Reading Lessons in Guinea, France, and the United States: Local Meanings or Global Culture?

KATHRYN M. ANDERSON-LEVITT

Is classroom practice becoming more homogeneous around the world, or will teachers continue to work very differently across different countries? This article addresses those questions by comparing first- and second-grade reading lessons in France, Guinea, and the United States. It shows that what reading lessons in each country have in common is not, as some have found in the case of middle-school mathematics lessons, whole-class instruction. Rather, what reading lessons in these three countries have in common is a “mixed method” of reading instruction, that is, the practice of combining explicit instruction in decoding and explicit attention to reading for meaning. Within that very general framework, teachers in France, Guinea, and the United States create distinctive lesson structures. Indeed, lesson structures vary so much within and between countries that what the lessons have in common might on the surface appear trivial. And yet, as I argue here, the common mixed method has had a powerful impact on reading instruction, particularly in Guinea. Although global models have little substance until local teachers act to give them meaning and structure, global models nonetheless inhabit and inhibit practice.

World culture theorists, otherwise known as neo-institutionalists, argue that schooling takes similar organizational shapes around the world and everywhere features a centralized, compulsory, mass system and a converging official curriculum. Some scholars have extended the argument to encom-

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2 The label “world culture theory” is the most transparent label for the school of thought exemplified by John Boli, Francisco O. Ramirez, and John W. Meyer, “Explaining the Origins and Expansion of Mass Education,” in New Approaches to Comparative Education, ed. Philip G. Altbach and Gail Paradise Kelly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). The phrase “world culture” comes from Francisco...
pass what teachers do inside classrooms as well, arguing that teachers more or less everywhere follow a similar “script” centered on whole-class instruction and seatwork.³

Other comparative researchers find sharp differences in teaching practices between countries. For example, an investigation based on extensive observations, video recordings, and teacher interviews in England, the United States, France, Russia, and India demonstrated deep differences in the forms of lessons and in educational philosophy in practice.⁴ Similarly, in a now classic study, Joseph Tobin, David Wu, and Dana Davidson demonstrated significant differences in the practices of preschool teachers across Japan, China, and the United States.⁵

I would argue both that classroom practice is “remarkably homogeneous” around the world⁶ and that teachers in different countries teach in significantly different ways, at least in the case of first- and second-grade reading lessons in the United States, France, and the Republic of Guinea. However, the problem then becomes how we should conceive of national culture and global processes as acting within classroom practice. I will show that in the case of reading lessons, teachers use a simple repertoire of lesson elements to build different lesson structures.⁷ Although shallow and almost meaningless until given meaning by local teachers, the common repertoire, the transnational model, nonetheless had a real impact on and a real presence in local practice.

Background and Methods

The case of early reading instruction deserves our attention because educators see basic literacy as the prerequisite to further academic success and because almost all of the world’s children experience formal reading


³ LeTendre et al.


⁶ To use a phrase from LeTendre et al., p. 5.

instruction. Granted, reading presents more challenges for comparison than do subjects like mathematics because reading methods may vary with the language of instruction. In this article, the cases of France and Guinea “control” for language of instruction but thereby introduce a new complication, the difference between learning to read in one’s native language and in a foreign language.

The first case, France, is a Western power that adopted the transnational model of modern schooling very early. Yet, teaching methods in France differ markedly from methods in other core Western nations like England and the United States, thus reminding us to call into question what we mean by the “West.” First grade, the *cours préparatoire*, is the first year of compulsory schooling in France, and classes are capped at 25 students, who enter at about age 6. Almost all French first graders arrive prepared by 3 years of full-time preschool. My description of first-grade reading practice in France comes from a larger study of cultural knowledge for teaching reading. I conducted participant-observation and teacher interviews in 55 classes, including 34 first-grade classes, over the period 1976–98. The longest periods of fieldwork were 10 months in 1978–79 and 4 months in 1988. Classroom visits took place in 32 different primary schools, public and private, in a wide range of urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods. Most of the classroom visits ranged from a half-day to three and a half days, but in three first grades I followed the class through the entire school year.

The Republic of Guinea, the second case, contrasts starkly with France because Guinea is still in the midst of a literacy revolution, with a gross rate of elementary schooling now reaching 51 percent. At the same time, Guinea resembles France because it borrowed its public school system from its former colonizer. Thus, Guinea can neatly illustrate how lesson structure is transformed as it moves from global North to global South. First graders in Guinea range in age from about 6 to 10 years of age, and very few have attended preschool. In spite of an official cap of 50, first-grade classes can hold 60, 80, even 110 students. Rarely native French speakers, children are expected to need 2 years to learn to read and write French. The *cours préparatoire* is organized as a 2-year sequence rather than a single year as in France, and

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10 Alexander. The comparison of Germany and the United States in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) also shows that the West is not a monolith.


second grade repeats and reinforces first grade. Therefore, I included both first-grade and second-grade lessons in the corpus here.

The observations in Guinean classrooms come from a larger study of what counts as good reading instruction in Guinea. In collaboration with Sadialiou Barry of Guinea’s Pedagogical Institute, Boubacar Bayero Diallo and I conducted participant-observation in the capital, in three provincial towns, and in two rural villages during the spring and fall of 1998. We observed 11 first grades and 9 second grades in 11 different schools, urban and rural. Each classroom visit lasted from half a day to 5 full days.

The third case is the United States. Including a third point of comparison helps to avoid false dichotomies and prevents us from mistaking a French model, transmitted to Guinea through the historic colonial relationship, for a truly global model. The United States holds practical interest as the third case, because France and the United States compete to influence educators on improving reading instruction in Guinea and elsewhere in West Africa.

