

# **Urban Teachers Examine Reading Instruction through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

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*What constitutes effective reading instruction for urban and ethnically diverse learners has been the topic of a great deal of debate. Particularly, during this time of sweeping mandates and increased calls for accountability. The response from urban schools to The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) serves as the backdrop for this paper which will examine reading instruction through the eyes of four urban elementary teachers. Data were collected through interviews, observations, focus groups, and document analysis. Findings address the impact of teachers' culturally responsive approach to reading acquisition, the implementation of research-based culturally responsive reading instruction strategies, and the role of race, culture and language in teaching and learning.*

The implications of the alarmingly high rate of illiteracy in the United States are costly and profound. School drop-out rates, unemployment, and crime are all associated with low literacy levels (National Institute of Literacy, 1997; Simmons & Kameenui, 1998). This is particularly distressing for those vested in the academic success of ethnically diverse students in urban schools. Critical issues associated with literacy, disabilities, and race have been linked throughout history and are still inextricably intertwined.

Over 80 percent of students with disabilities experience significant reading deficits (Lerner, 1989), and the majority of these students are served in general education settings (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Yet, historically general and special educators have not been effectively prepared in the diagnosis and remediation of reading deficits in traditional teacher preparation programs (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Researchers have noted that if reading deficits are not remedied by fourth grade, they will persist and students will continue to read below grade level through high school (Lyon, 1995). This leads to disturbingly low rates of transition and retention of students with disabilities at the secondary level (Sheehey & Black, 2003).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has monitored the literacy achievement of students around the country for over 25 years. African Americans have consistently scored below a basic level of proficiency in grades 4 and 8. According to Au (1993) "...African American, Hispanic American, and disadvantaged urban eleventh graders read only slightly better than seventh graders in the nation as a whole" (p.2). Although the achievement gap between students of color and their White counterparts has narrowed, the gap still persists (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law by President Bush in January of 2002. NCLB is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The purpose of this act is "...to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (Title 1, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965). Surely, there are few objections to the ideal of ensuring that all students have a fair, equal, and significant education. However, what is objectionable are the methods relied upon to ensure students

access to high-quality educational experiences and consequently their success.

The most prominent of these methods represents a focus on stringent accountability in the form of standardized assessment measures. These high stakes tests are designed to ensure students meet proficiency on a number of basic skills and demonstrate yearly progress, particularly students specified in subgroups such as racial/ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Fritzberg, 2004).

The unintended consequences of such mandates in the current politically-charged climate in education has resulted in a number of urban schools, which serve predominately students of color, facing punitive sanctions for failing to meet adequately yearly progress as measured by standardized assessment measures (Townsend, 2000). Unfortunately, these sanctions exacerbate the problems currently facing urban schools across the country and fail to address the myriad of contextual variables associated with teaching and learning in urban settings (Shealey, 2006).

How students are educated in the areas of reading and mathematics has changed drastically in recent years and reflects a renewed interest in measuring student performance through a narrow lens. This has resulted in limited opportunities for educators to make decisions about instruction based on meeting the academic, social, personal, and emotional needs of all learners.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in the theoretical and conceptual framework of socio-cultural language and literacy acquisition. Socio-cultural theories emphasize the social aspect of learning and the context in which students construct meaning. (Meachum, 2001; Vgotsky, 1986). Further, socio-cultural theories embody the following key

elements: literacy, construction of meaning, and socio-cultural context (Hammerburg, 2004).

Literacy within a socio-cultural context extends beyond reading and writing to include the type of text, the skills needed to be literate in a particular context, and the identity of the reader. The construction of meaning is a critical element of literacy and language development.

Additionally, meaning construction is an interactive process and involves students relying upon knowledge and identity resources to enhance comprehension of various forms of text (Hammerburg, 2004). Finally, socio-cultural context includes the purpose and environment in which learning takes place as well as the cultural backgrounds of learners. The premise of socio-cultural theories of language and literacy lies in the understanding that literacy development is framed by the identity of the learner and the ways in which the learner makes sense of multiple forms of text in varied contexts. Culturally responsive teaching represents an application of socio-cultural theories of teaching and learning.

