



Comprehensive Literacy Instruction within Classroom Contexts: Teachers' Perceptions of Best Practices for Literacy

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Abstract: This study illuminates the voices of literacy teachers. Findings from this study were based on a questionnaire about what teachers perceive as best practices in literacy instruction. We received 44 fully completed questionnaires. The 44 teacher respondents ranged from Pre-K through 6th grade with experience ranging from 1 to 20+ years of teaching. Teachers came from rural, suburban, and urban schools, with 40% of these teachers in Title I schools. More than 130 best practices in literacy instruction were identified by our teacher participants. Teachers' responses illustrated many of the components of comprehensive literacy instruction that covered a broad array of practices from the initiation of instruction through the assessment of student learning. Literacy teachers' responses were organized into three themes: Preparing for Instruction, Literacy Instruction, and Student Assessment and Differentiation.

Keywords: *literacy instruction, best practices for literacy instruction, teacher preparation*

Citation: Manak, J., Bollinger, C.B., Shimek, C., Barrett-Tatum, J., & Wellman, D. (2022). Comprehensive literacy instruction within classroom contexts: teachers' perceptions of best practices for literacy. *Current Issues in Education*, 23(2).
<https://doi.org/10.14507/cie.vol23iss2.2029>

Accepted: April 28, 2022

Introduction

Within the last decade, there have been several public challenges to the teaching of reading, which suggest that literacy teacher preparation programs are “ignoring the sound science behind how people become readers” (Hanford, 2018). Attention-grabbing headlines like “Why are we teaching reading the wrong way?” (Hanford, 2018) and “Why Johnny Still Can't Read—And What To Do About It” (Wexler, 2018) are incredibly misleading. The underpinnings of such attention-grabbing headlines ignore the voices of teachers and reinforce detrimental myths about reading instruction. They misrepresent what's happening in classrooms, higher education teacher preparation programs, and current research. What gets misconstrued is the

literacy teachers' professional judgment and ability to determine what works best for their own students. After all, Shavelson and Towne (2002) argued, "Scientific findings interact with differing views in practical and political arenas. The scientist discovers the basis for what is possible. The practitioner, parent, or policy maker, in turn, has to consider what is practical, affordable, desirable, and credible" (p. 49). Given the lack of teacher voices in the aforementioned articles and a dearth of research exploring what current teachers conceive of best practices, this research set out to understand what teachers perceive to be best literacy practices in their elementary classrooms.

While there is no one "right way" to teach reading, there are a multitude of effective instructional practices. We have good evidence that access to text that can be read with accuracy is an effective practice (Lindsay, 2013). Additionally, opportunities to engage with text are also related to improved reading achievement (e.g., Allington et al., 2010). We know that when children are allowed to self-select books, their engagement and reading achievement are improved (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). We also know that when students engage in book-related conversations focused on higher-order understandings, students benefit greatly (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Nystrand, 2006). In Kindergarten and first-grade classrooms, using explicit decoding instruction for about 10-minutes per day provides the best results (National Reading Panel, 2000). Lastly, we know that teachers matter. Not because they have specialized degrees or know how to manage time but because they know what to do with time to maximize student learning (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Pressley et al., 2001). Today's teachers are equipped with a breadth of research-based instructional practices and pedagogical knowledge. In an era where society questions teachers' professionalism and their ability to teach reading, how do educators describe the best practices used in literacy instruction?

Our study went directly to the teachers of reading in the elementary grades to hear their voices and better understand their perceptions of best instructional practices. Rather than collecting a "Top 10" list of the most widely used literacy practices, 44 teachers identified more than 130 effective practices and strategies.

The Search for Best Practices in Reading Instruction

The process of eliminating subpar practices and standardizing the most efficient practices has been applied across countless fields. Concepts such as "maximum prosperity" in business management (Robbins & Judge, 2009, p. 270) and "best practices" in education arose from this process (Kuh, 2001, p. 66). The central idea is that inefficient practices should be eliminated while those that streamline a process should be encouraged. George Kuh used the term "best practice" to identify collegiate practices in "schools that performed better than expected" (Kuh, 2001, p. 66), and this term has worked its way into the lexicon of K-12 schools. Literacy's "best practices" include methods that help more students achieve literacy goals at a pace better than expected.

In the 1960s, the U.S. Office of Education sponsored research to identify "best practices" in literacy instruction for elementary students. One of the most famous studies during this time was an examination of first-grade reading instruction conducted by Bond and Dykstra (1967). They concluded that the teacher, not the materials nor the methods of instruction, had the largest effect on student achievement. Research continues to untangle what quality literacy teaching encompasses through the identification of effective classroom practices as defined by student literacy achievement (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998).

In 1999, Congress convened the National Reading Panel (NRP) with the charge to “determine the most effective evidence-based methods for teaching children to read” (2000). According to this panel, the best approach to reading instruction included “explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, systematic phonics instruction, methods to improve fluency, [and] ways to enhance comprehension” (NRP, 2000). This led to the focus on the five pillars of literacy instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (Cassidy, Valadez, & Garrett, 2010). Views of effective literacy instruction were noted as a balance of phonics-based instruction for encoding and decoding and meaning-based comprehension and writing with vocabulary instruction encompassed throughout (Fisher, Frey, & Akhavan, 2019). Despite the view of balance, the “science of reading” focused namely on phonological and graphophonemic aspects of literacy and teachers’ knowledge or lack thereof for providing effective literacy instruction (Hudson et al., 2021). Burkins and Yates (2021) discuss that as educators are rethinking what balance looks like within literacy instruction, it is important to review research, reconsider practices, and envision new instructional possibilities. For instance, many teachers overlook the role of listening comprehension in reading comprehension, the student’s capacity to understand spoken language. The authors share research supporting that understanding spoken language and understanding written language are two different things, so opportunities to grow oral language help in developing the comprehension mechanism of reading (Quinn et al., 2015; Lervåg, A., Hulme, C., & Melby-Lervåg, M., 2018). Burkins and Yates (2021) seek to “shift the balance” by encouraging teachers to revise some current literacy practices while continuing to use other practices common to both balanced literacy and the science of reading as they make instructional decisions based on their knowledge of their students.

What are Best Practices in Literacy?

While many research programs and curricula guides refer to “best practices,” scholars examining the field of literacy research have disagreed on what are best practices for literacy teaching (Bricker et al., 2017). Since we were interested in how teachers determine best practices, this review of literature emphasizes studies that include the voices of teachers and examine highly effective teaching practices.

Interwoven and Responsive to Students

Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, and Hampston (1998) set out to determine best practices in literacy education by examining teaching practices of those identified by language arts coordinators as being “highly effective.” They observed and interviewed teachers nominated as “outstanding” or “typical” in their ability to teach literacy skills and determined eight aspects common among the teachers with the highest student success. Their research found that the most effective teachers provide:

- (a) coherent and thorough integration of skills with high-quality reading and writing experiences, (b) a high density of instruction (integration of multiple goals in a single lesson), (c) extensive use of scaffolding, (d) encouragement of student self-regulation, (e) a thorough integration of reading and writing activities, (f) high expectations for all students, (g) masterful classroom management, and (h) an awareness of their practices and the goals underlying them (p. 101).

Although some researchers argue that these qualities are challenging to produce, if not worthy teaching goals, the delicate art of weaving all these eight skills together emphasizes the complexity of strong literacy instruction. On a smaller scale, Scott et al. (2009) interviewed three

literacy educators with extensive experience in urban schools to determine what learners need most. They, too, found that teaching literacy is a complex process that requires well-trained teachers that can respond to students' motivations, cultural differences, and emotional needs.