This article relies on descriptions of U.S. reading lessons from the research literature. Although I have observed first- and second-grade classrooms myself, my observations were neither recent enough nor extensive enough to provide an adequate corpus. Therefore, I have collected descriptions of actual, naturally occurring reading lessons through a search of ERIC and of references cited by relevant studies. Although the United States is large and decentralized, recent studies describing actual first-grade reading instruction report on 10 different states across the country without uncovering regional differences. Several of these studies included schools across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Relying on the literature poses a problem because my research question requires descriptions that reveal the structure—the sequence of events—of actual lessons. Unfortunately, a number of excellent observational studies describe the activities of reading lessons, but without revealing their temporal

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sequence. The only suitable studies I have found are Dolores Durkin’s analysis of five first-grade classrooms; Steven Stahl, Jean Osborn, and David Pearson’s description of six first grades in Illinois; Stahl, Joan Pagnucco, and C. W. Suttles’s study of six first-grade classrooms in the Southeast; and descriptions of five first grades across the country by Michael Pressley’s team. These 22 examples of lessons are the U.S. cases to which my comparative analysis will refer. However, descriptions from Pressley’s team must be interpreted with caution because the researchers deliberately chose exemplary rather than representative teachers.

The Lesson as Unit of Analysis

My analysis uses the “lesson” as the unit of comparison, but the meaning of lesson is itself problematic. In the English-language research literature, “lesson” usually refers to a single, continuous session of teaching and learning. However, as we shall see, educators in France and in Guinea define a lesson as a series of sessions that take place over the course of 2 or more days, using the same material and organized around the same goals. For example, the official first-year reading curriculum in Guinea specifies that each first-grade reading “lesson” be organized into 13 distinct 30-minute
sessions (séances) over the course of a week. The notion of a lesson is especially complex in U.S. classrooms, where the use of small groups and individual projects means that a language arts session can consist of multiple simultaneous activities. Teachers in the United States may conduct multiple single-session language arts lessons over the course of the same day, although a single lesson may also take place across more than one session, as illustrated by the example of Teacher B’s class below.

If the goal of research is to understand teaching as meaningful action, it makes little sense to limit the analysis to only one session per class when a lesson is designed to accomplish its objectives over the course of several sessions. Therefore, in this article, I use the concept of “lesson” as local educators define it, that is, as one or several sessions focused on the same material and pursing the same main goal.

Sketching the formal structure of actual lessons hardly does justice to the dynamics of classroom teaching and learning. The descriptions in this article cannot convey the atmosphere of trust or hilarity or fear in teacher-student interactions, or the sensual experiences of children’s voices ringing off the ceramic tile floors of a French classroom, the heat and hard benches of a classroom in Guinea, or the bombarding colors of bulletin boards in a U.S. classroom. Nonetheless, what is described here—the logic and pattern of a lesson from the teacher’s point of view—is crucial to understanding what happens in classrooms. It provides an important complement to richer ethnographic descriptions.

A Common Model

In what way were the reading lessons observed in France, the United States, and Guinea similar? It was not the use of whole-class instruction that made them similar, as might have been concluded from the comparative studies based on middle-school mathematics and science lessons. On the contrary, U.S. teachers have made much use, sometimes exclusive use, of small-group instruction for reading lessons. Among the cases from the lit-

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20 Republic of Guinea, Programmes de l’enseignement élémentaire, 1re et 2e années (Conakry: Institut National de Recherche et d’Action Pédagogique, no date) p. 53.
21 LeTendre et al. (n. 1 above); Anderson (n. 1 above); Anderson, Ryan, and Shapiro (n. 1 above); Givin et al.
22 One large-scale study conducted in the 1980s found reading groups in 90 percent of U.S. first grades (James M. McPartland, J. Robert Coldiron, and Jomills Henry Braddock II, School Structures and Classroom Practices in Elementary, Middle and Secondary Schools, Report no. 14 [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Research Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, 1987]; see also Rebecca Barr and Robert Dreeben, How Schools Work [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985]; and Aaron M. Pallas, Doris R. Entwisle, Karl L. Alexander, and M. Francis Slika, “Ability-Group Effects: Instructional, Social, or Institutional?” Sociology of Education 67 [January 1994]: 27–46.) A recent nationwide study of kindergarten through third-grade classes found that students still averaged 38 minutes per day in small groups, with 30 minutes per day in whole-class instruction, and 18 minutes per day doing independent reading (Taylor et al., p. 144). Alexander illustrates the use of small groups in English as well as U.S. primary schools.
erature that make up my U.S. sample, 18 (81 percent) reported using small groups in some way. Teachers in France, too, made limited use of small group instruction. I witnessed grouping in about half of the first grades I observed in France, although teachers never grouped until the late winter or early spring and even when they grouped, they continued to teach the whole class together for morning sessions.23

What was common to reading lessons in France, Guinea, and the United States was the “mixed method” of instruction. “Mixed method” (la méthode mixte in French) is a very broad term that educators use to describe an instructional philosophy calling for some measure of explicit code-based instruction (“phonics” or, in Francophone countries, the “syllabic” or “synthetic” method), combined with some measure of explicit attention to reading for meaning (whether “whole word,” “whole language,” “language experience,” or other varieties). The mixed method is really a continuum of methods, some of which give more emphasis to decoding and some more emphasis to comprehension, but all of which give explicit attention to both.