Irvine & Armento (2001) report that the term, *culturally responsive teaching*, is often used interchangeably with other terms such as culturally responsible, appropriate, congruent, compatible, relevant and multicultural. These terms all imply teachers are recognizing and valuing the cultural contributions of their students and use this knowledge to inform their practices and employment of instructional strategies (Gay, 2000).

## **Method**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- What instructional methods do urban elementary teachers use to provide culturally responsive reading instruction?

- What elements of culturally responsive teaching are exemplified by effective reading teachers?

A qualitative research design was chosen due to the nature of the questions. Variables contributing to a culturally responsive approach to reading instruction are not easily identified; theories about this approach need to be developed. According to Gay & Airasian (2003) qualitative research seeks to probe deeply into why things are the way they are, and how participants in a particular context perceive things.

### **Setting**

King Elementary School is located in the southeast region of the United States. The school district serves approximately 60,000 students. Of the total student population, 35% are from ethnically diverse backgrounds. The school is located in low to lower-middle class neighborhood. Many of the students are bussed in from around the county. However, a large number of the students live in the neighborhood surrounding the school.

King Elementary serves approximately 700 students, approximately 90 percent of whom are from ethnically diverse backgrounds, predominately African Americans. Additionally, 80% of the student population receives free or reduced-price lunch. King, like many urban schools across the U.S., has recently faced a number of challenges including budgetary restraints and a consistently high teacher turnover rate. Yet, standardized testing represents the most problematic and emotionally demoralizing issue currently facing school personnel and students. One of the major initiatives at King Elementary is the implementation of a school-wide reading program which involves direct and explicit instruction in the areas of decoding, fluency, and comprehension for all students.

### **Participants**

The author engaged in purposeful sampling to identify

participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). With assistance from the school reading specialist, the author contacted all of the teachers in grades 2 and 3 and requested permission to observe them during their instructional block designated for reading. Teachers in these grades were selected because currently they face tremendous scrutiny from the district and state level due to the administration of standardized assessments beginning in grade 3. The author elicited the expertise of the school principal and reading specialist in identifying excellent reading teachers in the aforementioned grade levels who were considered successful in providing high-quality reading instruction and meeting the needs of diverse learners and their families.

Preliminary classroom observations were conducted with teachers who volunteered to participate and those identified by the reading specialist and principal. An observational rubric developed by the author based on the work of scholars in multicultural education (i.e. Gay, Ladson-Billings, Nieto, Tharp & Gallimore) served as a tool in examining components of teaching as well as teacher-student interactions. Based upon data collected during classroom observations and teacher consent, four teachers, two from each grade level, were selected from a total of thirteen teachers in grades 2-3 to participate in the study.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Four data gathering procedures were utilized in this study. They were: observations, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis.

*Observations.* The author observed these four general education teachers in their classrooms two days a week for 60-90 minutes per observation. Classroom observations included field notes on teachers' instruction and interactions of the teachers with their students.

*Interviews.* Additionally, the author conducted two individual semi-structured interviews with each teacher. The interviews focused on the following areas: philosophy and

beliefs about the teaching of reading, instructional methods, family/school collaboration, and the impact of contextual variables on teaching and learning. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes in length and was audio-taped.

*Focus Group.* One focus group interview was conducted with all the teachers at the end of the six-week period in order to clarify data collected in observations and provide opportunities for dialogue on the topics discussed in individual interviews. The focus group interview lasted 90 minutes and was audio-taped.

*Document Collection and Analysis.* Curriculum-based assessment is defined as any set of measurement procedures that use direct observation and recording of a student's performance in the local curriculum as the basis for gathering information to make instructional decisions (Deno, 1985). For this study, I analyzed pre- and post-test results of the *Curriculum-Based Measurement in Oral Reading*. It is administered by teachers and is a component of the basal series used by first and second grade teachers. The *Curriculum-Based Measurement in Oral Reading Fluency* was selected due to the nature of fluency as a precursor to reading comprehension and for assessing deficits in word recognition (Shinn & Good, 1992).