Contextually and Culturally Situated

In Smagorinsky's (2018) reflection of his own practice, he problematized one-size-fits-all literacy practices by highlighting the need for contextual teaching practices. His experiences conducting literacy education development in Guadalajara, Mexico emphasized the need for culturally situated teaching practices and that literacy teaching relies upon the context and cultural knowledge of the students. Smagorinsky argued that any notion of best practices in education will fail students if the contextualized, relational, and situational nature of human commerce is not considered first. Smagorinsky highlighted the intricate process of determining best practices and supporting others' beliefs that best practices need to be contextually situated.

Lastly, Peck (2010) conducted a study of a school's faculty-led process of switching literacy curricula and amplified the teacher's opinions of the process. In hearing teachers' voices, Peck emphasized teachers' ownership of the curriculum based on the contextual needs of their students but found that teachers asked for significant amounts of support and professional development. Ultimately, the faculty transformed their school through a focus on inquiry-based learning, curriculum alignment, and assessment-based literacy instruction, which were areas the teachers determined as best practices. Peck found that targeted and useful professional development empowers teachers to take ownership of their instruction, encourages culturally relevant teaching, and provides ongoing support from instructional leaders and administration. Even though the most effective practices of teaching literacy are still being debated amongst researchers (Bricker et al., 2017), examinations of effective literacy teachers demonstrate that best practices include having confident teachers that understand the complexities of their job, professional development aligned with teacher's needs, and allowing teachers to adapt curricula to meet the contextual needs of a community.

How Do Teachers Determine Their Teaching Practices?

Considering the mixed messages about best practices from literacy researchers, government stakeholders, and advocacy groups, we contemplated how teachers determine best practices. Some researchers approached how teachers determine best practices by examining their teacher education programs. Scales et al. (2017) conducted a seven-year longitudinal study to better understand how teacher education programs shape the teaching identities of pre-service and in-service teachers. After examining teacher preparation program documents, they conducted a multi-case study by following former teacher candidates located in seven different environments across the U.S. throughout their first year of teaching. They conducted three observations of the new teachers' classrooms, conducted interviews, and collected field notes. Their findings illustrated that teacher education programs greatly influence the identities of novice teachers, but that each local and school context also shaped the teaching practices of their participants. Ultimately, they found that pre-service and in-service teachers think of themselves as decision-makers, and strong teacher education programs help foster this identity.

In a similar, but different approach, Roe (2004), conducted a study of one excellent literacy teacher and found that this teacher relied upon professional development, colleagues, dialogue, state and district initiatives, and her established theoretical framework when making instructional decisions. Later, Brunetti and Marston (2018) took up a similar study on a larger

scale and interviewed 53 early and mid-career teachers (years 1-10) about professional development and what they found helpful throughout their careers. All participants were former graduates of a 5-year teacher education program at a mid-size liberal arts university on the West Coast of the United States. Brunetti and Marston (2018) found that teachers primarily emphasized validation, collaboration, relationships with students, continuing professional engagement, leadership, and balance as important themes contributing to their professional growth. They argued that these themes are correlated with teacher identity development and should be considered by teacher educators and school personnel.

Finally, Squires and Bliss (2004) explored teachers' best practices by focusing on two teachers that appeared to have similar beliefs but acted in dramatically different ways. Squires and Bliss (2004) discovered a more nuanced and complex understanding of the teacher's beliefs towards student autonomy, literacy development, and the role of the teacher in the classroom. The two teachers demonstrated that beliefs are not always visible as actions in the classroom, and thus understanding teachers' practices is a deeply complex process. Ultimately, Squires and Bliss (2004) argued for the importance of listening to teachers' voices and explanations of their practices.

Considering the previous research on best practices, we were curious to better understand elementary literacy teachers' conceptions of best practices. This led five professors of literacy education from four institutions to contemplate how elementary teachers navigate their literacy instruction, including scientifically based literacy research. Thus, this study's research question was: What do teachers believe are "best practices" in literacy instruction? Findings from this study were based on a national questionnaire gathering rich descriptive voices of teachers regarding what they perceive as best practices in literacy instruction and how they orchestrate these effective practices.

Conceptual Framework

Working from an understanding that learning to teach is grounded in experiences of practice (e.g., Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006; Percy & Troyan, 2017), we argue that it is critical to listen to teachers' voices, as they are the experts. This perspective is born from a sociocultural understanding of learning - that learning occurs in interaction with one's environment, including the experiences and other people, texts, and tools embedded therein (e.g., Bakhtin, 1986; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978; Bruner, 1984). Zeichner et al. (2015) similarly raised the question of whose knowledge counts for informing teacher education. They argue about the importance of hearing a variety of voices to transform approaches to teacher education and suggest *horizontal expertise* as a way to bring together the unique knowledge of a range of different people, spaces, and situations.

Methods

Data collection for this study included a qualitative questionnaire designed by the research team, which was administered to elementary literacy teachers (PreK-6th). The questionnaire consisted of eight open-ended questions that prompted participants to describe items related to their perceptions of best practices for literacy instruction (see Appendix A). The present study focuses solely on two questions relating directly to teachers' perceptions of best practices. As both questions related to participants' perceptions of best practices, reliability between their perceptions and their implementation of these practices was not dependent upon what was reported versus what was implemented.

Each of the five researchers initially emailed the Qualtrics questionnaire to 20 elementary school teachers within our professional networks (approximately 100 teachers). Next, colleagues from a professional research group emailed the questionnaire to elementary teachers within their professional networks. Forty-four complete questionnaires met the criteria of educators who taught literacy (reading and writing) in grades Pre-K through 6th. The 44 teacher respondents from eight states across the Eastern United States ranged from 1 to 20+ years of teaching experience. Teachers came from rural, suburban, and urban schools, with 40% in Title I schools (See Appendix B for Participant Demographics).

Data Analysis

This analysis focused on the first two questions of the questionnaire relating to teachers' descriptions of literacy instruction best practices in the ideal classroom:

1. In your ideal classroom, describe what literacy (reading and writing) instruction looks like?
2. When you think about best practices in literacy instruction (reading and writing), what comes to mind?

Responses to these two questions were recorded, tallied, and categorized. There were numerous phases of thematic coding. In phase 1, the researchers worked together to establish codes and definitions based on 5% of the questionnaire responses. In phase 2, members of the research team coded all responses individually using the pre-established codes and definitions. In phase 3, members of the research team split into two groups to discuss their coding and ensure validity. Each group achieved consensus amongst their individually-determined codes and worked together to employ descriptive coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) by assigning phrases that summarized passages of participants' responses. These phrases later became larger themes presented in the findings.