To many readers, the use of a mixed method will seem obvious, since the very nature of reading seems to require that readers decipher an alphabetic code as part of a strategy to comprehend a meaning.24 Yet the question before us is not “How do readers read?” nor even “How do children actually learn to read?” The questions are: “How do educators claim that initial reading instruction ought to be conducted, and how do they actually conduct it?” Despite the prevalence of the mixed method today, other methods have been and are still employed. Strictly meaning-based methods like the nineteenth-century sentence method and the most radical versions of twentieth-century whole-language instruction discouraged any instruction in the code and expected novices to read for meaning without decoding.25 Strictly code-based methods like the one advocated in Why Johnny Can’t Read avoided explicit instruction in reading for meaning.26 Similarly, historical approaches in Europe and North America such as the alphabet-spelling method and the

23 Anderson-Levitt, Teaching Cultures (n. 11 above).
24 I am not sure whether the consensus covers the entire globe, but in a very general way, the mixed method seems to apply in many different countries with different writing systems. Quranic teachers in Morocco now incorporate phonics teaching alongside visual memorization of words; see Daniel A. Wagner, Literacy, Culture, and Development: Becoming Literate in Morocco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 47. Although Chinese is written with ideographs that convey meaning rather than sounds, it is sometimes transcribed phonetically into the Roman alphabet (pinyin), and in Taiwan teachers use a syllabary to introduce reading. Japanese, although written with ideographs borrowed from the Chinese system, relies heavily on syllabaries for instructing new readers; see Harold W. Stevenson, James W. Sigler, G. William Lucker, and Shin-ying Lee, “Reading Disabilities: The Case of Chinese, Japanese and English,” Child Development 33 (October 1982): 1164–81, 1167.
25 For example, Frank Smith in Reading without Nonsense (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978) argues that “a teacher would do well NOT to . . . ensure that phonic skills are learned and used” (p. 138).
practice of teaching children to read in Latin before the vernacular likewise expected novices to decode without reading for meaning.27

In the sections that follow, I will demonstrate that teachers in France, Guinea, and the United States used a mixed method, that is, included both explicit instruction on the code and explicit attention to reading for meaning in their lessons for novice readers. I will further show how teachers structured mixed-method lessons in each country.

Reading Lessons in France

Mainstream Practice and a Variation

In France, both Ministry policy and commercial teachers’ guides advocate a mixed method. As expressed by the latest official instructions, “Learning to read is to learn to put into operation two very different activities: one that leads to identifying written words, one that leads to understanding meaning.”28 Teachers interpret those instructions in an atmosphere of considerable professional autonomy. School inspectors hold only limited sway over experienced teachers, and school directors hold even less influence. The teachers I observed were free to choose their own method and textbook for reading instruction; some used no commercial textbook at all, preferring to use texts composed by the students themselves.29 The teachers’ only obligation is to achieve broad learning goals laid out by the Ministry of Education in its official instructions.

In spite of the teachers’ autonomy, in most of the classrooms I observed in France (30 out of 34, taught by 28 different teachers), reading lessons followed a similar pattern no matter which commercial textbook they used—and even if they used no textbook at all. The lessons moved from text to words to sound (“analysis”) and then back from the sound to words, syllables, and text (“synthesis”). The typical lesson structure, which took place across a span of about two days, was as follows:

1. Production of the key text. The teacher elicited discussion from the children, usually about an illustration from the textbook, and wrote

27 For example, Roger Chartier, Dominique Julia, and Marie-Madeleine Compère, L’éducation en France du XVIe au XVIIe siècle (Paris: Société d’Édition d’Enseignement Supérieur, 1976); Charles C. Fries, Reading and Linguistics (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1962). Likewise, I was told that in some Quranic schools in Guinea today, novices learned to sound out the Arabic words but not to read for meaning.


29 In 34 first-grade classes taught by 30 different teachers, all within a 20-kilometer radius, four teachers chose to use no commercial text at all, and the other 26 used 12 different published readers (Anderson-Levitt, Teaching Cultures, p. 118). For portraits of teachers in France, see also Alexander (n. 4 above); and Patricia Broadfoot, “Institutional Dependence and Autonomy: English and French Teachers in the Classroom,” Prospects 15 (1985): 263–71.
some of their comments on the board.

2. Reading of the text on the board by the whole class.

3. Word study. Reading continued with an emphasis on recognizing words isolated from the text on the board or on homemade flashcards.

4. Analysis of a sound. The class isolated a particular sound from the words on the board and often “hunted” for other words that contained the same sound.

5. Synthesis. The teacher dictated words or syllables with the key sound, which students wrote on slates. Students had to blend sounds in order to write unfamiliar words or syllables.

6. Reading. The class read orally and sometimes silently a text similar to the one on the board from the commercial reader or from a photocopied sheet.

7. Other supporting exercises. The class recycled through these steps and did other supporting exercises as needed. The teacher usually closed the lesson with a final dictation in ink.30

The description below offers an example of an actual lesson observed in 1988. The teacher pulled the lesson’s text from the students themselves, although she steered their conversation to include words with the sound she wanted them to study.

Madame David taught 24 first graders in a public school in an affluent neighborhood. She began a new reading lesson on a Monday morning in March by encouraging the students to talk about their weekend, writing some comments on the board (step 1). The text began:

émilie est allée chez le dentiste samedi et jeudi anne-lise a perdu une dent. elle avait un peu peur. mais émilie n'a pas pleuré. elle a été courageuse. (Emily went to the dentist on Saturday and on Thursday Anne-Lise lost a tooth. She was a little afraid. But Emily did not cry. She was brave.)

The teacher led the class in reading the text on the board (step 2). She pointed out the sounds made by the letter pair eu and put boxes around words with the eu-sound (step 3). She wrote down other words with the eu-sound offered by students, as in deus → deu, and had them read the syllables thus identified (step 4). Asking students to take out their slates, she dictated the key word jeudi (Thursday) and syllables like leu, meu, deu (step 5). That afternoon, Madame David had students read aloud from a homemade dittoed sheet that contained a text similar to the one on the board (step 6).

In three sessions on the next day, Madame David had individual students read aloud from the dittoed sheets, read silently and aloud from a new text on the blackboard, and answer simple comprehension questions. Students again pointed out the eu spelling and hunted for more eu-words, and Madame David gave another dictation of syllables (step 7).

30 Anderson-Levitt, Teaching Cultures.
This mainstream lesson structure clearly falls within the broad rubric of mixed methods. In a five-session lesson on the eu-sound consisting of five sessions, Madame David taught both comprehension and the code. Most of her explicit attention to meaning came in step 1, when she invited the class to compose the lesson’s key text. Since students had actually said, “Emily lost a tooth,” she could assume that they understood the sentence. At the same time, she taught both analysis and synthesis of sounds.