Other documents collected by the author included previously administered informal reading assessments, teacher records, student school records, student work samples, and a record of teacher referrals to the Student Study Team. This team serves as an intervention initiative to which teachers recommend students who are viewed as at risk for special services based on their current academic and/or social performance. These documents provided additional understanding of the activities included in the instruction of reading.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were entered into the Atlas.ti Visual Qualitative Data Analysis Management Model Building Program for the

following purposes: to facilitate the storing and organization of files, to search for themes, to verify crossing themes, to diagram and create a template of the process of data analysis. According to Creswell (1998) qualitative software provides the following advantages: provides an organized storage file for easy accessibility, helps the researcher to locate pieces of information easily, and the program provides the author with an opportunity to analyze the data line by line and make meaning of each sentence and idea.

Analysis of the data began with the open, axial and selective coding of the interview transcripts and observational data. This process of defining categories of information through coding involved reading the transcripts and observational data line by line (Creswell, 1998), as well as reviewing themes from research literature in an effort to formulate a database of codes. By assigning primary documents such as interview transcriptions and observational data to the software program, the author was able to maintain this database in a common location for future review and analysis. Furthermore, the classification and categorization of codes consequently led to the development of a theoretical framework, which guided the analysis and interpretation of the findings (Glesne, 1999). The data analysis process was ongoing and involved constantly comparing events and documents in an effort to further develop theories and understandings (LeCompte, 2000).

## **Findings**

### **Teacher Beliefs**

The author found that the teacher participants' beliefs and attitudes on what constitutes quality reading instruction were consistent with the assertions presented by a number of researchers advocating a balanced approach to reading (Freppon & Dahl, 1998; Pressley, Rochrig, Bogner, Raphael, & Dolezal, 2002). Additionally, the ability of the teachers to provide effective reading instruction situated in an

environment that acknowledges and honors students' cultural backgrounds is heavily influenced by contextual factors inherent in teaching and learning in the urban context and an over reliance on high stakes testing. Insights into how teachers' beliefs and philosophy about reading impact their classrooms practices were derived from triangulated data from all data sources.

Two of the teacher participants held a constructivist orientation toward literacy. Both teachers have graduate degrees in reading, and their classroom environments and routines reflect their understanding of current trends in literacy instruction and the learning styles of ethnically diverse students. Below one of the teachers, Stacy, a European American second grade teacher, shares her philosophy on reading instruction.

*Well...they [students] really need a balanced program. I think we get away from that here. I think we spend an awful lot of time on...um...one strategy, which is sounding out a word when there are so many different strategies...You know...the whole goal of reading is for meaning, and I think people get caught up if students can sound out words then they read. That's not true. You need to be able to understand what you're reading.*

All participants agreed that efforts by the school to address the underachievement of many of its students in reading, by adopting one single approach is inadequate and fails to effectively meet the diverse needs of their students. Currently, the school provides direct instruction to all students utilizing a pre-packaged, scripted program.

Overall, all of the teachers reported the need to address skills development in reading through explicit instruction and embedded connected activities. Patty, a third-grade African American teacher, who represents a more traditional orientation toward literacy acquisition, believes students

benefit greatly from extended opportunities for explicit skills instruction. Patty shares her frustration regarding the tension, which exists between meeting demands for accountability and providing balanced reading instruction.

*You know the focus is so heavily on skill reading. There is not a whole lot of time for discovery learning, and you know fun type of activities that are still educational. I feel like I don't have any time to do anything this year.*

### **Instructional Methods in Teaching Reading**

The following instructional strategies were implemented by all of the teacher/participants and were found to be effective in working with ethnically diverse learners with and without disabilities:

- Literacy centers,
- Direct instruction,
- Guided reading,
- Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), and
- Modeling.

Brief descriptions of each instructional strategy are provided below.

*Literacy Centers.* First, literacy centers constituted the most frequently used instructional strategy. They were utilized to provide embedded skills instruction to students. The content of the centers varied for each grade level and teacher. The purpose of literacy centers is two-fold: to provide skills instruction in meaningful and social contexts and to build the motivation of students toward reading. A critical element of literacy centers is the focus on students' processing through the integration of reading and writing.