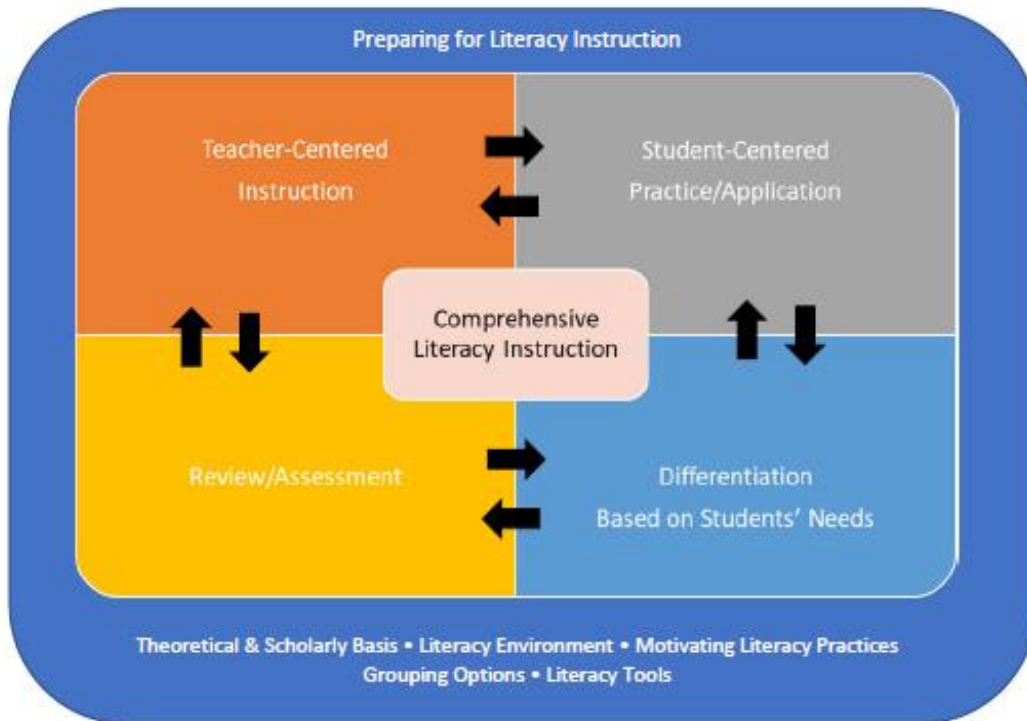
In phase 4, the two groups reconvened and employed pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) by examining the descriptive codes and larger themes determined by each individual group for commonalities between the different coding teams. Once consensus was reached amongst all members of the research team about the larger themes and responses that fit under these themes, they were further consolidated into a smaller number of categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Reliability was reached through regular bi-weekly meetings held by Zoom, and an iterative, recursive process continued until the researchers reached a consensus on the themes to be discussed in the findings. Lastly, once the larger themes and questionnaire responses were agreed upon by the research team, we went back to the original responses from the questionnaire and sorted the responses by demographic information such as primary (K-2nd) and intermediate (3rd-5th) grade-level bands, geographic location, and identifying information about the teacher (e.g., race, school SES).

Findings

More than 130 best practices in literacy instruction were identified by our teacher participants. Teachers illustrated many of the components of Morrow and Gambrell's (2014) comprehensive literacy instruction. Teachers' responses covered a broad array of practices from the initiation of instruction through the assessment of student learning. Literacy teachers' responses were organized into three themes: Preparing for Instruction, Literacy Instruction, and Student Assessment and Differentiation (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Moving Towards Comprehensive Literacy Instruction: Literacy Teachers' Perceptions of Best Practices



Within these categories, teachers described practices, strategies, and theories that were further organized into subcategories. In the following subsections, we highlight the authentic language teacher respondents used when describing best practices. Although we parsed these into discrete subcategories, we saw overlap in comments and that some practices could be incorporated within various categories and across grade levels. Our data analysis considered the context in which the teachers identified these best practices within their responses and organized them accordingly. Teachers' top responses in each category and/or subcategory were identified and analyzed by grade-level bands (See Appendix C).

Regardless of teachers' different school settings, years of experience, and/or numbers of students identified as ELL or ESE within their schools, teachers' responses illustrated the complexity of reading instruction and the multitude of tools teachers have available to address the needs of their students. For instance, a white, female, intermediate-grade teacher in an urban, Title One school in Massachusetts (51-75% ELL and 10-25% ESE) with a master's degree and 10-14 years of teaching experience explained:

In my ideal classroom, I would love to be able to follow a true Reader's and Writer's workshop format. I would like to do a mini-lesson for each subject and then have them move into independent practice. In reading, after the independent practice, I would have guided reading groups and would like to meet with two out of four of my reading groups each day. The two groups I do not meet with would

be working on independent projects that focus on the skill I am teaching for the week, or enrichment projects for the advanced readers.

Similarly, a white, female, primary-grade teacher in a suburban, Title One school in Georgia (less than 10% ELL and ESE) with a bachelor’s degree and less than four years of teaching experience articulated:

Ideally, reading instruction looks like flexibly grouped small groups, differentiated based on what each individual group needs during instruction. This would give me more time to effectively work with each individual student in a small group setting/individually to meet their needs. (This is somewhat the plan each day, but the chaos of first grade seems to get the better of us on many days!) Ideally, writing instruction looks like Writer’s Workshop, with a brief whole group mini lesson, leading to individual work time through the writing process (brainstorming, bubble maps, rough drafting, conferencing with students about writing, self-evaluating TRUTHFULLY using rubrics, peer evaluating, etc.).

Furthermore, a white, female, intermediate-grade teacher in a suburban school in Massachusetts (less than 10% ELL and ESE) with a master’s degree and 15-19 years of teaching experience stated:

In an ideal classroom literacy would be balanced and differentiated to the needs of my individual learners. There would be time for engaging, authentic texts read individually, as a class, small group, and as shared reading. There would be time for word work and building vocabulary as well as directed phonics instruction for students who needed it. I would use a writer’s workshop model with students that connected with themes and texts in the reading block of the day.

Analysis of the data, such as the excerpts above, made us even more aware of the comprehensive nature of literacy instruction.

Preparing for Instruction

Within the subcategories for preparing for instruction, teacher responses demonstrated many considerations that they use to guide the preparation of their literacy environment. Teachers identified the importance of preparation for establishing a meaningful, supportive literacy environment as a foundation for engaging and motivating reading and writing instruction. These were grouped into five subcategories: (1) theoretical and scholarly basis, (2) literacy environment, (3) motivating literacy practices, (4) grouping options, and (5) literacy tools. Table 1 provides a comprehensive list of the best practices that teachers identified within these categories.

Table 1
Preparing for Instruction Subcategories

Theoretical and Scholarly Basis	
6+1 Traits (Culham)	Lucy Calkins
Bloom’s taxonomy	reading workshop
Daily 5 (Boushey)	writing workshop
Fountas & Pinnell	ZPD Zone of Proximal Development

Literacy Environment	
balanced (see our definition)	literacy block/ uninterrupted time
class size	love of reading/writing
comfy and cozy environment	materials readily available
develop life-long learners	share [sharing]
fluid instruction	teacher as facilitator
integrated	teacher voice in curriculum
joyful experiences	
Motivating Literacy Practices	
challenging	meaningful literacy experiences
choice (students)	student interest
engagement	
Grouping Options	
collaboration	partners
small groups	whole group
individual/1:1 with teacher	
Literacy Tools	
anchor charts	mentor texts
anchor text w/ supplemental level	scope and sequence
readers	standards
authentic texts	sticky notes
brainstorming	technology
bubble maps	wide variety of texts/genres
graphic organizers*	
literature (use of quality)	

Theoretical and Scholarly Basis

Teachers reflected both explicitly and implicitly on the theoretical and scholarly foundation for their teaching practices. Responses in this category were evenly distributed between primary and intermediate grade teachers. While one teacher with primary and intermediate teaching responsibilities specifically mentioned the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), we see evidence of other teachers across grade levels referring to the theoretical underpinnings of ZPD with descriptions such as “teaching that is based on where your students are—not a one size fits all model.” Another teacher mentioned Bloom’s taxonomy (1956) explicitly. However, other teachers implicitly identified practices imbued with Bloom’s taxonomy, such as using “metacognitive strategies,” “challenging” students, identifying “learning targets,” and utilizing “higher order questioning.” While teachers did not explicitly name other theories or theorists, we see evidence of theoretical basis in teachers’ instructional

practices. For instance, we see instructional practices grounded in theoretical concepts such as reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), constructivist approaches (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1991), and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1934/1986). Teachers also mentioned literacy scholars and/or their approaches, such as the Daily 5 (Boushey & Moser, 2006), Fountas & Pinnell's Guided Reading (1996), and 6 +1 Traits (Culham, 2003); however, the greatest number of responses across grade-levels focused on grounding their instruction in Calkins, (1994) reading and writing workshop approaches.

