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ABSTRACT

Information on current trends and issues in English instruction, compiled by the directors of six National Council of Teachers of English commissions, is presented in this report, the eighth annual report by the commissions. The commissions and their directors represented in the report are: (1) Commission on Reading (Patrick Shannon); (2) Commission on Composition (Sharon Crowley); (3) Commission on Language (Jesse Perry); (4) Commission on Literature (John Pfordresher); (5) Commission on Curriculum (Richard Adler); and (6) Commission on Media (Barbra Morris). Some of the subjects discussed in the report include concerns about the widespread increase of legislative actions regarding teaching, narrow concepts of literacy, current teaching practices in literature classrooms at all levels, cultural literacy and how it impedes the acquisition of literacy, writing instruction as a political act, the misuse of the term "whole language," appropriate use of computers in English classrooms, changing approaches to evaluation and assessment, active learning, teacher education, media education, media use in the schools, writing assessment and the politics thereof, language arts textbooks, the use of computers in the classroom, ability grouping, and local curriculum development. (SR)

TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, 1991

Reports on Infcrmal Annual Discussions of the Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English

Compiled by Stephen Piazza and Charles Suhor, NCTE

During their meetings at the recent Annual Convention, the six Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English informally discuss professional trends and issues. While the ideas below do not constitute official positions of NCTE or unanimous opinions of a particular commission, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the eighth annual trends and issues report by the commissions.

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The Commission on Reading (Patrick Shannon, Director) recognizes and applauds recent interest in extending the teacher's role concerning the development, implementation, and assessment of literacy education programs in schools. Site-based management teams (e.g. The Rochester, NY, City School District), school-university collaboration (e.g. Institute for Research in Teaching at Michigan State University), teacher research (e.g. The Center for Establishing Dialogue in Teaching and Learning), and innovation in classroom and broad based assessment (e.g. the recent provincial assessment in Ontario) can increase teachers' effectiveness in their efforts to support students' reading and writing. These and other efforts to reinvolve teachers in all phases of literacy education, which model the importance of literacy in the lives of teachers, will help students make connections between literacy and their lives.

Members of the Commission express concern that this interest is not more widespread, and they identify several barriers to its progress. The barriers develop from reductionist definitions of reading as phonics, writing as spelling and grammar, and language as English. Federal and state legislators and other groups have used such definitions to thwart growing interest in change. For example, the failed Armstrong amendment to the National Literacy Act of 1989 would have withheld funds from literacy projects that did not teach phonics explicitly. Federal funding for a national assessment of reading (the new NAEP test) and for a study of phonics (Adams' Beginning to Read) has refueled talk of a national curriculum based on elemental skills. Following the federal government's lead, several states have retreated from commitments to develop the language and literacy of both native languages and English for nonEnglish speaking and limited English speaking students. Finally, some religious

groups and business leaders have increased their efforts to censor innovation toward greater teacher and student choice in literacy programs based on vague references to traditional American values.

The Commission calls for an increase in efforts to support teachers in their continuing efforts to develop as reflective practitioners who openly discuss their definitions of language, learning, and literacy among themselves and with their students and the public through extended inservice programs, support groups outside school, and forums for teachers writing about their beliefs and practices.

1. The Commission on Composition (Sharon Crowley, Director) laments the widespread assumption that the adoption of so-called "cultural literacy" will enhance literacy acquisition. Rather, the commission warns, adoption of this philosophy of instruction may actually impede the acquisition of literacy. We find in the cultural literacy curriculum no attention to literacy development in children, nor is there attention paid to the social contexts in which reading and writing are acquired and practiced. We see no evidence that cultural literacy programs are concerned with students and their development; rather the curriculum is imposed from the top down, with little regard for children's readiness to receive it. Moreover, the curriculum is teacher-centered.

The cultural literacy curriculum represents a sort of "trivial pursuit" approach to education; for example, traditional grammar is divided up into small discrete bits of information which are presented to students without regard for the sequence in which they ought to be acquired, their relationship to other features of grammar, or the relation of these to reading and writing acquisition. The commission further deplores the non-representative character of the cultural literacy curriculum, as well as its lack of knowledge about children's literature.

