Practitioner
Brief Series

Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction



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Culturally Responsive
Educational Systems

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Instructional practices that address issues of culture and language hold the greatest promise for helping culturally and linguistically diverse learners to become successful readers (Beaulieu, 2002). The challenge for today's teachers is to include those elements of curricula that will optimize learning for students while maintaining their cultural identity (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Lipman, 1995). In order for culturally and linguistically diverse students to reach their full potential, instruction should be provided in ways that promote the acquisition of increasingly complex knowledge and skills in a social climate that fosters collaboration and positive interactions among participants. Such classrooms are inclusive in their emphasis on high standards and outcomes for all students, including culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Important features of such settings include high expectations, exposure to academically rich curricula and materials, approaches that are culturally and linguistically responsive and appropriate, use of instructional technologies that enhance learning, and emphasis on student-regulated, active learning rather than passive, teacher-directed transmission. In addition to using effective methods and materials, teachers should possess cross-cultural communication skills and develop clear understandings of their culturally and linguistically diverse students (Garcia & Dominquez, 1997 as cited in Obiakor & Utley, [2001]).

Importance of the Teacher

Literacy instruction is the focus of this brief because recent studies reaffirm that to improve literacy instruction, we must examine teaching expertise rather than expect a panacea in the form of materials (Block, Oakar, & Hurt, 2002), or blame the students, the parents, or social class. Teaching ability, over and above reading programs, is the major contributor to students' literacy success (Duffy, 2001; Knipper, 2003; Willis & Harris, 2000).

Importance of Multiple Forms of Literacy

In order for culturally and linguistically diverse students to become productive members of society they need to be fully functional participants in literate communities. Literacy is pervasive not only in school but in the workplace, home, and community (Au et al., 1995). Literacy is defined as the "ability and the willingness to use reading and writing to construct meaning from printed text, in ways which meet the requirements of a particular social context"(Au, 1993). This definition can be deciphered to illustrate the following instructional implications in multicultural settings:

- ***Willingness to use literacy.*** First, this definition addresses one's willingness as well as one's ability to use literacy. This feature is important, because students of diverse backgrounds may have the ability to use literacy but be unwilling to do so.
- ***Reading and writing.*** Second, one of the implications for literacy instruction is that teachers will want to give an equal emphasis to reading and writing and to look at ways that instruction of one can strengthen the learning of the other. Teachers should encourage students of diverse backgrounds to use strengths in their home languages as the basis for becoming proficient in reading and writing in English.
- ***Constructing meaning.*** Third, reading and writing are used to construct meaning through interactions among the reader, the text, and the social text. This view of reading and writing reminds us of the importance of the background knowledge that students bring to the task. A reader's background knowledge strongly influences variations of interpretations of text due to differences in the prior knowledge or cultural schemata students bring to the reading task.

- ***Printed text.*** Fourth, the definition of literacy described here refers to the student's ability to work with the printed text, which distinguishes it from "cultural literacy" or "computer literacy." The teacher's reading aloud of literature and collaborative writing provide opportunities for literacy learning.
- ***Social context.*** Finally, the social contexts of the home and community often prepare students of diverse backgrounds to learn in ways quite different from those expected by the school. Students of diverse backgrounds often experience literacy in social contexts vastly different from those typically found in schools. The teacher's goal is to enable students of diverse backgrounds to use literacy successfully in mainstream social contexts, as well as in the contexts of their homes and communities by modifying the social context of instruction so that lessons can be more effective for students of diverse backgrounds.

Importance of Early Reading Success

Significant societal gains can come from early reading success. For example, the National Reading Panel (2000) cites information published by the National Right to Read Foundation outlining the societal costs of illiteracy:

- 85% of delinquent children and 75% of adult prison inmates are illiterate.
- 90 million adults in the United States are at best functionally literate.
- The cost to taxpayers of adult illiteracy is $224 billion a year in welfare payments, crime, job incompetence, lost taxes, and remedial education.
- U.S. companies lose nearly $40 billion annually because of illiteracy.

The "chicken-egg" logic here is that if you teach a child to read he or she will be less of a strain on society because he or she will be less likely to be on welfare, commit a crime, skip work, fail to pay taxes, and need remedial education (Willis & Harris, 2000).