Literacy Environment

With the most frequent number of mentions, fifteen K-5 teachers emphasized that an ideal literacy environment would have an uninterrupted block of time for literacy instruction. One intermediate teacher highlighted "a designated amount of time daily for writing instruction and practice," while a primary grade teacher mentioned "a 90-minute ELA block" and then further described the components that it would include.

Teachers across grade levels articulated the significance of creating an instructional environment that supports a love of learning. Within the literacy environment subcategory, teacher comments emphasized "developing life-long learners," "developing a love of reading," and engaging students in "joyful experiences" within a "comfy and cozy environment." Teachers also frequently commented on the importance of balanced, integrated literacy experiences as well as interconnecting reading and writing instruction.

Motivating Literacy Practices

Motivating literacy practices (Turner & Paris, 1995) played a prominent part in teachers' thoughts about best practices. Overwhelmingly, teachers' responses most frequently included choice and engagement with meaningful experiences and student interest followed by challenge. Slightly more intermediate than primary teachers identified the importance of allowing students to make choices in various aspects of their literacy learning. A teacher with primary and intermediate teaching experience articulated the motivational aspect of choice in combination with student interest when she explained, "it is important for kids to read what they want and write what they want. . . . I think they need to explore and find out what they love so that we build on it as they grow." While teachers often referred to choice within their students' independent reading and writing topics, an intermediate grade teacher emphasized the role of choice in assessment with "students making choices as to HOW they would like to demonstrate their learning/understanding of important skills/concepts."

Student engagement was also slightly more emphasized by intermediate than primary grade teachers. Responses included "engagement with all kinds of literature" and "engagement in whole group and small group instruction." Illustrative of the interconnected nature of engagement, student interest, and meaningful literacy experiences, an intermediate teacher explained, "Students should be engaged in personal narratives, writing in various genres, and learning about the writer's craft . . . if we are to encourage students to become strong writers - they must learn to LOVE writing first. That happens with students writing about themselves and their lives." A primary grade teacher highlighted that in an ideal reading environment, "students engage in guided reading every day, time for phonics instruction, and center work where they engage in comprehension and fluency practice." As seen in the previous quotes, teachers' responses were woven with the importance of providing meaningful experiences and identifying students' interests. One primary grade teacher wrote, "...reading instruction in an ideal

classroom is when students' interests in a wide variety of genres are nurtured, and they are engaged with all kinds of literature.”

Grouping Options

Teachers identified a variety of grouping practices ranging from whole group to small groups to one-on-one individual instruction. Small groups represented the grouping practice most frequently articulated by the K-6 teachers, whole groups were the second most frequent response. Small groups, mentioned by a few more primary than intermediate teachers, were identified for a variety of uses, including collaborative work groups, direct instruction, and differentiated, targeted instruction. Whole group instruction and independent/individual instruction, the third most common grouping option, were both identified nearly equally between both groups of teachers. Teachers often included multiple grouping options within their responses. For instance, a primary grade teacher explained, “In the ideal classroom, there is a mix of whole group and small group instruction. Mini lessons, strategy groupings, student/teacher conferencing are all part of the classroom.” Similarly, an intermediate teacher articulated the importance of implementing multiple grouping options in a “workshop model where kids are constantly reading and writing independently to practice their skills while the teacher conferences 1:1 or teaches guided instruction through small groups.” With slightly more intermediate teachers mentioning collaboration and partner work in their responses, these were the least frequently mentioned but included collaborative practices between students such as “partner talk,” “think-pair-share,” and “turn and talk.” Teachers’ flexibility in using different grouping options based on the context of their instruction was an important aspect woven throughout their responses.

Literacy Tools

Often at the forefront of thinking about best practices was using the standards as a guiding tool for instruction. Nearly twice as many primary grade teachers than intermediate grade teachers cited standards. The use of a wide variety of texts/genres and authentic texts were the next two most frequently identified best practices respectively by both groups of teachers. One intermediate teacher highlighted the significance of “texts that feature characters and situations that reflect the student population with a good variety of mentor texts and classic children’s literature.” Teachers’ comments about best practices often included a “wide variety of texts,” “authentic texts,” “literature,” and “anchor and/or mentor texts.” Teachers named several other tools for literacy instruction, with some broader in nature (e.g., graphic organizers and technology), while others were more concrete and specific (e.g., post-it notes and bubble maps).

Literacy Instruction

At the heart of comprehensive literacy instruction is the actual implementation of instruction and the ways teachers engage learners. Teachers’ responses revealed a broad definition of literacy, including reading, writing, listening, speaking, and visually representing. The majority of best practices were categorized in this section. While developing and preparing for instruction are important for setting the stage for the instructional process, actual teaching happens when students are actively engaged in learning. We further divided the best practices into two categories: teacher-centered instruction and student-centered learning in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Literacy Instruction

Teacher-Centered Instruction	Student-Centered Practice/Application
activating and building prior knowledge aligned instruction assigned activities balanced literacy book units close reading gaps comprehension daily five deepen students' understanding developing reading & writing skills direct instruction grammar guided practice guided reading higher order questioning integrated with content interactive read alouds learning targets (objectives) matching students with books metacognitive strategies mini-lessons model(ing) reading phonemic awareness phonics read aloud shared reading shared writing sight words flexible, small group instruction skill/strategy-based instruction think alouds unit-based instruction vocabulary word study	applying strategies book talks book to write in & highlight literacy centers/stations discussion enrichment fluency practices hands-on learning independent reading independent writing interactive notebooks invented spelling literacy integration with content-area units journaling literature circles making connections notice and note partner talk/think-pair-share/ turn & talk personal narratives practice with a variety of texts project-based learning reader's workshop rereading student-centered writing process writers and readers notebooks quick writes rewriting revising/editing response writing responding to books rough drafting student accountability sustained silent reading (SSR) think critically varied writing tasks writer's workshop

Teacher-centered Instruction

Best practices within this category focused on the teacher's instruction and guidance of students' learning. More specifically, this category included a variety of practices that focused on the teachers' role, instructional strategies and skills, curriculum, and lesson design. Guided reading, mini lessons, and read alouds were the top three most frequently mentioned practices by both primary and intermediate grade teachers. Guided reading stood out with over 33 mentions, which was nearly twice the other most frequently identified categories. Slightly more intermediate than primary teachers identified guided reading as a best practice. An intermediate teacher highlighted, "Small group guided reading allows the teacher to focus on individual strengths and weaknesses, which can be done with the whole class book or secondary texts" before further adding, "[r]ead aloud is an important time of the day in the elementary classroom and allows students to explore reading concepts in a stakes-free setting." Similar to many teachers' responses, one primary grade teacher addressed several practices stating, "Teachers teach mini lessons based on the comprehension skill of the day. Then, students spend time in independent reading while teachers are conferencing with students, pulling strategy groups or guided reading groups depending on the grade level."

The bulk of practices that teachers shared focused on their role leading and facilitating instruction. Interestingly, all categories except book units and deepening students' understanding were mentioned by both primary as well as intermediate teachers. In addition to emphasizing guided reading, teachers also mentioned modeling as well as shared reading and writing activities within the classroom. Within their explanations, teachers identified ways they intentionally craft their instruction, such as deepening students' understandings, developing reading and writing skills, activating and building prior knowledge, and even how they taught comprehension and vocabulary strategies.

Student-centered Practice/Application

Best practices that involved the student's active engagement in learning were included in this category. More specifically, these best practices are student-centered and focus on students practicing and applying what they are learning. Independent reading, independent writing, writer's workshop, and literacy centers or stations were the top four most frequently mentioned practices by both primary and intermediate grade teachers.