2. The commission reaffirms its longstanding opposition to the imposition, from without, of standardized assessment criteria on writing teachers, their students, and their curricula. How composition is tested has much to do with how it is taught. NAEP findings show some effects of writing process instruction, but--apparently--do not find that kind of instruction to be common or widespread, or well-inculcated into students' writing habits. The commission fears that this state of affairs may be attributed, in part,

to the use of standardized, so-called "objective" forms of assessment.

This year the commission takes special note of a prevailing misuse of portfolio assessment. Content requirements for portfolios are being imposed. This results, once again, in writing curricula being determined for teachers and students by an external source. The portfolio is also being treated as a permanent record, rather than as a representation of a students' writing to and for a local, time-bound, community of classmates and teacher. Ideally, portfolios evolve from work that is generated in the context of classroom reading, writing, and discussion. The commission laments, once again, that a complex educational strategy has been imposed on teachers without their being given opportunities to weigh its worth and its relevance to their preferred educational strategies.

3. The commission reminds members of the English profession that "composition" should not be construed as "English-only" composition. Very soon a majority of the students with whom we work will not speak English as their native language. This does not mean that teachers of written English must become multilingual, but it does mean that teachers should not overlook the special acquisition problems that face students for whom English is a second language. Specifically, the commission recommends that teachers encourage students to do freewriting and to use other heuristic techniques in their native languages; urge students to use their native languages in small-group discussions; and teach them to translate written work into and out of their native languages as a means of reinforcing and supporting their acquisition of English.

4. The commission cautions against the widespread assumption that writing, and

writing instruction, can be carried on outside of politics. Writing instruction which concentrates solely on form ("the essay," "the research paper") is necessarily conservative. Instruction which concentrates on the composing process is liberal to the extent that its adherents wish to empower students. Radical approaches to writing instruction are now in circulation, as well. The commission does not wish to debate the merit of any of these approaches; it simply wishes to remind teachers that writing instruction is always a political act, since it is practiced within institutions which are themselves imbricated in the politics of the community and the culture they serve. The commission does affirm its desire that the professional judgements made by individual teachers be respected by their colleagues.

5. The commission reaffirms its longstanding policy that writing instruction should engage students, as well as teachers, in as much writing practice as is possible. The commission questions the assumption that students and teachers in writing classes across the nation are actually permitted to do a great deal of writing.

6. As another area of longstanding concern, the commission reiterates its fear that postsecondary writing instruction is still being carried out, for the most part, by part-time teachers and graduate students who are overworked and underpaid. Once again, the commission deplores this state of affairs, since it exploits teachers and undermines their capacity to provide students with quality writing instruction.

The Commission on Language (Jesse Perry, Director) is greatly concerned with the misuse of the term "Whole Language." Whole Language is a term applied to classroom curriculum that has grown out of studies of language learning, the reading process, and the writing process. Whole language classrooms are places where children learn language while using language in functional, meaningful contexts. Some publishers misuse the term "whole language." Although valuable whole language materials are being produced, some publishers are merely pasting pictures of children's trade books onto workbooks and calling them "whole language materials."

The Commission is still concerned with language and how it is learned. The Council has been sensitive to the importance of situational appropriateness in describing language patterns. The Commission applauds a trend to increasingly detail descriptions of language variation depending upon the audience and the situation. Language programs which deny differences and do not build on a respect for and understanding of the different linguistic backgrounds and strengths that learners bring to the school contribute to the dropout rate for students who have been declared "at risk."

The Commission is concerned with the attempt to create a dichotomy between oracy and literacy. This dichotomy is created by viewing language learning as a hierarchy where oral language mastery must precede literacy learning. Focusing on oral language mastery is a real barrier for non-English speakers who may already be literate in another language and for minority dialect speakers who are sometimes viewed as never "mastering" oral English. All learners should be exposed to the integral nature of language and to the interplay and inter-connectedness between all forms of meaning construction if high levels of literacy and oracy are to be attained.

The Commission continues to be interested in language arts textbooks grades K-6. The newest editions of many publishers' texts do not incorporate the best current knowledge about language and its operation, nor are they structured to encourage teachers' best instructional practices. Textbooks, therefore, should be carefully examined in order to insure that they: (1) integrate the strands of language arts (2) emphasize descriptive information about the language rather than formal grammatical usage (3) present only those drills and exercises that students transfer to real language use in reading, writing, or speaking.

