

***Instruction
in American
Classrooms***

In this section of the report, we provide a snapshot of 4th grade reading instruction in the United States. For the most part, the majority of students at this level have already learned the basics of reading. They can turn the symbols on the page into words, phrases, sentences, and ideas. Their teachers are more actively engaged in getting students to focus on meaning, to learn from what they have read, and to enhance children's ability to use information they have read.

To appreciate what goes on in reading classrooms, it is helpful to understand how theories of teaching reading have evolved over the past 50 years. Although research and practice operate on different timetables, there is nevertheless a noticeable shift toward the newer ways of thinking on the part of many teachers, most textbook publishers, and among civic and business leaders who press for higher levels of school achievement. We begin with an outline of the evolution of thinking about reading, and then focus on how closely teachers' beliefs and practices match evolving thought.

On the surface, it would seem logical to connect teacher beliefs and practices to student achievement. However, given the cross-sectional nature of the data from the IEA Reading Literacy Study, this is inappropriate because we would be unable to account for at least 3 years of prior instruction. Therefore, we can not attribute success or failure to current teacher practice.

The Evolution of Reading Theory

Within the living memory of a great many Americans, learning to read meant learning to reproduce, in speech or in writing, the author's exact message. Coinciding with this was the view that the student is an empty vessel to be filled by parents, teachers, and the author/expert who wrote the book. In this school of thought, teaching is the step-by-step *transmission* of knowledge, arrayed from easy to hard, from an active teacher to a passive student. The easy parts are thought to be recognizing words, reading sentences accurately, and remembering details. The hard parts, which are usually withheld from students until they have cleared certain hurdles, are thought to be the ability to make generalizations and to apply new knowledge to new tasks.

In the next stage of evolution, *interaction*, the reader/student plays a slightly more active role. The student is asked to connect

the material read with knowledge learned yesterday, last year, at school, or on the street. And so one begins to see a greater interaction between the book and the student, who is increasingly encouraged to think beyond the immediate words in the text. The interactive approach assumes that the reader must always fill in missing information because no text is fully explicit; and that filling in the blanks creates an engagement with the new information in the text that helps the student absorb and remember what he has read.

Next came a school of thought that places still greater reliance on the reader. The student is not only encouraged to fill in the inevitable missing information, but also to notice similarities and disparities between the text he is reading and what he already knows, or thinks he knows, about the subject. It is, in essence, a *transaction* between the reader and the writer. In addition, the student is asked to find answers in the text to self-generated questions. The student is no longer seen as an empty vessel: he or she is expected to have questions in mind and to grapple with the author about ideas and style. In contrast to the stepwise approach of earlier theorists, teachers expect students to deal with both details and large themes from the beginning. What differentiates easy from hard, according to transactional theorists, is the density of the material rather than the progression from facts to ideas to generalizations.

Therefore we arrive at three distinct periods in thought about reading:

- *Transmission*, where the meaning of the text lies in the literal words, which the student is expected to reproduce;
- *Interaction*, where meaning resides with both the text and the reader, and the student is expected to relate what he reads to what he already knows; and
- *Transaction*, where meaning is generated by the reader based on information from the text, personal knowledge, and purpose for reading.

We searched the data from the teacher questionnaires to see how teachers' beliefs and practices correspond, or fail to correspond, to these differing views about the teaching of reading, and finally, we explored the alignment between teachers' beliefs and actions.

What Teachers Believe

The items from the questionnaire about teachers' beliefs divide into two groups. The first group, which emphasizes sequenced instruction, is characterized by the sequencing of reading tasks, mastery of prior levels before moving on, an emphasis on accuracy, and strong teacher direction. It is closely aligned with the *transmission* approach discussed above.

While this stance is likely to be consistent with what phonics proponents advocate, it is broader than just phonics. Implicit, though not specifically stated, is a belief in developmental stages that are carefully orchestrated by either the material or the teacher.