Independent reading and writing were two practices identified as essential components of literacy instruction. Several teachers emphasized independent reading, such as one primary grade teacher who emphasized that "students [should] spend time independent reading while teachers are conferencing with students, pulling strategy groups, or guided reading groups depending on the grade level" and an intermediate teacher who noted, "students should be independently applying strategies taught in the classroom to their independent book of choice." Primary and intermediate teachers echoed the importance of independent reading opportunities for their readers.

In addition to independent reading and writing, teachers emphasized reading and writing workshops, such as the intermediate grade teacher who wrote, "Reading and Writing Workshops should be taking place in every classroom, every day. Allowing students to read books they love... Students should write about what they know--themselves. Writer's workshop should be taking place daily." Furthermore, writing practices overall took a prominent role in the teachers' responses. Aspects of the writing process, although not always within the context of writing workshops, were articulated throughout their comments, including brainstorming, drafting,

revising, editing, teacher conferencing, peer-editing, and rewriting. Just as teachers discussed a variety of reading experiences, a variety of writing activities were also emphasized. Some writing activities identified were journaling, personal narratives, quick writes, response writing, and writing notebooks. One teacher emphasized “writing tasks where they have some choice about craft and audience.”

Multiple teachers noted the importance of providing varied literacy experiences, including a wide genre of texts, multiple reading and writing activities, opportunities to work on individualized and small group projects as well as integrating literacy learning across content areas. For example, a primary grade teacher shared, “When I think of best practices for ELA, I think of reading and writing being integrated into all subject areas...[they] are intertwined and it’s so important to include collaboration for students.”

Collaborative experiences were recognized as an important aspect of student learning. Interestingly, an equal number of primary and intermediate grade teachers referred to small, collaborative group work in literacy centers or stations. While a first-grade teacher highlighted that students should work in “literacy centers to work on phonics, grammar, writing, and reading strategies,” an intermediate teacher similarly stated in an ideal classroom, students should be “moving through meaningful small group stations focused on different aspects of literacy (reading, writing, word study).” One teacher commented, “In my ideal classroom...There would be a lot of discussion, opportunity to talk to others about our subject matter, and time to truly read/write.”

Student Assessment and Differentiation

The final category includes best practices that teachers use to monitor student learning and accommodate individual students’ abilities and needs. The placement of this category at the end is a bit misleading since the differentiation and assessment of learning are interwoven throughout the instructional process; however, we know these practices bind together instructional decision making with student learning. Table 3 details a comprehensive list of best practices within this assessment and differentiation category.

Table 3
Student Assessment and Differentiation

Review/Assessment	Differentiation Based on Students’ Needs
anecdotal recording (good note taking)	additional instructional support
conferencing	differentiated instruction
formative assessment	leveled books
peer evaluating	leveled instruction
rubrics	pacing instruction
running records	reading recovery
self-assessing/evaluating	scaffolded support
setting reading goals	targeted, small group direct instruction
tracking student progress	words their way

Review/Assessment

This category highlights an array of formative assessment practices used to assess student progress. Notably, these best practices reveal the importance of the teacher's role in the use of assessment as a guide for their instruction. The two most frequently identified practices were the use of formative assessments and conferencing with students.

Teachers' comments also included "anecdotal records," "rubrics," helping students to set "reasonable and attainable goals for themselves," and "tracking student progress." One teacher summarized her view of assessment, "I think best practices in literacy instruction come from unpacking the standards and knowing what our students already know and what they're expected to know in the next grade level. This enables the teacher to set expectations and students to set reasonable and attainable goals for themselves."

Differentiation Based on Students' Needs

Within this category, best practices highlighted ways that teachers address their students' needs. The data clearly delineated that teachers believe that small group instruction is a vital best practice. Many of the best practices mentioned by teachers used the terms "flexible," "small group," "targeted," and "leveled" to describe small group instruction. Another practice, "scaffolded support," was mentioned several times by teachers. One teacher wrote that it is necessary "to scaffold learning from where students ARE to where they need to be." Additional instructional support, leveled books and instruction, as well as pacing also provided a window into the ways teachers differentiate instruction for their students.

Discussion

Considering Bond and Dykstra's (1967) research demonstrating that *teachers* determine the effectiveness of a literacy program, this research study asked teachers to articulate what they perceived to be best practices. The analysis of this questionnaire reiterates what Bond and Dykstra discovered: best practices are teachers intentionally selecting tools, approaches, and programs that support students' diverse needs in specific contexts. Yet, in our study, we discovered through the voices of the teachers that the popular term "best practices" may actually be more limiting than illuminating. We believe that teachers practice "best practices" in literacy instruction through a broader scope than detailed by the balanced approach that focuses on the science of reading.

Our findings indicate that teachers engage in comprehensive literacy instruction. Comprehensive literacy instruction, as defined by Morrow and Gambrell (2014), is a balanced approach that emphasizes both skills-based instruction and meaning making. It incorporates evidence-based practices to meet the needs of all students through whole-group, small-group, and individualized instruction. It incorporates children's funds of knowledge by building on the knowledge that students bring to school and acknowledging the role of motivation in writing. While recognizing the fundamental role of phonics and orthography, it also recognizes that comprehension is the ultimate goal of literacy instruction. In other words, it recognizes the science of reading but contextualizes it to the students who make up the community of learners.

Comprehensive literacy instruction is an approach more widely known in the field of inclusive education rather than general elementary education (e.g., Hunt et al., 2020; Kozlski et al., 2021) due to the approach's attention to individual needs and individualized or small group instruction. Yet comprehensive literacy instruction is receiving increased attention in the general education classroom as teachers use these inclusive practices as part of their day-to-day

instruction (Hunt, 2019) and has gained some momentum among administration (e.g., [National Association of Secondary School Principals](#)).

While “best practices in balanced literacy instruction” encompass the teachers’ ability to orchestrate a variety of skill-based and strategy-based instruction within authentic learning experiences, our research indicates that today’s teachers use the more nuanced comprehensive literacy approach to reading instruction that considers each child’s reading development and experiences with literacy learning. Explicit, systematic phonics instruction needs to be situated within a classroom context where reading is conducted meaningfully to motivate students to utilize these newfound letter-sound relationships to make meaning from texts. Furthermore, best practices in comprehensive literacy instruction emphasize a combination of student-centered and teacher-directed instruction (Cooper, Robinson, Slansky, & Kiger, 2014). Teachers strategically use their cumulative knowledge of research-based literacy teaching practices to address their students’ needs and the families they serve. Teachers also discussed what was expected of them in their unique cultural circumstances. Ultimately, it was a combination of all of their knowledge situated within a specific cultural context that shaped what teachers understood to be comprehensive literacy practices (Smagorinsky, 2018).

As we analyzed the data, we came to realize that in comprehensive literacy instruction, teachers consider both abstract and explicit considerations for their classrooms ranging from the need for and use of authentic texts to the emotional learning of their students and the physical space for their classrooms. Many approaches that are touted as best practices were identified as including components of comprehensive literacy instruction (Morrow and Gambrell, 2014), universal design for learning (UDL) (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014), five pillars of literacy (NRP, 2000), sheltered instruction observation protocol (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2013), and echoes of theoretical underpinnings. Ultimately, the numerous best practices in comprehensive literacy instruction identified by our respondents highlights the complexity of teaching and learning that teachers consider in determining their classroom instruction. Although there are fundamental aspects of literacy instruction we need to explicitly teach, perhaps there are hundreds of best practices. Our understanding of best practices should shift from labeling specific strategies to recognizing the interplay of a variety of strategies situated within a particular context (Shavelson & Towne, 2002).