The Commission continues to express concern about the quality of undergraduate teacher education. In revising teacher education programs in English, the Commission believes the needs of English teachers above and beyond those of standard English majors should be considered. What serves as the traditional major on most campuses today emphasizes literature, giving some lip service to theory, and pays little attention to other aspects of verbal communication.

Many American schools continue to divide students by measures of ability or achievement and assign them to homogeneous, leveled groups for instruction. While such tracking may be an educationally sound practice in certain rare circumstances, it presents many grave problems which usually outweigh its benefits. Such practice also denies students opportunities to experience a variety of language styles, both formal and informal.

The English Only Movement still holds a concern for the Commission.

Finally, the Commission continues to be concerned about the appropriate use of computers in the English language arts. They offer a wide range of both constructive possibilities and significant dangers. On the positive sid, computers can become part of classroom activities which genuinely enhance students' experience of language and ideas. Word processing, databases, networking, bulletin boards, simulations, interactive fiction, LOGO, and electronic mail are among the computer uses which, in the hands of thoughtful teachers, can become part of rich, imaginative instruction in English.

The Commission on Literature (John Pfordresher, Director) presents the following trends and issues report for 1991.

Current Teaching Practices.

1. Today's Literature Classroom. Young students in elementary school still frequently demonstrate a strong interest in reading works of literature. There is, at the moment, a resurgence in publishing illustrated books for children. But for many, complex reasons, as students get older the interest in reading literature declines. After age ten to eleven, and right on through the college years, American students seem less and less interested in personal, free reading, and in making literature an organic part of their daily lives. Statistically, the number of novels written for adolescent readers has been falling. Books for young readers which still command interest today frequently focus upon topics related to personal life: divorce, adoption, step-families, AIDS. But most students, from the period of early adolescence, turn to popular music, television, video games, and so on for their imaginative and aesthetic experiences.

The makeup of students in the typical literature classroom continues to change. In urban areas, the student body may well be more segregated than it was in the past. This urban discourse community frequently works against the school, teaching young people an indifference or even a scorn for the traditions of printed literature. Ethnic diversity has, however, even come to many small, rural schools, and teachers in such situations may find themselves working with children from several different ethnic groups. Today, with fewer African and Asian Americans entering education, many students will find it progressively more difficult to encounter a teacher like themselves, a teacher who might serve them as a viable role model.

2. Elementary. Teaching elementary students literature for its own sake, as a subject area equal in importance to social studies and science, continues to be a strong, developing trend. Especially promising in this area is the transactional model for classroom practice, in which an interpretation of a text is the result of conversation between teacher and students; such teaching begins with the assumption that there are no predetermined interpretive "answers" but rather conclusions reached through discussion.

Perhaps the more wide-spread use of this educational model may help to reverse what is currently one of the most depressing aspects of elementary school student development. It is during the years of elementary education that student indifference to literature first begins to appear, and along with transactional teaching the schools can help to counter this tendency by fostering independent, private reading, and by stressing the special pleasures and benefits of literature. Students must be given time to read during school and in class there must be a recurrent stress upon reading aloud; not just to young students, but to pupils of all ages. Classrooms should be filled with paperback books, magazines, and newspapers, and students should be encouraged to take these materials home, and share them with family members. Teachers should regularly hold book conferences with each pupil on free, outside reading.

3. Secondary. While the process approach to the teaching of writing now dominates, in many classrooms the teaching of literature is still centered on the teacher, and the teacher's "authoritative" interpretation of texts. This is especially true of older teachers, who feel anxious about the prospect of a classroom in which meaning is discerned through collaborative discussion, and in which the "right answer" is replaced by

collective understanding. The same kind of teacher is often unfamiliar with literary works outside of a traditional canon of texts and views with apprehension the suggestion that the curriculum must include literary works by people from many different cultures. There must be fresh efforts to help these teachers learn how to teach in a transactional classroom. They need to learn how to work with texts they themselves did not study in school. All teachers need to do more personal reading, and more discussing of literature with their peers. They need book discussion groups within their schools, inservice training on recent developments in literary history and theory, and summer institutes which can expand their cultural horizons and help them to master the theory and practice of new forms of literary interpretation. Inspiriting inservice training coupled with vigorous ongoing faculty discussion groups can give teachers the courage to venture beyond the stale and the hidebound.