I found a variation on this structure in two classrooms, where I witnessed a version of the mixed method referred to in France as globale-analytique (holistic-analytic). This version was popular with certain politically committed teachers in working-class neighborhoods. Madame François’s class read for meaning, on the day I visited, by trying to make sense of a formal business letter sent to the class by the district’s director of cafeterias. Mademoiselle Albert’s class, on the day I observed, read for meaning by silently studying a page from a trade book projected on a screen and by discussing the illustration. In both cases, the class “discovered” a text, to use the teachers’ terminology, rather than producing a text. However, in spite of their emphasis on meaning, both of these classes also paid explicit attention to the code, albeit in separate lessons. In the first class, students kept a word notebook in which words were grouped by sound. In the second class, on the day I visited, the class analyzed the sound of oi in a column of words on the board: oiseau, boire, voit (bird, to drink, see).

This variation differed from mainstream lessons in three ways. First, the class discovered existing texts as well as producing their own texts. On at least some occasions, it also divorced the study of words and their sounds from the study of texts, whereas in the mainstream method the sound studied always derived from the key text. Finally, although this variation regularly invited students to analyze or isolate a sound from words, it gave less attention than the mainstream method to synthesis of sounds, the kind of skill required in dictations. Nonetheless, the variation was clearly a mixed method, giving attention both to meaning and the code.

The Synthetic Method as an Exception

In just two classrooms out of 34 I visited, I witnessed lessons that eschewed the mixed method for what was called a “synthetic” or “syllabic” approach. Both synthetic lessons took place in Catholic schools in affluent neighborhoods in 1978. The lessons focused almost exclusively on learning sounds and on blending them into syllables and words. For example, Madame Denis began her lesson on the s-sound by holding up objects and eliciting their names: “semoule, salsifis, salade” (semolina, the vegetable salsify, lettuce). The class quickly isolated the s-sound in these words, which they read on the board. The teacher dictated the syllables so and sa for them to write on their

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31 See ibid., pp. 122–23, for a description of the lesson.
slates. The class then read syllables and words from their textbooks. Similarly, Madame Michel also focused almost exclusively on sounding out words. Surprisingly, her students named the letters rather than calling them by their sounds, in a throwback to the “alphabet-spelling” method of the nineteenth century. Madame Michel’s only concessions to reading for meaning were to read aloud to the class from *Babar the Elephant* and to give a “silent dictation” in which students wrote the names of objects pictured on the board. As in Madame Denis’s class, you might say that Madame Michel taught the meanings of individual words, but there was no focus on understanding sentences or paragraphs.

Other teachers referred to these methods, and particularly to the alphabet-spelling method, as “old-fashioned.” I did not find any examples like these almost purely code-based methods when I returned to France in the 1980s and 1990s.

With the exception of these two “old-fashioned” teachers observed, the teachers I observed in France used a mixed method. Most of them guaranteed understanding of the text by having students produce the key texts themselves. Most taught the code through both analysis and synthesis, although the two holistic-analytic teachers de-emphasized synthesis.

**Reading Lessons in Guinea**

Guinea’s official curriculum, published circa 1990, prescribes the mixed method, which Guineans usually referred to as the “semi-holistic” method (*méthode semi-globale*). The official curriculum called the semi-holistic method a “happy medium”: “Like the syllabic method, it helps the child to perceive words as combinations of letters and syllables and from the holistic method it takes up the idea that knowing how to read consists not of decoding but of grasping the meaning of a text in a holistic fashion.”

Here, “holistic method” (*méthode globale*) refers to a strictly meaning-based method—a concept familiar to Guinean educators from debates in France but never seen in Guinean schools. The “syllabic method” means a “synthetic” or strictly code-based method like Madame Denis’s above and like the one that Guinea used until the mid-1980s.

Guinea replaced the syllabic method with a mixed method in about 1990, and it will be important to my argument to pay attention to the revolution in Guinean reading instruction. During the colonial period, Guinean...
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schools used a syllabic method as represented by the small primer *Mamadou et Bineta*.

In it, much as in the lesson Madame Denis taught in France, each lesson began with a sound identified with a key word and then moved on to syllables, words, and short texts using the sound. After Guinea’s break with France in 1958 and during Guinea’s 17-year experiment with instruction in local languages, most teachers continued to use a syllabic method. When Guinea reinstated French as the language of instruction in 1984, at first teachers relied again on the colonial-era syllabic primer.

However, the new regime commissioned a new curriculum and, influenced by a pair of linguist advisors from France, the new curriculum opened the door to the mixed method by echoing the doctrine from France, “To read is to understand.” Guinea’s Pedagogical Institute, collaborating with a second pair of French linguists, designed its own first- and second-grade textbooks, *Langage-Lecture* (Language-reading). The new textbooks used the mixed or “semi-holistic” method. They were distributed to first grades in 1993, and when they went out of print, the French-published textbook series that replaced them likewise used a mixed method.

Guinean teachers put the method into practice under very difficult conditions. In urban areas, the teachers we visited taught huge classes, often on double sessions. Many worked a second job to make ends meet; some struggled with recurrent illness. In rural schools, where teachers tended to be less well prepared, books and other resources were even harder to come by than in the cities, multigrade classes were common, and lack of electricity made lesson preparation more difficult. Guinea’s centralized educational system controls teachers right down to daily sign off on lesson plans by school directors. However, because of their working conditions, rather than clamoring for more autonomy, many teachers sought scripted sample lesson plans.

The official curriculum and the teachers’ guide designed for the Ministry’s textbooks suggested the following lesson structure:

1. Production of the key text. The teacher would write the key text (*texte de base*) on the board.
2. Reading. The class would read from the board.
3. Word study. The class would identify words isolated from the text, for example, by unscrambling words of the text written on flashcards or slates.
4. **Analysis of a sound.** The teacher led the class in isolating the sound to be studied, often having them hunt for words containing the same sound.

