teachers and students. Rich interactions are the essence of the mark of an excellent teacher, not just the teaching practices in which they engage (Mohan et al., 2006).

*Defining engagement.* Finally, explicit definitions of key terms can be problematic in these studies. For example, teaching classifications like "effective" and "engaging" may be interpreted in a variety of ways. Although Pressley and his colleagues sought to document highly effective classrooms, they received nominations from school supervisors of teachers who were not engaging or effective with their students. Thus, many of the studies actually compared effective and ineffective teachers even when the initial call for nominations was only for the most engaging and effective teachers on the supervisor's staff (e.g., Bogner et al., 2002; Dolezal et al., 2003). As described earlier, Pressley and his colleagues characterized teachers as more or less effective and engaging based on observations of student behavioral engagement and the cognitive demand of tasks. Even though criteria for measuring engagement were inductively developed and observed in multiple studies, the criteria were constructed primarily in primary-grade settings of public and private schools serving middle-class families. Although the operationalized definition of engagement worked well for Pressley and his colleagues in these settings, it may be less appropriate when studying the engagement in other environments (e.g., upper-grade levels; urban schools) or for differentiating between different types of effective and engaging instruction.

## DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In Michael Pressley's last address to the reading research community, his primary claim about effective literacy instruction was that if educators could produce more classrooms and schools like the effective ones he and his group have documented, literacy achievement across the country would increase. He said, "it is time to find out what is required to transform more classrooms and schools so that they are consistent with effective classrooms and to determine just how much difference such transformation makes on the achievement and lives of children" (Pressley, 2006b, p. 6).

### *Improving the Teacher Corp*

Pressley proposed that a major research direction for the future be the improvement of the teacher corps (Pressley, 2006b). One of the most consistent findings in Pressley's work on effective teachers is that the most effective ones actively sought professional development to improve their teaching. In contrast, the less effective teachers were confident of their abilities and felt they had little need for further training. As such, Pressley proposed that greater professional development be offered only to those who sought improvement, and those who lacked talent and who were not motivated to improve their teaching be counseled out of the profession (Pressley, 2006b), a bold suggestion given the teacher shortages in many areas of education. Yet Pressley's research-based experiences led him to believe that really effective primary-grade teachers are not born but rather improve over time (Pressley, 2003). He claimed there were no quick transformations, so it was even more important that researchers study and develop high-quality professional development that is offered over an extended period. Yet Pressley also cautioned that professional development alone would not be sufficient. More research was needed on effective principals and effective whole schools, districts, and states that foster literacy achievement better than other ones.

### Comprehension Strategies

Pressley had great concern about the lack of attention to comprehension strategies by teachers, even in effective schools.

He recommended serious research on ways to develop teachers who can effectively provide comprehension strategies so that students internalize them. Once again, he recommended long-term professional development, at least a school year, for this transformation and claimed that every teacher should be taught to explain, model, and scaffold comprehension strategies and be consistent in their implementation every school day. Ultimately, Pressley believed that "many more teachers can learn to teach comprehension strategies than are teaching them at present" (2006b, p. 18).

### Developing Video Case Studies

In critiquing the methodology, we pointed out limitations from the use of observational data without a video record. Future studies of effective instruction should strongly consider videotaped observations, as these potentially provide valuable illustrations of good teaching for in-service and preservice teachers, who can learn much from concrete glimpses into other classrooms. Video records can be used to stimulate discussions among in-service and preservice teachers and to clarify examples of effective practice (Lundeberg, in press), especially those aspects of practice, such as interactions and discussions that are difficult to show with just written description.

### Conclusions

Thus, we propose four directions for future research. First, we encourage researchers to continue work on exemplary teachers and schools, particularly teachers and schools in urban public districts and those serving populations at risk for reading and writing difficulties. Second, we hope researchers will use the work produced on excellent teachers and schools as a basis for cross-case analysis. Although we have begun this process in our review of Michael Pressley's work, a more systematic synthesis is needed. Third, we encourage researchers to use video to study classroom practice, so we can elaborate on the lists of practices already captured by previous research and potentially construct concrete examples of outstanding instruction for teacher professional development. Finally, we strongly concur with Mike that we need to know if research on effective teachers and schools really matters—we propose that professional development based on his work be implemented. Will teachers and schools that use the practices uncovered by Mike and his research teams actually improve the achievement of students? It is time to find out.

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