4. College. Many bright, hard-working college students today regard their studies as a kind of job to be done well within the requirements of curriculum and course. But outside of required work they are superficially social, partying, joining in sports and play, not inclined to read on their own, much less take seriously the content of what they are reading.

College English departments continue to undergo profound changes. Increasingly their younger faculty members, as well as some of the senior professors, are interested literary theory, and skeptical of the claims of a literary canon. Some departments have abandoned the traditional curriculum altogether. At Georgia Tech the English department is now a department of "Literature, Communication, and Culture," while at Syracuse it has become the "Department of Textual Studies." The proliferation in

models for reading has meant the end of any dominant interpretive paradigm. Cultural criticism is a topic of great interest. More and more, English departments actually teach world literature, introducing students to texts from many nations, and by writers conspicuously chosen because their economic and social class might have rendered them silent in the past. Gender issues, and gender studies, are extremely popular, and particularly energize the enthusiasm and imagination of women students.

* New Teachers with Degrees in Education. Some recent graduates from schools of education are not adequately prepared to teach English literature at the elementary and secondary levels. Foggy about the nature of the experience of literature as literature and lacking a strong personal background in literature, they sometimes turn to published workbooks both for classroom exercises and for student homework. Filling in the blanks substitutes for student reading and thinking. Some new teachers so misunderstand the concept of free reading for elementary students that they will use old basal readers for this activity. They see the teaching of literature as an activity in the teaching of reading. However, brighter, more ambitious students are beginning to emerge from some schools of education, and may be the first sign of hopeful developments for the near future.

* Testing. The increasing use of tests administered by state boards and by NAPE is having a damaging effect upon the teaching of literature. Teachers, concerned that their students achieve minimum competency levels, prepare students for testing rather than for life. The tests themselves focus on a narrow list of skills, rely upon mechanical sorts of questions, and destructively limit the basic concepts of education.

* Literature, Past and Present. As recent research by Applebee suggests, the

canon of traditionality taught long texts in the secondary schools has yet to be substantially challenged, though there is some change, with shorter works by a greater diversity of authors emerging. Meanwhile, on the primary level, a canon of literary works frequently taught to young students of literature seems to be emerging. In college literature curricula there are more substantive changes. At some schools (eg., Syracuse) the entire notion of a canon of valued texts may be on the way out, while elsewhere a traditional list of works is being supplemented with what may become a kind of second canon, texts like The Color Purple and "The Yellow Wallpaper" joining Hamlet as perennially popular with some teachers. As the process of reconsidering what we teach students continues, the problem of determining worth will become paramount. Do the great works of past literature indeed have a special power about them which brings readers back every generation, as some argue? Or is that power simply the consequence of those works remaining in the curriculum and enjoying widespread attention? Have the approved interpretations of canonic texts made it impossible for teachers to read them freely, and personally? These are problems which teachers of literature are grappling with today.

What kinds of literature should young people experience? How can teachers avoid being an either / or approach towards selecting what students read? Textbooks continue to perform an ambiguous role in the curriculum. On the one hand, it can be argued that they simply constitute a response to what teachers want. However, if that becomes a narrowly defined version of former classroom practice, then textbooks can become an educational strait-jacket for the teachers who use them. And this becomes especially problematic for the young, inexperienced teacher who may feel considerable

anxiety about classroom performance, and so rely excessively upon teaching materials from textbooks.

The solution to these problems must be professional teachers self-confident in their sense of what literature is and how it works. These teachers must have the skill to explore possibilities of meaning and experience in a text and the ability to recognize and select literature which will stimulate students to read with care.

* Governor's Conference on Restructuring American Education and the Future English Classroom. What has happened in the year since the President and the nation's Governors convened to frame a new policy on educational reform? The answer seems to be, very little, except for more testing of pupils and a stronger, though misguided, appeal for the use of phonics in teaching reading. The net result has been to make teachers more alarmed about test scores, and to skew the curriculum to ensure that students perform well when they are tested.

The members of the Commission on Literature urge the nation's Governors to act seriously, and substantively, on their initial impulse. The nation's educational system does need fundamental change, and that change can only come with a substantial further economic investment in its children. What would be the most useful way that teachers of literature might use a sudden infusion of extra funds?