5. **Syllable work.** The class would read words containing the sound and do “syllable work.”

6. The class would read a new text for “synthesis” or would do exercises. Again, this ideal sequence was to take a full week in first-grade classes and 2 or 3 days in second-grade classes. It paralleled mainstream French lessons quite closely, except that it provided for synthesis in only one session out of 13, whereas mainstream lessons in France devoted at least one-quarter of their time to dictation and other synthesis work.

The lessons we actually observed in Guinea contained most of the activities prescribed by the official program and rarely introduced other activities. Thus, we often witnessed sight-reading of the text at the board, and we often saw analysis exercises like word hunts. However, in only a quarter of the classrooms did we witness any “syllable work” at all, despite the official instructions. It was uncommon to see a word cut into syllables or to see a column of syllables on the board. It was uncommon to witness exercises in which the class combined consonants plus vowels to create syllables or to see the teacher dictate syllables or words. Thus, the lessons we observed generally moved from whole to part—from text to word to sound—but infrequently moved back from part to whole—from sound to word to text.

The example of Madame Diallo’s first-grade class below shows how a weeklong lesson worked in practice.

When I arrived on a Monday morning in April 1998, Madame Diallo was leading the class in reading the basic text on the board, “maman est malade, je pile du mais” (Mama is ill, I pound the corn). This was step 2 of a lesson on the letter m. After the oral reading, Madame Diallo asked the class, “What is the sound you hear most often?” One student produced the answer: “The letter m.” That was the beginning of analysis (step 4; this lesson skipped step 3).

The teacher launched a word hunt with her next question, “Who can give me a word with [the letter m]?” The students produced words that the teacher listed on the board, all of them proper names like Moussa, Mariama, and Salématou. The class identified the m’s in the words but did not reread them.

Five days later, the last session of the same reading lesson went on in a similar manner. There was another word hunt. Afterward, the class read in the textbook

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38 We analyzed every first-year and second-year classroom observed in 1998, excluding from the sample the eight first-year classrooms we observed during the first weeks of the year when reading per se had not yet been introduced. For this analysis, the sample consisted of four first-year lessons taught in three different classrooms, and 10 second-year lessons taught in nine different classrooms. Despite efforts to spend a full week at each site, we rarely were able to observe a full lesson from beginning to end, making it difficult to reconstitute the entire lesson structure in many cases. Of the 14 lessons observed, four clearly introduced each activity in the prescribed order, two followed a different order (isolating the sound before studying the words); in the remaining eight, we could not be sure. See Anderson-Levitt and Diallo for details.
isolated words illustrated with little pictures, beginning with “marigot” (pond). The teacher regularly questioned the children in the following manner:

Teacher: La mo-teur (the motor). Again the sound—
Students: —mm!
Teacher: Il fu-me (he smokes). At the end of *fume* we hear—
Students: —mm!

Madame Diallo taught the students, above all, French vocabulary and the link between the written letter *m* and its sound. She also demonstrated orally (though not at the board) that words could be divided into syllables. However, she never directly attacked the blending of *m* with vowels.

Although the shift to a mixed method had occurred very recently, we did not find a code-based method persisting in some Guinean classrooms, as I had in 1970s France. We did witness one second-grade teacher who used the colonial-era primer instead of the sanctioned textbook, but we did not see her teach blending as the colonial primer instructs teachers to do. Rather, her class generated sentences as well as words to serve as text on the board, just as in the other Guinean classrooms we observed.

In sum, all teachers we observed in Guinea clearly used the mixed method. They gave explicit attention to meaning—indeed, reading lessons became first and foremost lessons on understanding French vocabulary. They also gave explicit instruction on analysis of the code, although most of them gave short shrift to synthesis.

**Reading Lessons in the United States**

Vast and decentralized, the United States has no official national policy on education. However, there are government-sanctioned statements that transmit “received knowledge” and, like the policies of France and Guinea, they tend to promote the mixed method. For example, in 1998, the National Academy of Science’s National Research Council, in “a consensus document based on the best judgments of a diverse group of experts,” recommended that first-grade instruction should provide “explicit instruction . . . that lead[s] to phonemic awareness” but should also “promote comprehension.”

Teachers in the United States work under highly varied circumstances. Supervised by principals, local school boards, and in some cases active state boards of education, they experience less autonomy than teachers in France do. Teachers in the United States do not conform slavishly to textbooks and teachers’ guides, but recent movements have sought greater control over

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their practice through tests of basic competency, more detailed job descriptions, and standardized testing of their students.40

Inside classrooms, waves of reform have left in their wake at least two distinct approaches. The literature from which I draw my sample of lesson descriptions distinguishes “traditional” methods on the one hand and “process-oriented or whole-language” approaches on the other. In fact, some of the studies deliberately sampled lessons representing each of these two approaches.41 Because their lesson structures differ significantly, I will treat the two approaches separately.

Traditional Lessons

The traditional or standard method is focused on basal readers and tends to involve sight-reading for meaning supplemented by lessons on the code. My sample includes 11 traditional lessons from the sources noted earlier.42 The core of traditional lessons is the sequence that makes up steps 1–3 of a typical set of activities.43 Typically, traditional lessons consist of the following activities, of which steps 1–3 make up the core:

1. Vocabulary preparation. The teacher previewed new vocabulary from the text to be read in the basal reader, usually as a list of words taken out of context.
   1. Reading. The group then read the selection orally.
   2. Comprehension questions. The teacher asked questions about the meaning of the text after or during the reading.
   3. Phonics. When there was phonics instruction, it focused on sounds isolated from words.
   4. Seatwork. The teacher assigned the students worksheets before moving


41 A third, code-based approach emerged in the mid-1990s, although we do not know how widely it is practiced. For example, California adopted McGraw-Hill’s Open Court, which features scripted, direct instruction on the code, as one acceptable textbook series (California Department of Education, Reading/Language Arts Publishers List, http://www.cde.ca.gov/cfin/pl/rta/rtapub.html). I do not include strictly code-based lessons in this article because I have not found a description of naturally occurring lessons in the literature.