Unlike some of the op-ed pieces that have received mainstream media attention attacking teachers’ knowledge (e.g., Hanford, 2018; Wexler, 2018), the teachers in this questionnaire demonstrated a wealth of knowledge and expertise. Although curriculum decisions may be made at the state or district level, the questionnaire responses highlight how teachers intentionally design their literacy practices to fit their context and students’ needs. Literacy learning is viewed as more than solely the actions of the teacher but is rather the meaning making of the collective (Bakhtin, 1981; Gutiérrez, 2008). Teachers emphasized the shared learning experiences between all members of the classroom rather than focusing on the simplification of the actions of the teacher.

In sum, the teachers from this survey demonstrate that the notion of best practices is actually an orchestration of literacy instruction between teachers and students. Many of the practices teachers provided as “best” were not specifically “teacher-centered” or “student-centered,” but rather focused on their interactions as the place where learning occurs. It is the compenetration, or the infusion, of the teachers’ and students’ actions and responses in intentionally designed environments that result in best practices.

Implications

This study illuminated forty-four teachers' voices about best practices in literacy instruction. Teachers' responses clearly articulated practices that are effective for their students and the importance of data, and how to use it to support literacy teaching and learning. Analysis of these teachers' responses revealed a convergence of teachers' understanding of literacy practices. While numerous respondents from a randomized national sample would significantly add to the findings, this core sample of teachers clearly illustrated the multilayered nature of comprehensive literacy instruction required to effectively meet students' needs in today's diverse classrooms. This is not surprising given literacy researchers' consistent argument that context matters, especially for literacy practitioners (Shavelson & Towne, 2002; Smagorinsky, 2018). Furthermore, in-depth interviews with individuals would further enhance our understanding of what these practices look like in the classroom.

Educational terms morph over time (Scales & Wellman, 2016), but the theoretical underpinnings that support best practices remain. Given that the field of education defines effective literacy instruction practices with a myriad of terms for the wide range of diverse and complex contexts in which they teach, we propose Morrow and Gambrell's (2014) *Comprehensive Literacy Instruction* as the most appropriate terminology to represent the reading instruction teachers are actively implementing. Comprehensive literacy instruction is inclusive of all elements of instruction, from the teachers' ability to structure their literacy environment, to determine instructional approaches, to consider ways to engage students in literacy learning and to assess and differentiate for students' needs. This term addresses the convergence of the complexities and nuances of the ever-shifting definition of literacy combined with the professionalism of teachers' decision making within the socially contextualized elements of literacy instruction's best practices.

Teachers' knowledge is demonstrated through higher education degrees, products for accreditation portfolios, and required educator exams. This research illustrates that teachers are not just using "best practices," they are providing students with comprehensive literacy instruction that is solidly built upon research and theory across multiple disciplines. While teachers specifically identified strategies, skills, and tools, they also identified intangible qualities that motivate, engage, and foster their students' love of literacy learning within each of their own social contexts. Teachers should be viewed as valued, trusted, and informed advocates for students' literacy needs rather than trying to control their instruction through policy and curriculum design. As literacy leaders, we need to continue to listen to teachers' voices and encourage teachers to advocate for themselves as professionals and leaders in the field of education.

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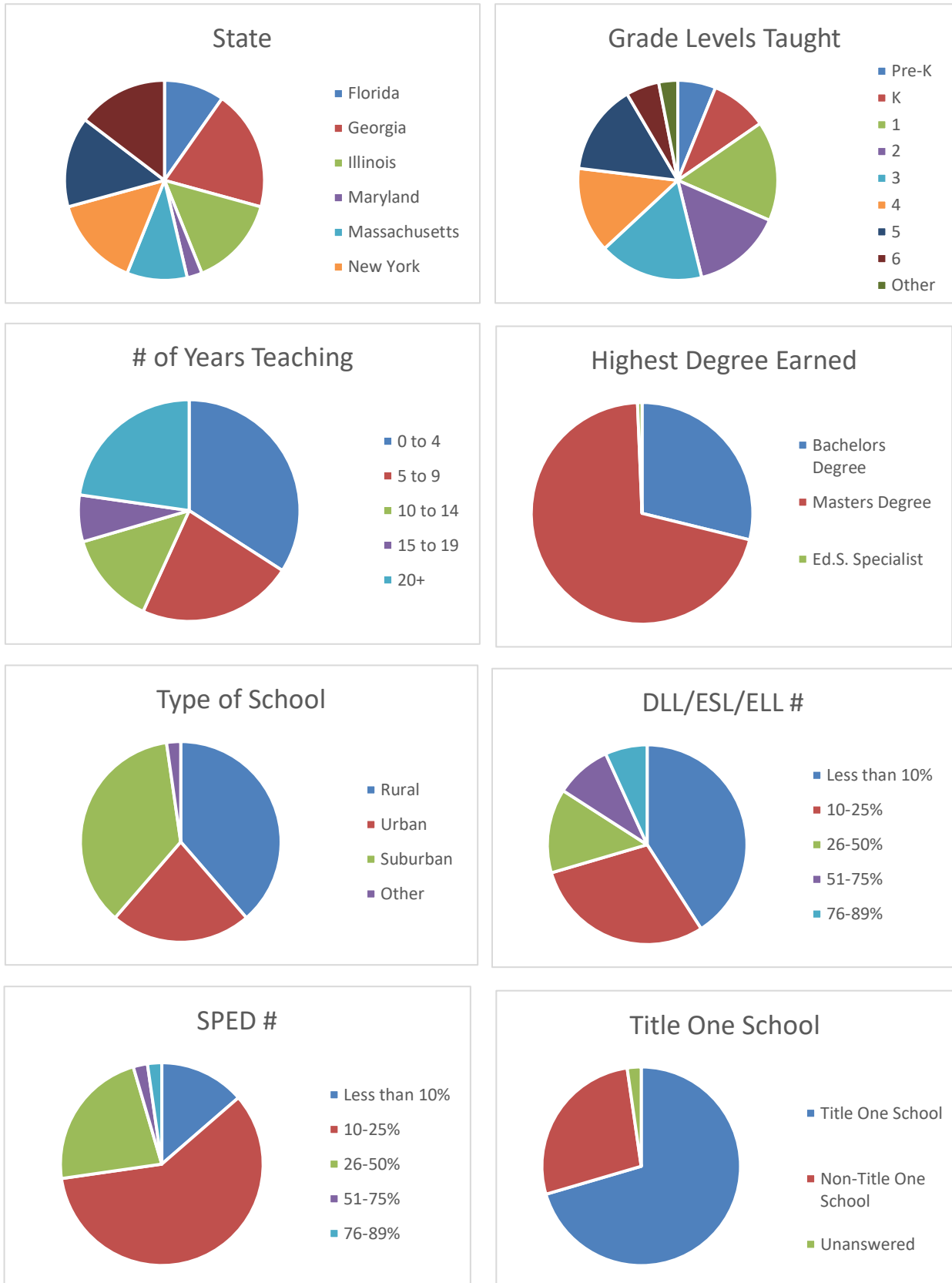
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Appendix A Questionnaire