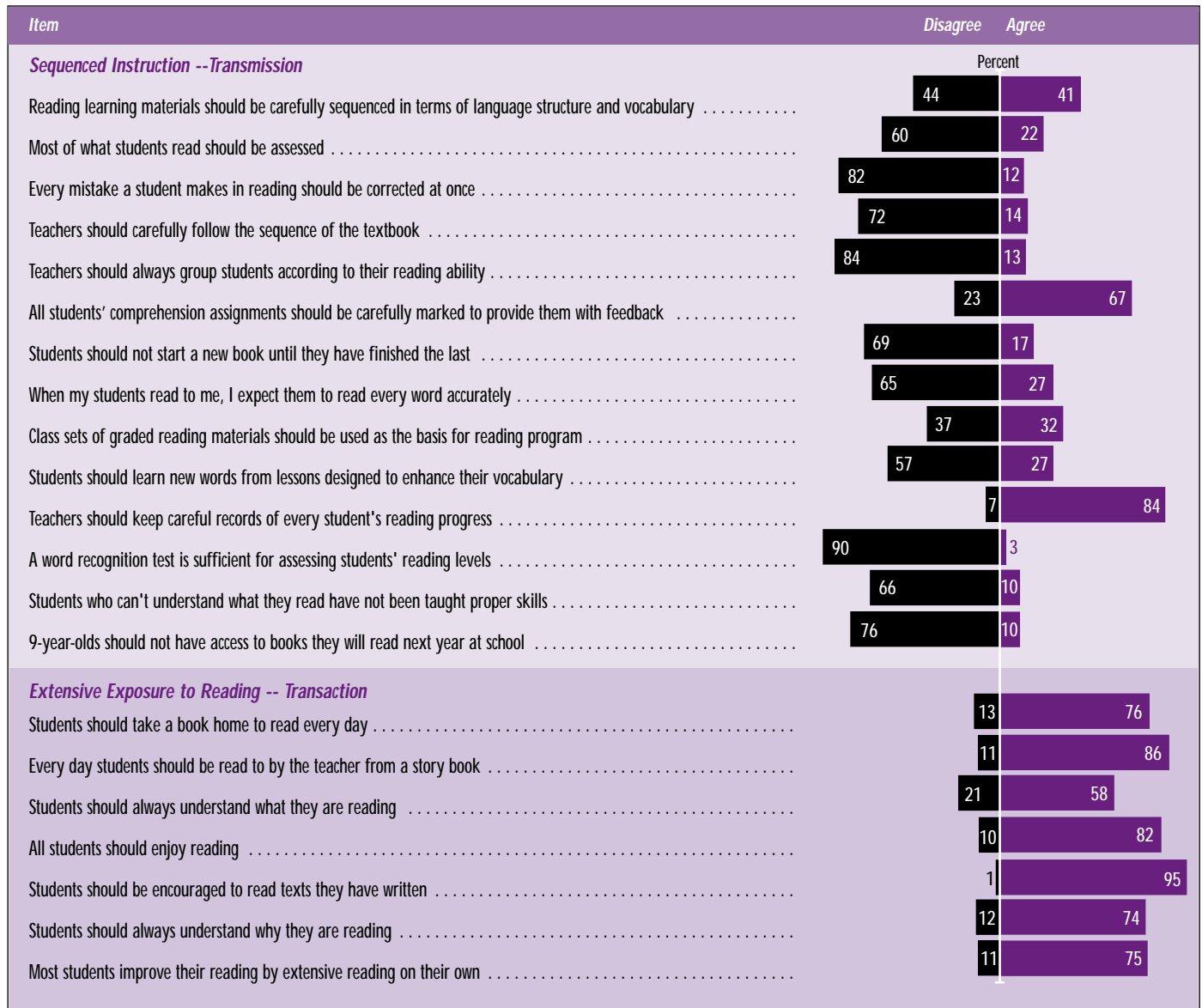
Alternatively, the second set of beliefs, which emphasizes an extensive exposure to reading, is more typical of the transaction approach. These beliefs focus more on what the student does and less on what the teacher does. Students are expected to read lengthy texts frequently, at home and at school, with little teacher direction. Students are expected to play a larger role in finding the meaning of what they read and to read texts that they themselves have written. Thus there is a greater emphasis on the integration of reading and writing.

Figure 27 displays 4th grade teachers' responses to a series of statements concerned with the nature of reading. They were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement on a five-point scale—strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, and strongly disagree. For the purposes of this presentation we have collapsed all except the uncertain category into two by dispensing with the distinction between strongly agree and agree on the one hand, and disagree and strongly disagree on the other. Teachers responding that they were uncertain were omitted from these analyses and, as a result, the percentages in Figure 27 do not add to 100. Further, the statements themselves have been separated into two groups; those that relate to a transmission emphasis and those that indicate a transaction orientation.