*Direct Instruction.* Direct instruction refers to the teaching of reading skills by focusing on three components: organization of instruction, program design, and teacher presentation techniques (Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui,

1997). The teachers participating in this study agreed that explicit and systematic skills instruction is essential to developing students' reading skills. All students at King Elementary were required to participate in one hour of direct instruction in the area of reading. However, the teachers strongly believed that students should also be provided with opportunities to explore meaning construction in collaboration with others, as well as to develop their critical thinking skills. For this reason, the teachers Based on their instructional practices, the teachers in this study advocated and implemented a comprehensive literacy program in each of their classrooms.

*Guided Reading.* Guided reading provides students with guided practice in applying skills they were taught explicitly. This process also involves teachers talking, thinking aloud, and questioning throughout the procedure. The grouping for guided reading varies from whole-class to small groups depending upon the goals of instruction. The teachers at King Elementary participated in a professional development initiative which emphasized the use of guided reading following direct instruction.

*Drop Everything and Read (DEAR.)* DEAR time is an example of how teachers provided students with opportunities to engage in independent reading. DEAR time and independent reading activities resemble real-world activities. In each, students have the opportunity to choose their own books based on their interests and later utilize these books in their independent writing lessons. The teachers reported that students responded positively to the opportunity to self-select texts based on their interests. Teachers ensured that all texts offered during independent reading time were grade-appropriate.

*Modeling.* Modeling represents one type of scaffolding or using instructional strategies to take students to a higher level of learning. Scaffolded instruction, which utilizes modeling and demonstrations, is a key element of early reading instruction (Strickland, 2002). By modeling the

process of thinking aloud on a daily basis, teachers assist struggling readers in understanding the processes at work while engaged in reading and writing activities. Students, particularly ethnically diverse learners, benefit from teacher and student modeling.

*Culturally Responsive Teaching.* The roles and responsibilities of culturally responsive teachers have been categorized as cultural organizers, cultural mediators, and “orchestrators” of social contexts (Diamond & Moore, 1995). Each of the categories embodies the beliefs that teachers understand how culture operates and is manifested in classroom dynamics and student academic achievement. Key elements of culturally responsive teaching displayed by the participating teachers were: caring, high expectations, understanding of the role communication and language in learning, and sensitivity to student learning styles.

## **Caring**

One of the major pillars of culturally responsive teaching is the power of caring (Gay, 2000). Noddings (1992, 1996) asserts that teachers must recognize their perceptions regarding caring and those of their students. According to Irvine (1999) “the ethos of caring and ‘other-mothering’ embody what teaching is all about” (p. 249).

Leslie, a third-grade Latina teacher, refers to her students as “my children.” As a first year teacher, Leslie is being mentored by Patty, an African American veteran teacher, with more than 20 years of experience. What Leslie has learned in her brief tenure is that her most important job is to care for her students. Leslie asserts, “You know they come from very different backgrounds and...what goes for one doesn't go for another. What I do know is that they are all my children.”

Caring is expressed explicitly and implicitly through attitudes, expectations, and behaviors. All of the teacher/participants in the study demonstrated a consistent caring for their students. They display a caring for their

students' entire being, not just their academic success. In expressing such caring, these teachers embraced the wholeness of education rather than relegating their role as teachers primarily to academic issues.

### **High Expectations**

The power of caring is demonstrated by teachers' ability to identify non-caring attitudes and behaviors (Gay, 2000). The influence of non-caring attitudes and behaviors and/or low teacher expectations leads to ethnically and linguistically diverse learners experiencing differential treatment, which may lead to faulty assumptions and misdiagnoses about students' abilities (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). Culturally responsive teachers have high expectations and standards for all of their students. Britney, a second-grade African American teacher, who received her teaching credential from a local historically Black college, discusses her interpretation of high expectations and her desire to prepare her students for greatness.