42 The five first-grade classes described by Dolores Durkin in 1984, three code-oriented first grades described by Steven Stahl and his colleagues in 1994, and three traditional first grades described by Stahl and other colleagues in 1996.

43 Durkin (n. 17 above). Since Durkin’s study, traditional classes have been influenced by the whole-language movement to the extent that students now tend to spend less time doing seatwork, more time listening to the teacher read, more time doing independent reading, and more time composing their own texts (Allington et al.).
on to the next group.
Except for seatwork, these activities occurred in small groups. In my sample from the literature, the core sequence of the traditional lesson—vocabulary preparation, reading, and comprehension questions, or at least an abbreviated sequence of reading and comprehension questions—was reported in all 11 of the traditional lessons and also in one of the process and whole-language classrooms.

The lesson below, observed by Stahl and his colleagues, illustrates the traditional approach.44

In the morning, Teacher B used the district-mandated basal reading program, which placed emphasis on explicit statements of phonics rules, and in the evening, she used materials from another publisher for reinforcement and practice. She divided the class into four groups and spent about 30 minutes with each while her aide prepared a worksheet with another group (for step 5, seatwork). The teacher began the morning by reviewing previously taught vowel combinations, ou, aw, and ough. She had students practice reading words with the targeted sound out loud (step 4), discussing the meaning of any unfamiliar words. Then she had students silently read a story from the basal reader (step 2). (Earlier in the year, this would have been oral reading.) Teacher and students discussed the story (step 3). In the afternoon, the groups either reread orally the story that they had read silently in the morning or read stories from another basal reader. Later, during 15 minutes of "sustained silent reading," the students read trade books.

The teacher’s work with each reading group, which included the core structure of reading and comprehension questions, was supplemented in this case by additional oral and silent reading.

Process and Whole-Language Lessons

Process writing and whole language are two interrelated approaches that influenced many U.S. teachers in the 1980s and 1990s.45 "Process writing" means encouraging individual students to write their own texts. "Whole language" refers to an emphasis on the discovery of meaning in a text using contextual clues at hand. My sample from the literature includes 11 process or whole-language classrooms, which I will call "process classrooms" for short.46

It is difficult to describe the structure of lessons or sessions in process classrooms because several activities might occur simultaneously. As in traditional classrooms, many process classrooms made use of small groups for

44 Paraphrased from Stahl, Osborn, and Pearson (n. 17 above), p. 11.
45 We do not know what proportion of teachers in the United States use a process or whole-language approach, although traditional lessons are probably more common (Susan Florio-Ruane, personal communication based on her classroom observations). The 22 classrooms in my sample from the literature were not chosen at random.
46 Three whole-language first grades described by Stahl, Osborn, and Pearson; three process first grades described by Stahl, Pagnucco, and Suttles (n. 17 above); and five exemplary first-grade classes described by Pressley et al. (n. 15 above).
some reading activities. In addition, process classes used whole-class activities as well as more complex independent seatwork. I cannot discern a predictable sequence of events, although I can identify certain typical activities. Instruction on the code, albeit sometimes minimal, was reported for all 11 of the process classes as well as for all 11 of the traditional lessons.\(^47\) Likewise, “guided reading,” in which students read aloud to the teacher in small groups or one on one, was reported for a majority of the process classes. Typical of process classrooms were extensive independent reading by individual students and “Journaling” or “Writers’ Workshop,” an activity in which individual students composed texts and read them to others.\(^48\) Even more typically, teachers in the process classrooms in this sample read aloud to the class or read aloud with the class using a “Big Book.” The one practice not commonly reported for the process classrooms was the classic sequence of vocabulary-reading-comprehension questions.

In sum, every class in the U.S. sample, whether traditional or process, included activities with explicit attention to meaning and provided at least minimal instruction on the code. Traditional lessons were structured around the sequence vocabulary–reading–comprehension questions. Process lessons avoided that structure and instead supplemented oral reading with production of texts by individual students, independent silent reading, oral reading by the teacher, and mini-lessons on the code.

National Differences

Figure 1 summarizes the lesson structures identified in the sample of actual lessons from each country. Except for the two “old-fashioned” teachers in France, all the observed teachers used a mixed method. That is, they included both explicit instruction in the code and explicit attention to comprehension. Oral reading also took place in all three countries, making up a third element of the repertoire for reading instruction common to all three countries.

Teachers used the mixed method, then, in all three countries—but exactly what counted as the mixed method varied from France to Guinea to the United States and sometimes within a country as well.\(^49\) From common building blocks, teachers in each country constructed distinctive lesson structures.\(^50\)

\(^47\) Sometimes the reporting was vague; where Stahl, Pagnucco, and Suttles said teachers in the study assigned worksheets or workbooks on “skills,” I interpreted skills to include work on the code. Studies outside my sample demonstrate explicit instruction in the code in whole-language classrooms (Dahl et al. [n. 16 above]).

\(^48\) In contrast to composition of texts by the whole class in France.

\(^49\) Notice, however, that variation within each country was limited. Including the strictly code-based classrooms not illustrated in fig. 1, there were at most three different lesson structures within a single country.

\(^50\) Some authors have argued that beneath national differences in structure lies a more dimly perceptible common structure (Givvin et al. [n. 19 above]). However, fig. 1 provides no hint of a deeper common structure.
Lesson Structures

Lesson structures varied, first, in the degree to which teachers favored multisession lessons, single-session lessons, or a looser structure. In figure 1, the heavy outlines delineate lessons, that is, sequences of activities that focused on the same material and the same goal, whether taking place in one session or several. In mainstream French classrooms and in Guinea, lessons took place in multiple sessions over the course of days, and almost all language-arts activity in the classroom contributed to the goal of a single lesson. In holistic-analytic classrooms in France and in U.S. classrooms, different sessions often had different foci, meaning that there could be more than one reading lesson in the same day. Notably, reading for meaning could be divorced from analyzing words for their sounds in the latter classrooms, whereas in mainstream classrooms in France and in Guinea both activities would be focused on the same text. The absence of boxes in the last column indicates that
U.S. process and whole-language teachers wove activities together in such a variety of ways that I could identify no predictable sequence of events. It has been argued that the difference between the loose flow of U.S. classroom activities and the focused, bounded lessons of mainstream French classrooms reflect differential influence of philosophers like Dewey in the United States and Comenius on continental Europe. If that is the case, then the holistic-analytic classrooms in France invite further analysis as an exception to the continental pattern.