The results are fairly clear; with only a few exceptions, teachers disagree with items that represent a transmission approach and agree with the items characteristic of the transaction approach. So, on the surface at least, teachers see reading as a process of transaction between the reader and the text—a transaction between textual information, personal knowledge, and personal motivation.

Figure 27

What Teachers Believe



NOTE: Percentages do not add to 100; the shortfall is due to teachers checking "uncertain" as a response.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Reading Literacy in the United States: Technical Report*. Washington D.C.: 1994.

What Teachers Do

The essence of the survey questions about teachers' practices is teacher control. Does the teacher entirely dominate the proceedings, or share control with students, or center instruction around independent student activities? Questionnaire items relating to these issues were grouped statistically to indicate three general orientations toward teaching practices, namely whether these practices were, respectively, *materials directed*, *shared direction*, or *student centered*. **Figure 28** displays the items in question. Teacher responses to these items were phrased in terms of frequency of use and to simplify matters have been collapsed into two categories—rarely and frequently.

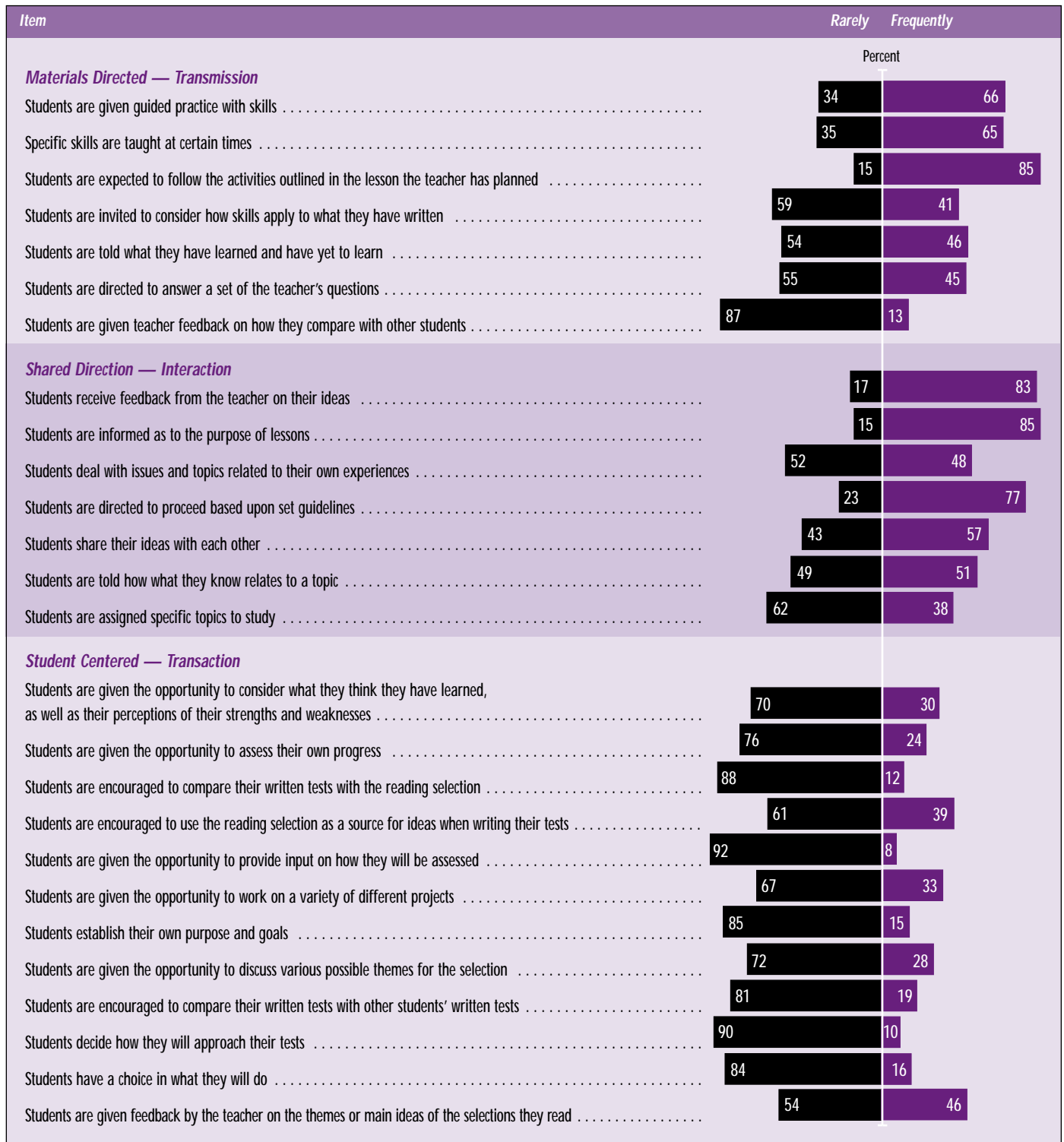
Practices emphasizing teacher control usually involve the teaching of specific skills—a class where the students follow, in lock step, the instructions of the teacher. The teacher carefully maps out what will be done according to a highly structured progression. In the *materials directed* set of items, note that for the first three items, two-thirds or more of the teachers surveyed said they expected students to work frequently on activities that are skills oriented and orchestrated in specific ways by either the teacher or the materials they have been assigned. Teachers who practice in this skill-based manner are presumed to be operating consistently within a *transmission* approach.