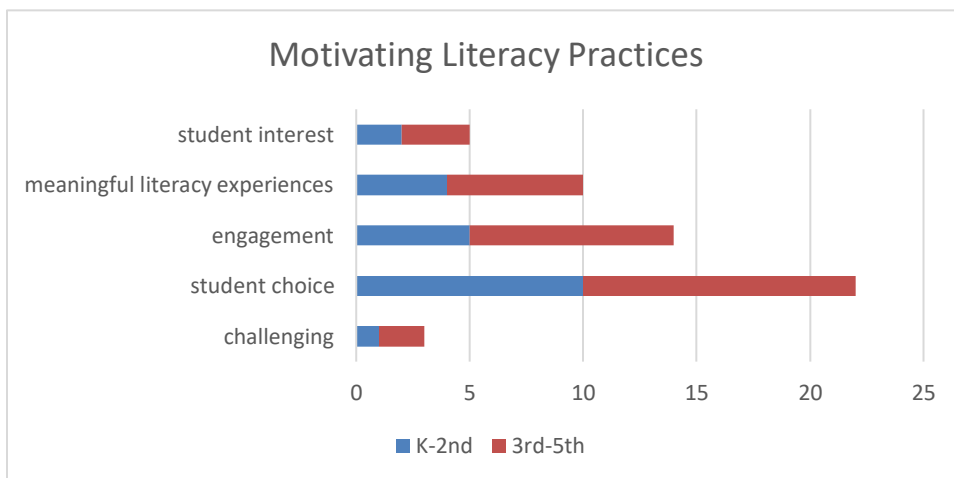
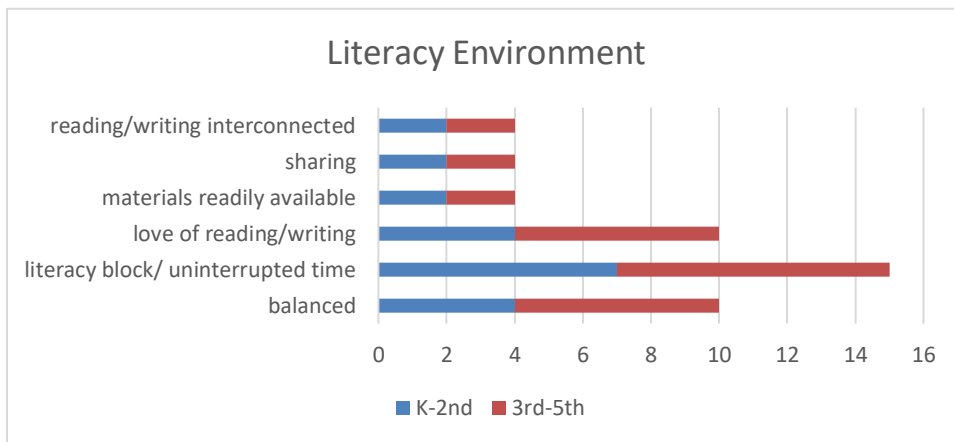
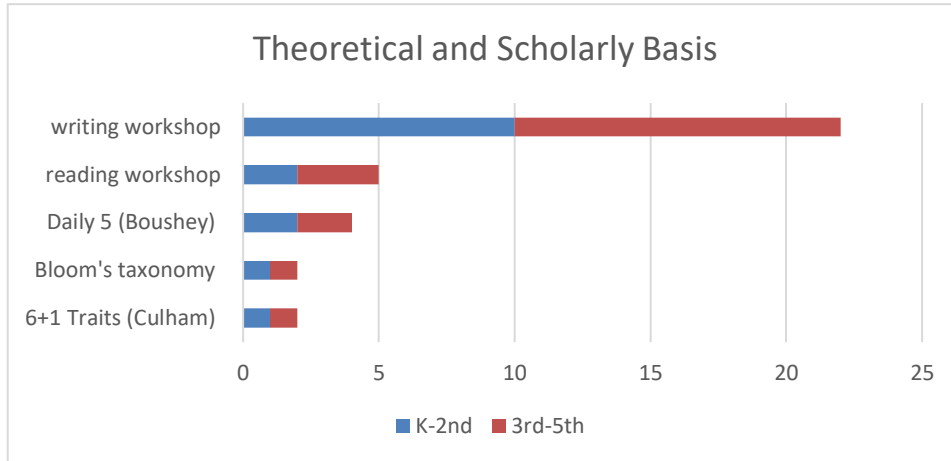
- What are the best practices in literacy instruction (reading and writing)?
- What informs your view of best practices? How do you know which practices are best?
- In your ideal classroom, describe what literacy (reading and writing) instruction looks like?
- How well does your ideal vision and view of best practices align with what you are asked to do during literacy instruction at your school?
- Describe the supports from within your school that help you implement your ideal literacy instruction.
- Describe the supports from outside your school that help you implement your ideal literacy instruction.
- Describe the barriers from within your school that help you implement your ideal literacy instruction.
- Describe the barriers from outside your school that help you implement your ideal literacy instruction.

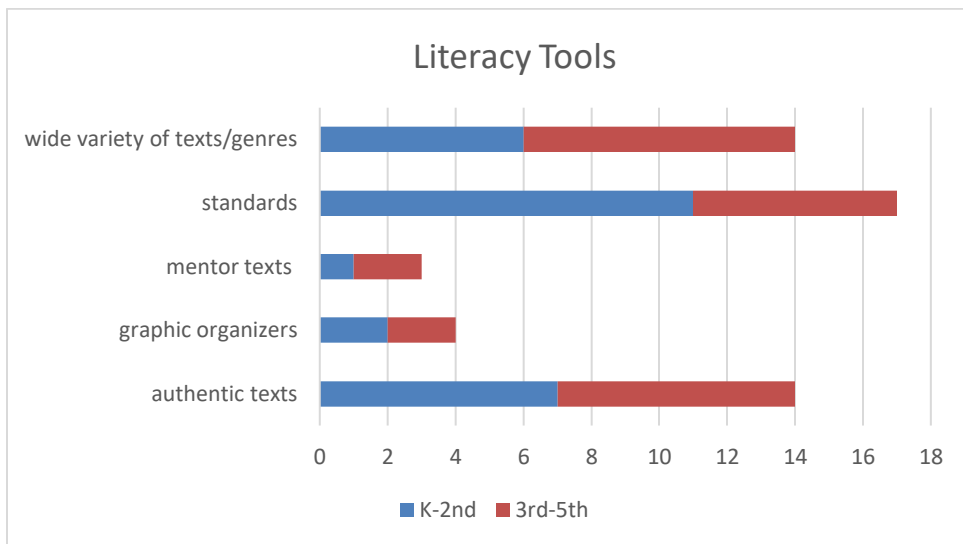
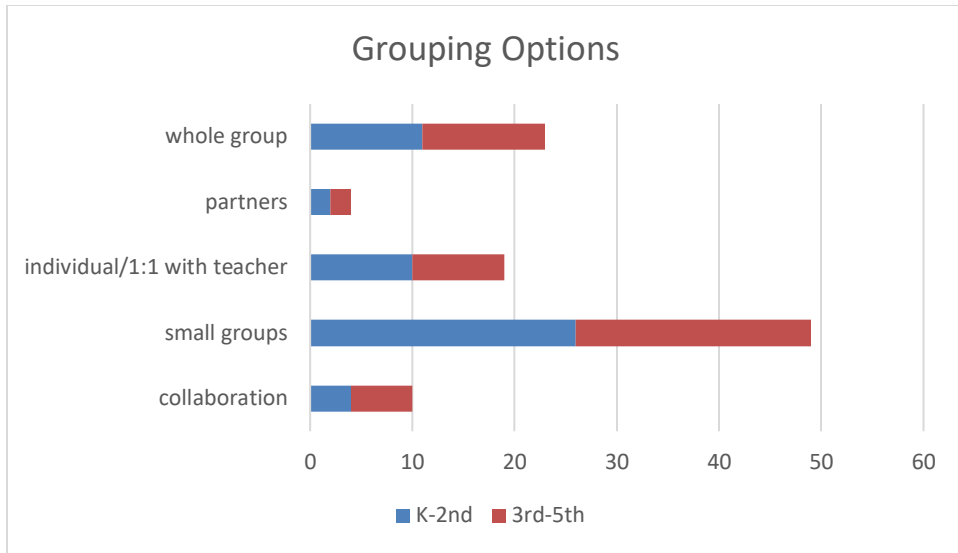
Appendix B Participant Demographics