Second, figure 1 makes visible how Guinean lesson structure paralleled mainstream French lessons, except for attenuation or deletion of the last step of lessons in France, synthesis. The parallel is hardly surprising, given the influence of French linguists on the design of Guinea’s language arts curriculum, but why the difference in emphasis given to synthesis? Elsewhere I have suggested that Guineans creolized the French structure in this particular manner because of ambivalence about the code-based methods of the colonial era and the early days of independence. Guinea’s pedagogical experts castigated pure syllabic methods as outdated and colonial and in their enthusiasm may have frightened teachers and supervisors away from synthetic exercises even within the context of a mixed method.

This difference between France and mainstream Guinea also highlights a more general observation. What counted as instruction in the code varied, including both analysis and synthesis in mainstream French lessons but limited mainly to analysis in Guinea.

A third point illustrated by figure 1 is that, whereas in mainstream French and Guinean lessons comprehension work preceded reading the text, in traditional U.S. lessons the main comprehension work followed reading the text. In France in particular, once the class produced the text, it was presumed that students understood it, and the class proceeded to read it without further discussion of its meaning. In the United States, any work on comprehension before encountering the text was limited to preview of a few vocabulary words. Rather, even in U.S. whole-language classrooms, discussion occurred—as it did in minority French classrooms when they “discovered” a text—during, not before, reading.

The structural difference points to deeper differences in what counted as comprehension from country to country. Comprehension in France was

51 Alexander (n. 4 above).
52 Anderson-Levitt, “Ambivalences” (n. 33 above).
53 I can only speculate on what is going on here. Just as educators in Guinea associated synthetic methods with the colonial era, educators in the United States and France seem to associate synthesis with the past or with political conservatism, however incorrectly. More recent French textbooks seem to give less attention to synthesis than older textbooks, and Catholic schools are seen as more likely to teach synthesis than public schools in both countries.
54 It would be worth investigating what difference this simple reversal of sequence might have on students’ learning.
about meaningful class discussions that generated the text. In Guinea, it was about learning a foreign language, and “discussion” of the text focused on basic interpretation of its words and sentences. In the United States, comprehension questions raised after reading checked basic understanding but could also lead to literary interpretation of the plot and of characters’ motives.

The lessons also differed in their use of instructional tools. Lessons in the United States centered on individual books in students’ hands—usually identical sets of primers but, especially in process classes, also individual library books. Lessons in France and Guinea centered on text written on the chalkboard. In Guinea, reliance on the board might be attributed to the sometime scarcity of textbooks. However, the U.S.-French difference is notable, since classrooms in these countries had access to both ample chalkboard space and ample individual books.

Whole Class and Small Group

The tools of choice were closely intertwined with the social organization of the class. Guinean classrooms used whole-class instruction, French classrooms used the whole class with limited small-group work, and U.S. lessons used a great deal of small-group work with less whole-class instruction. The use of small groups reveals several interesting points, some of which help us understand other national differences in lesson structure.

First, as already noted, U.S. reading groups stand as a major exception to the generalization from studies of mathematics and science lessons that teachers around the world tend to use whole-class instruction. Clearly, generalizations we draw from cross-national comparison will vary depending on both subject matter and grade level observed.

We must ask now what drove the preference for whole-class or small-group instruction. Pragmatic reasons alone may have motivated Guinean teachers. With overcrowded classrooms, no aides, and not nearly enough textbooks for all the students in a class, they may have had little choice but to teach to the whole class while standing at the chalkboard. However, U.S. teachers’ choices reflected cultural values. Teachers in the United States have valued equal opportunity, an ideology that permits differentiated instruction depending on students’ “needs.” Moreover, they believed that learning should be pleasant and feared that whole-class instruction would only frustrate low-ability students while boring the others. For both reasons, dividing the class into small ability groups made cultural sense.55

French educators were attracted to the idea that individualized instruction is a modern way to teach, and some teachers in France told me that the use

55 These explanations fail to explain why grouping is much more prevalent for reading than for math in U.S. elementary grades.
of ability grouping in the United States was “modern.” In the name of individualized instruction, the Ministry of Education in France has promoted ability grouping for 30 years. Yet teachers in France have resisted ability grouping because it violated their cultural notion of equality as equal treatment of all. They also questioned whether 6-year-olds were capable of independent seatwork while the teacher worked with a group. Where they adopted ability grouping, they thoroughly transformed it, limiting it to the end of the school year and afternoon sessions only.

Curiously, in recent years there has been “administrative press” against ability grouping in the United States, partly because ability grouping has been shown to reinforce rather than reduce initial differences among students. Thus, the process classrooms reported more use of whole-class sessions than traditional U.S. classrooms. However, if the U.S. is moving away from grouping even as France inches toward it, new questions arise. Is this a case of “crossover” that challenges the notion that schooling is converging in every dimension? Or does it represent convergence by France and the United States toward some middle ground that combines a measure of whole-class instruction with a measure of grouping?

Meanwhile, it is because teachers in France continue to rely heavily on whole-class instruction that they can use the chalkboard as their principal instructional tool. And because they teach to the whole class at the board, they can lead the class in producing group texts, which in turn allows them to ensure comprehension before rather than after reading of the text. To the extent that U.S. teachers prefer small-group activities, it is not surprising to see U.S. reading lessons focus on the discovery of texts preprinted in books rather than the production of communal texts at the board.