Every elementary and secondary classroom should have its own library. And not large sets of a few titles, but rather a large number of highly varied books which student and teacher can use, both for class activities and for individual free reading. This library should contain not one, but several different dictionaries; it should have back issues of various periodicals, and other sorts of materials, including non-print media like video

tapes. This classroom library would then become the basis of the curriculum for a specific teacher and his or her pupils. Together they would determine what was to be read, and in what fashion.

Each elementary and secondary classroom should have one personal computer for every four students, as well as a sufficient number of silent [perhaps laser] printers. Students using word processing programs should be encouraged, from the earliest grades, to be the makers as well as the consumers, of literature. Student writing, gathered into class-authored magazines and anthologies, should be as much a part of the classroom library as works by traditional authors, and student writing should become a vital dimension of student reading, and of classroom discussion of literature. There is every reason to use for example a short-story by a student for class discussion, along with a short-story by a celebrated author from the past.

In these ways the limiting consequences of nationally published textbooks can be replaced by a reading community within the classroom which uses its classroom library daily, and which learns to make its own changes and to construct its own sense of what literature can be. Such experiments are already underway in various parts of the country, and they should be encouraged.

* Literature and the Community. Too frequently the walls of the school building and the constraints of the curriculum become barriers between the whole community which a school should be serving and the teaching of literature. This gives students and their families a sense that reading literature is something which is done by compulsion during school hours, and avoided after class is over.

America's schools need to make reading and talking about reading a part not

only of the school day, but of the lives of community members. Teachers should be encouraged to form book clubs after school hours. They should gather at regular intervals to talk about works they have been reading. Parent organizations need to organize and support similar groups in which parents and teachers can read and discuss works of literature. Problems related to the teaching of literature based on ignorance and prejudice which frequently result in efforts to censor or in some way control the curriculum might be partly solved if community members would, on a regular basis, talk about shared literary experiences with a school's teachers and with each other. Every year, schools should become more organically a part of the intellectual and imaginative lives of all citizens.

The Commission on Curriculum (Richard Adler, Director) recognizes continuing trends such as using information gained from research and successful classroom practices; involving teachers more extensively in ongoing curriculum development; involving more segments of the public in the curriculum process; implementing curriculum that accounts for more pluralism among students and settings; applying curriculum that considers a variety of learning styles; and expanding assessment procedures, e.g., self-assessment.

General trends are appearing as to "what" should be in the curriculum. National groups are meeting to decide the content for a "national curriculum." These groups represent specific philosophies which appear to be exclusive rather than inclusive, narrow as opposed to expansive, and static, not dynamic. Still, other groups are meeting to determine the common characteristics of successful curriculum descriptions and successful classroom practices. These characteristics appear to be collaborative learning, continual staff training, local control of curriculum, and a focus on the process of learning styles. Within the year, these groups will probably receive more attention by the press, thus informing us about additional specifics in their deliberations.

The Commission listed and expanded on six trends that contained issues important to the English curriculum.

1. The value of talk in the learning process needs additional research and observation in order to convince teachers that substantive student talk requires not only quantity but depth and quality. Interaction facilitates learning through collaboration and experimentation. Questions of how the profession can disseminate the results of research to teachers needs to be addressed.

2. An increase in student activity in the learning process, partly because of the trend in collaborative learning, places additional pressure on teacher-education programs to emphasize strategies that encourage risk, discovery, and experimentation in the classroom. Learners are demanding a challenge through the study of more complex issues, greater self-involvement, and self-affirming situations. Within the classroom, students appear to learn from trends, such as process in composition, that language serves them in their learning and classmates have opinions and values that are not only useful but reflective. To these students, passive learning asks for right or wrong answers and makes them authority-dependent.

3. Within the English curriculum, the use and misuse of literature not only continues to be a trend for concern, but includes new issues. Quality literature appears to be used more widely across the country. Children's literature is gaining as a means of teaching reading. Literature by and about minorities and women increases each year. Concerns about fragmenting literature to teach phonics and establishing standardized reading lists were raised. Despite the increase in response-centered approaches to teaching literature, the personal or emotional response to a text continues to receive little or no attention in some classrooms.