Teaching practices that fit with the notion of *shared direction* expect students to generate ideas, to share with one another, and to relate what they are learning to their own experience. Teachers still provide a high level of direction and feedback, but students are given some latitude as they work within a prescribed structure. The pattern of responses for the group of items in Figure 28 designated as tapping shared direction support this view. Teachers who practice this way are associated with the *interactive* approach.

Teaching practices that center on student autonomy may be characterized as *student centered*. Students are encouraged to have their own thoughts about how well they are doing, what they are doing, and how they will do it. Within a structured environment students are given the opportunity to organize themselves and the materials they use in order to find meaning in what they read. Teachers who favor these practices could be called *transactional* teachers. In Figure 28 responses to the 12 items listed in the group headed *student centered* seem to indicate fairly clearly that teachers of 4th grade reading do not often adopt a student-centered approach.

Figure 28

What Teachers Do



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Reading Literacy in the United States: Technical Report*. Washington D.C.: 1994.

Thus, on the basis of teachers' responses to these survey questions the following observations seem possible: teachers vary a lot with regard to the use of transmission approaches (skills based); they frequently use interactive approaches (shared direction); and they rarely use transactional (student centered) approaches.

What Teachers Have Students Do

Teachers also answered questions about the kind of activities they required of their students—and how often. **Figure 29** shows the 21 items in question categorized into three groups: *skills-based* activities; *integrated language arts* activities; and, *schema-based* activities. Teachers responded to these items on a five-point frequency-of-use scale which has been collapsed, as above, into the two categories “rarely” and “frequently”.

Figure 29 shows clearly that teachers frequently ask students to work on *skills-based* activities, an orientation that corresponds to the *transmission* approach. These activities include working on letter-sound relationships and word attack skills, learning new vocabulary from text, and doing reading comprehension exercises.

Teachers also assign *schema-based* work that would suggest an *interactive* orientation. They ask students to make predictions during reading, to make inferences and generalizations, summarize their reading, relate their experiences to the text, and look for a theme or message.