Implications

What reading teachers in France, Guinea, and the United States held in common, then, was a thin shell, nothing more than a fragile general notion of a mixed method for reading instruction and the habit of oral practice in reading. What counted as the mixed method in France, in the United States, and in Guinea was not the same. Educators in each country, both at the level of national ministries and experts and at the level of actual classrooms, had

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56 Anderson-Levitt, *Teaching Cultures* (n. 11 above). The notion of “individualized” instruction belongs to that set of ideals like coeducation and student-centered instruction that educators see as part of a transnational, modern way to do schooling (Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt, “A World Culture of Schooling?” in Anderson-Levitt, ed. [n. 13 above]).

57 Anderson-Levitt, *Teaching Cultures*.

58 Barr and Dreeben (n. 22 above).


taken the generic common model and created one or more distinct national lesson structures from it.

If what counted as the mixed method varied like this on the ground, we must assume that every other element of a presumably global model varies likewise. Seemingly obvious concepts like “lecture-recitation,” “student-centered instruction,” “coeducation,” or even “compulsory schooling” potentially mean different things in different places. We must always ask what we mean when we say that these ideas have spread around the globe. We must always expect that they will be transformed in meaning as they move.

There is an immediate practical implication of these shifts in meaning. Where educational reformers from different countries come together, they readily use a common vocabulary to miscommunicate with one another. A French inspector once surprised me by saying, “But we have small groups in France,” when I had seen nothing resembling what I took to be ability grouping. The misfiring was likewise visible in Guinea, where advisors from France, the United States, Canada (Quebec), and other countries vie for influence. In Guinea, both French and U.S. advisors agreed with the Guinean principle of a mixed method. However, U.S. experts complained privately that Guinean-written textbooks were “too phonetic” and did not emphasize comprehension enough. In fact, one U.S. advisor told me that, although the Guinean method was supposed to be a mixed method, “it feels like straight-away phonics.” At the very moment of that interview in another office in the same building complex, a French advisor was working with Guinean educators to revise the national texts by adding more explicit exercises in sounding out words and syllables. To the French advisor, the textbook was, to use U.S. language, not phonetic enough. Where three national cultures came together, the “happy medium” of the mixed method became a site for culture wars.

A Thin Yet Potent Transnational Model

National cultural differences are hardly fading away in the classroom, as we can see from the cases reported. The local teachers—Guinean, but also the French and U.S. teachers—have adopted “global” ideas, but they have adapted them according to local values and circumstances. They have indigenized the mixed method of reading instruction to such a point that there remain distinctly American, distinctly French, and distinctly Guinean ways of teaching reading.

But that is not the whole story. Even though the mixed method of reading instruction turns out to mean something different in the United States, France, and Guinea, it is hardly meaningless. It and the broader common model of schooling to which world culture theorists point do, in fact, have tremendous significance.

Indeed, the idea—or at least an idea—of the mixed method had enough power to turn reading instruction on its head in Guinea. As described above,
only a few years after moving from isolation into reintegration with the West, Guinea made a radical shift from a phonics-based system to a mixed method. The transnational model was the motor of this revolution. Guinean teachers have lived through tremendous upheaval not, this time, because of their own internal revolution (as happened when the country experimented with teaching in local languages) but rather because of a transnational assumption about what constitutes good, modern reading instruction.

Conclusion

How can it be that reading lessons are both significantly similar and significantly different across France, Guinea, and the United States? The explanation is not simply a matter of focus; it is not that lesson structure is similar when viewed from afar but different when scrutinized up close. Nor is what we are seeing simply the indigenization of a model imported from outside, although that happens as well. Rather than to think in terms of the translation of transnational ideals into local practice, we must recognize both the transnational and the national in both ideals and practice at all levels, from national classrooms to Ministries of Education to the World Bank.

The local inhabits global models. Because local educators reshape transnational innovations as fast as they import them, there is no pure example on the ground of a global ideal. In fact, we cannot even imagine a generic transnational model abstracted from many specific ways of doing schooling. No one can think in terms of such generalities as “whole-class lecture-recitation” without imagining, say, “my second grade year with Mrs. Berman” or “the class we observed in that town in Thailand.” No one can refer to the mixed method of reading instruction without calling up specific images, whether Madame Diallo’s lesson in Guinea, Madame David’s lesson in France, or an old memory of Fun with Dick and Jane in the United States. A transnational model means different things in different places.

At the same time, the global inhabits local practice. Global models are built into local practice; they are not merely distant policy statements or abstract ideals. Indeed, the global inhibits local practice because global models, vague and broad as they may be, place limits around the ordinarily thinkable. They are the box it is hard to “think outside.” Teachers enact national practices, not to mention their own individualized way of teaching, “within” or at least “against” transnational models. As different as Japanese and U.S. mathematics lessons are, both are nonetheless “lessons” and, specifically, whole-class lecture-recitation and seatwork lessons conducted by one teacher with a group of children isolated in a classroom. As distinctive as

Guinean, French, and U.S. reading lessons appear, they operate within the same broad framework of what lessons are, and they share the same building blocks of oral reading, comprehension work, and code work.

The similarity of lesson elements is difficult to see precisely because lessons are so similar in their basic elements around the world at present. However, historical comparison makes the current transnational model more visible. In other places and in other eras, people have used other means to conduct formal instruction, from monitorial classrooms with 1,000 pupils to one-room dame schools to one-on-one apprenticeship. As noted earlier, they have found ways other than mixed methods to teach novice readers. The common repertoire, whether it is whole-class lecture recitation or elements of a mixed method of reading instruction, really is a small repertoire within the larger universe of past and possible practices.

We need double vision to see teaching practices for what they are. Moreover, the double vision of teaching leads to a double vision of educational reform efforts. On the one hand, we cannot expect any top-down reform to produce the same results in different places. On the other hand, local attempts at reform operate within a broad but real framework, the current transnational model of good teaching.