4. Technology and its impact on the curriculum, especially computers, needs extensive attention by researchers, national education organizations, and teacher-training institutions. With added technology come additional questions: Which new technological devices for the classroom? How do teachers use them? How does the curriculum integrate them into the overall plan? How do we avoid waste or misuse of technology with respect to time in the classroom? Technology advances so rapidly that

trends and issues appear and disappear quickly.

5. As regional and national groups meet to formulate curriculum, the local school faces the question: What is the optimum process for curriculum development at any level? Because the teacher is closest to the learner, responsibility rests with the teacher to interpret the curriculum document. Consequently, the question arises as to where the curriculum originates -- top-down or locally generated? If the choice is local, is the expertise available to accomplish the task? Others involved in the process, e.g. superintendent, parents, principals, must understand their roles with respect to support, interpretation, and supply of resources to ensure a dynamic process.

6. Finally, the Commission recognizes the complexity of the trend toward the changing approaches to evaluation/assessment. Foremost is the question of which vehicle offers the most valid information about student performance. And then, which vehicles can provide sufficient and additional information about the extent of learning that has occurred. With the continued call for accountability in schools, evaluation matters raise other questions: Can the public accept new concepts of evaluation, e.g. portfolio? Who has a right to the results? Within what contexts can evaluation be authentically used? And finally, what role does the student play in the use of the results of evaluation?

The Commission on Media (Barbra S. Morris, Director) notes that definitions of contemporary "literacy" must recognize that an understanding of visual, as well as verbal, texts is essential for citizens in today's world; therefore, we support development of media-inclusive language arts curricular models that acknowledge and build upon the rich variety of ways our students, and their teachers, are influenced by forms and content present in modern communication. The Commission observes widespread use of the term "cultural studies" in international educational discourse; in courses, Cultural Studies allows consideration of the dynamic forces in societies and across societies that shape and reshape issues and imaginations. We believe that rapid acceptance of "cultural studies" in education internationally reflects a legitimate current need (K-12 and college) for pedagogical approaches and tools for addressing the complex realities of diverse modern communication systems.

Inclusion of the study of media certainly is no longer optional in our schools. As educators in a multiple-media, multiple-cultural language environment, we must support quality media education by developing regional and national conferences and meetings that will empower language arts teachers to select materials currently available from sound media curricula for their own classrooms. Marginalizing the study of media in English classrooms has created a climate in our society that too often supports dangerous and unwelcome censorship of materials other than print in our schools. We assert unequivocally that teachers must be encouraged to include visual/verbal texts in their classrooms as they see they are appropriate to their students' educational development. Furthermore, we must send our students the message that critical thinking extends beyond print and that censorship of discussion of a form of discourse stifles

possibilities for thoughtful reasoning.

Furthermore, the Commission recognizes the importance of putting the means of media production into the hands of our students in order to promote active, collaborative, critical examination of social issues within academic settings. Because each medium codifies "reality" in a different way, our students need a clear sense of the differences between presenting a subject in writing or in imagery (or a combination of both). First-hand production of content requires the sort of analysis and careful discrimination among elements in a text that mitigates against blind acceptance of either television or film as unmediated reality. Slowing down the flow of text and analyzing its elements and its narrative structure and its perspectives on people and their lives provide a powerful educational experience our students need if they are to function intelligently in today's communication environment.

The Commission takes note of two problematic areas related to media use in schools: (1) There are no national guidelines or standards for production or use of videotaped documents of teacher classroom practice; appropriate training and criteria for evaluation need to be developed; (2) Critical rigor must accompany any expansion of media education in the language arts. Using media only to study themes in literature is no substitute for teaching about media and their various constructions of narratives, perspectives on human behavior and relationships, and rhetorical conventions; these matters are complex and often controversial. Because of the need to study media within schools, we believe that time must be available to teachers to train and experiment with new methods of media education; we are concerned with critical "reading" of diverse texts, academic writing processes that support sustained, thoughtful reflection on those

texts, and active dialogue regarding the effects of media on public opinion. Because American schools already lag far behind those in other countries in validating development of critical teaching about media, we urge NCTE to update its collections of bibliographies and materials about media education and support the preparation of all teachers to approach this important area knowledgeably in their classrooms.