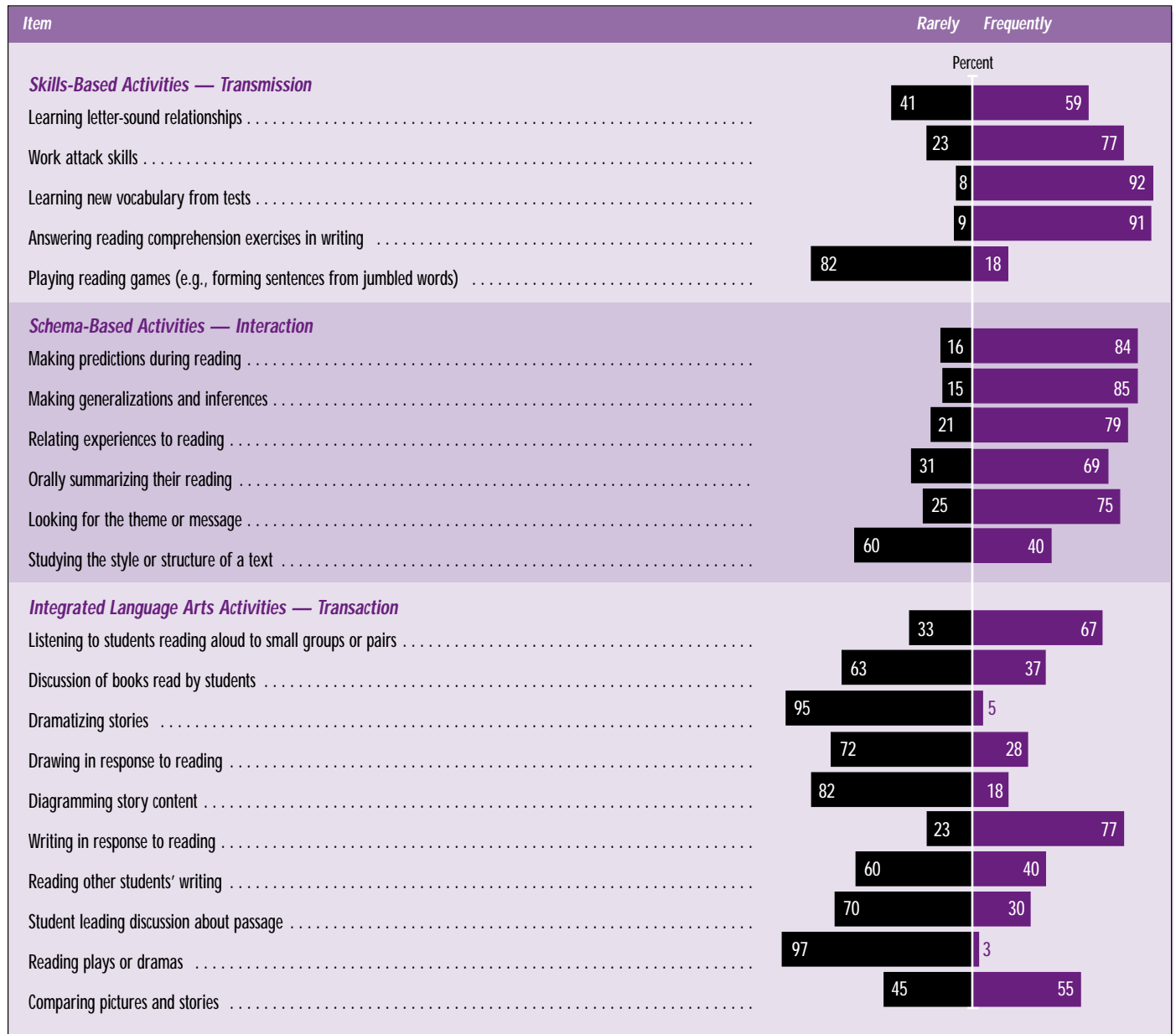
By contrast, teachers tend not to have students engage in *language arts* activities that call for the *integration* of reading, writing, speaking, and thinking. These activities require students to be much more assertive in relation to what they are learning. Some of the activities in this category are very time consuming—putting on a play, dramatizing a story—and this may explain why teachers do not report using many of the integrative activities on a regular basis.

Are Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Aligned?

The suggestion here is that teachers' beliefs and practices are not especially well aligned. Teachers are oriented away from skills-based, transmission approaches, but adopt that approach quite often in assigning reading activities to students. They tend to accept the transactional arguments of modern reading theorists, but do not consistently reflect these in their instructional practices.

Figure 29

What Teachers Have Students Do



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Reading Literacy in the United States: Technical Report*. Washington D.C.: 1994.

In offering some speculations on why this may be so, we recognize that teachers operate within a teaching environment that may severely limit their chances of putting into practice what they consider to be best practice. First, discussions of reading theory have elements of political correctness to them, and reading teachers are expected to subscribe to views of teaching whose implementation is impractical for reasons of resources and/or educational policy. Second, and more specifically, increasing discipline problems may push teachers toward drills and workbooks as a method of maintaining control in the classroom. Third, much of the theorizing about reading has yet to be translated into readily usable teaching practice and/or teaching materials.