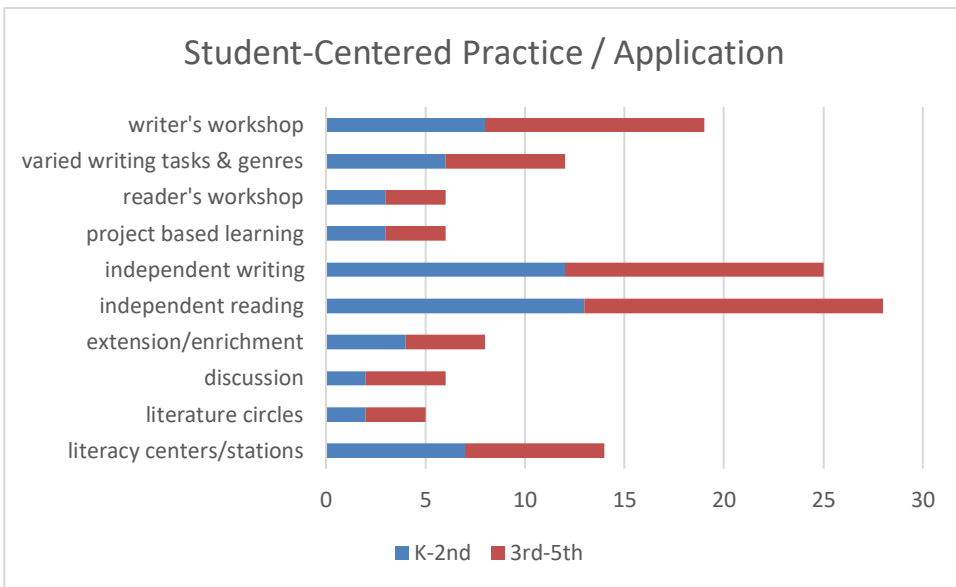
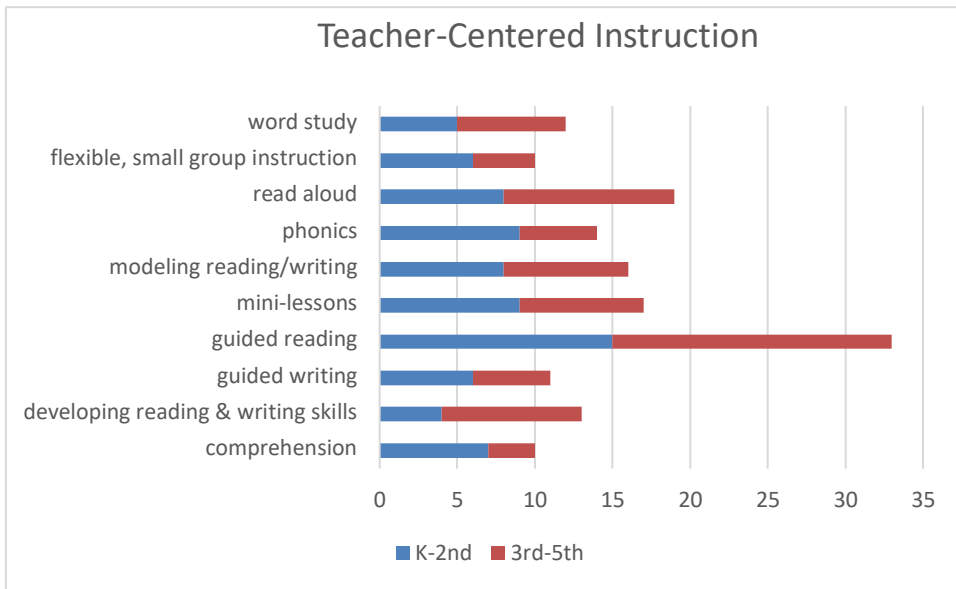
Appendix C Teachers' Top Responses Analyzed by Grade Level Bands

Preparing for Literacy Instruction

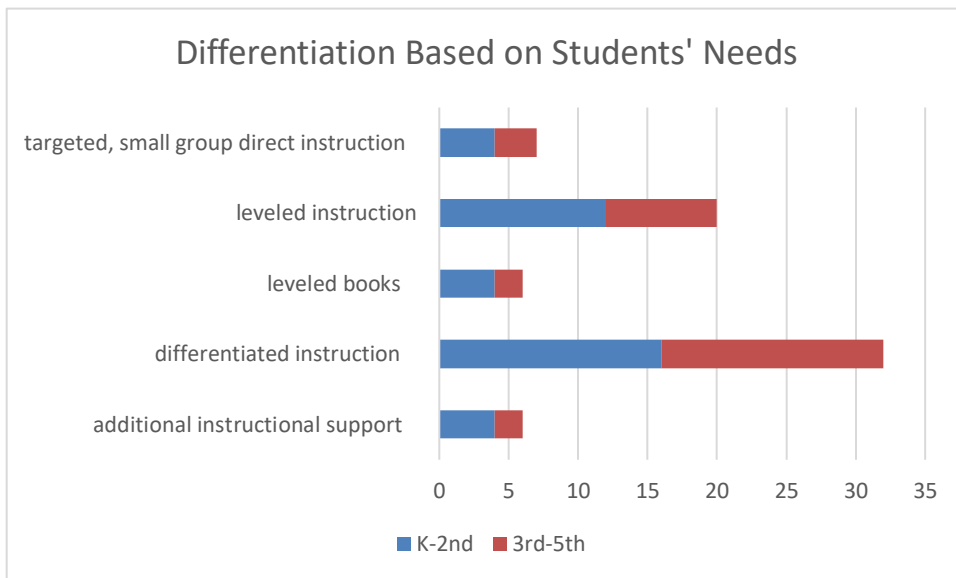
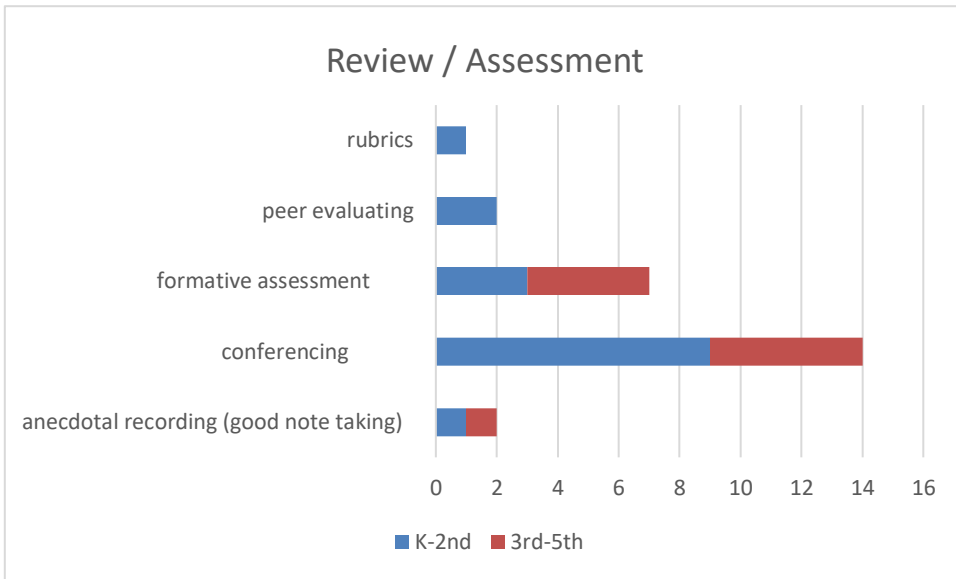




Literacy Instruction



Student Assessment and Differentiation



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