*I guess you would say...I push them even more because I know the expectations are so much higher because statistics would say this and statistics would say that. So, I find myself pushing them even harder. I'm glad I get to push them harder in 2nd grade because that sets the foundation, that is the basis and from there you want them to just succeed when they go to the other grades.*

Britney's experience at a historically Black college provided her with a deep understanding of the historical significance of teaching African American students and the positive impact her own teaching can have on the lives of her students as well as their families and communities.

### **Communication**

Language is a part of culture and communication, and teaching and learning coexist in the context of the classroom. Thus, culturally responsive teachers recognize the importance of addressing these relationships and their implications on students' learning. Teachers' attitudes toward the home language and/or dialect of their students directly impact how students view themselves and their potential for success (Au, 1993; Washington, 2001). Stacy describes her experience working with one English Language Learner.

*In the beginning of the year, I had a little girl in here from Mexico. She spoke hardly any English. I was pretty much walking around with a Spanish dictionary, and I was labeling the whole the room in Spanish and English and things like that...but you just really try to make sure that you're taking kids from where they are and bringing them up.*

Stacy also discussed her understanding of how students' primary dialect may present challenges in assessing reading deficits. Stacy reports her experiences in her master's program as well as working in urban schools contributed to her ability to model standard English for students, while at the same time, affirming who they are and encouraging growth in their native language.

### **Sensitivity to Learning Styles**

Study participants are sensitive to varying student learning styles and cultural patterns of learning. They provide opportunities which maximize the potential of their students and orchestrate opportunities for students to succeed academically. By acknowledging the importance of the learning patterns and styles of culturally diverse learners, Britney, a music education major in her undergraduate program, shares how she uses popular and classical music in the classroom to engage and educate students. She is able to

capitalize on her students' strengths in an effort to impact student outcomes. She says the following.

*Well, I think, for sure, you have to use hands-on activities, especially in the area of reading. For example use, teaching spelling words and having students manipulate the letters, which impacts their reading ability, instead of using worksheets.*

By attending to essential elements of culturally responsive teaching within the realm of reading instruction, schools situate the education of ethnically diverse students within a socio-cultural framework which addresses issues such as race, culture, language, and disability in a meaningful and relevant manner. It is most appropriate that these variables are addressed in the teaching of reading. For often during the process of culturally responsive reading instruction, students experience the concepts of liberation and emancipation, and teachers' expectations of them are manifested in students' successful reading .

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The implications of this study offer insights into how general education and special education teacher candidates are prepared in the area of literacy instruction as well as in professional development. The study's findings underscore the need for further examination of teachers' beliefs regarding ethnically diverse students and the impact of these beliefs have on their literacy instruction. Additionally, teacher preparation and professional development for general and special educators should include opportunities for candidates to reflect upon the implications of teachers' beliefs on their practice, as well as the most effective strategies to change negative, biased attitudes toward urban students, Further, it is critical for future research in teacher

education to be able to link the dispositions and behaviors of successful urban teachers to skills and knowledge gained in teacher preparation programs.

In terms of addressing the area of cultural competence, the principles of multicultural education must be adopted by teacher education programs. A large number of teacher preparation programs address diversity in their mission statements. Yet, a commitment to diversity is not evidenced in course content or field experiences which represent the core of teacher preparation programs. Thus, it is imperative that teacher preparation programs respond to calls for greater accountability by increasing recruitment and retention efforts of ethnically diverse teacher candidates, as well as by providing programs and activities to help teacher candidates learn how to abolish the achievement gap through culturally responsive teaching.

In qualitative research, participants' stories reflect their understanding of the phenomenon under study. The cultural nuances represented in their school site, and the students and families they serve are unique. Thus, being able to generalize the findings of this study to other urban settings is not the intention of this study. Rather, the author sought to highlight the work of culturally responsive teachers in one urban elementary school in the face of increased demands and limited resources.

The findings underscore the need for further research on teachers' beliefs about ethnically diverse students and the impact these beliefs have on literacy instruction. Teacher preparation should include opportunities for candidates to reflect upon how teacher beliefs affect literacy pedagogy and effective strategies for changing negative attitudes toward urban students who are acquiring literacy proficiency.

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