Culturally and linguistically diverse students are the targeted population for improved literacy instruction because they continue to be overrepresented in special education programs. Of the six million children in special education, half of those who are in special education are identified as having a specific learning disability. In fact, this group has grown more than 300% since 1976. Of those with specific learning disabilities, 80% are there simply because they haven't learned how to read. Thus, many children identified for special education—up to 40%—are there because they were not taught to read (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002).

Importance of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

A research synthesis of the literature suggests that providing literacy instruction that is culturally responsive promotes high achievement among culturally and linguistically diverse students (Brown University, 2003; Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nichols, Rupley, & Webb-Johnson, 2000). Culturally responsive literacy instruction is instruction that bridges the gap between the school and the world of the student, is consistent with the values of the students' own culture aimed at assuring academic learning, and encourages teachers to adapt their instruction to meet the learning needs of all students. Teachers who demonstrate culturally responsive pedagogy:

- ***Communicate high expectations.*** There are consistent messages, from both the teacher and the whole school that students will succeed, based upon genuine respect for students and belief in student capability.
- ***Use active teaching methods.*** Instruction is designed to promote student engagement by requiring that students play an active role in crafting curriculum and developing learning activities.
- ***Facilitate learning.*** Within an active teaching environment, the teachers' role is one of guide, mediator, and knowledgeable consultant, as well as instructor.
- ***Have positive perspectives on parents and families of culturally and linguistically diverse students.*** There is ongoing participation in dialogue with students, parents, and community members on issues important to them, along with the inclusion of these individuals and issues in classroom curriculum and activities.
- ***Demonstrate cultural sensitivity.*** To maximize learning opportunities, teachers gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms and translate this knowledge into instructional practice.
- ***Reshape the curriculum.*** A reshaped curriculum is responsive to students' interests and backgrounds.

- ***Provide culturally mediated instruction.*** Instruction is characterized by the use of culturally mediated cognition, culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally valued knowledge in curriculum content.
- ***Promote student controlled classroom discourse.*** Students are given the opportunity to control some portion of the lesson, providing teachers with insight into the ways that speech and negotiation are used in the home and community.
- ***Include small group instruction and cooperative learning.*** Instruction is organized around low-pressure, student-controlled learning groups that can assist in the development of academic language (Brown University, 2003; Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nichols, Rupley, & Webb-Johnson, 2000).

Importance of Skills, Reading for Meaning, and Multicultural Literature

The most effective approach to literacy instruction requires both explicit skill instruction and engaging literacy activities such as reading children's literature and writing for real-life purposes. Approaches in which systematic skill instruction is included alongside an emphasis on reading for meaning, language instruction, and connected reading result in higher reading achievement. Teachers who frequently use multicultural children's literature integrate reading and writing across the curriculum, and teach skills in the context of meaningful literacy experiences. Students acquire comprehension, spelling, and language skills that are commensurate with students across the country (Cantrell, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Nichols et al., 2000). Multicultural literature is literature that focuses on people of color (i.e., African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanic Americans), on religious minorities (i.e., Amish or Jewish), on regional cultures (i.e., Appalachian or Cajun), on the disabled, and on the aged. However, the focus of this paper is on multiethnic literature that deals with peoples of diverse backgrounds in the United States, including African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanic Americans. Harris (1992) points out that historically, literature written by and for these groups of people generally lies outside of the literary canon, recommended book lists, and the elementary school

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African American Children's Literature	Lucille Clifton Jeanette Caines Sharon Bell Mathis Camille Yarbrough Mildred Taylor Emily Moore	Brenda Wilkinson Rosa Guy Mildred Walter John Steptoe Joyce Hansen Joyce Carol Thomas	Eloise Greenfield Patricia McKissack Walter Dean Myers Rita Garcia-Williams Angela Johnson
Asian American Children's Literature	Yoshiko Uchida Allen Say Laurence Yed Jeanette Eaton Me Li	Ed Young Paul Yee Arthur Bowie Chrisman Elizabeth Seeger Rhoda Blumberg	Taro Yashima Tuan Ch'eng Shih Elizabeth Forman Lewis Mildred Batchelder
Native American Children's Literature	Virgina Driving Hawk Sneve Jamke Highwater William Apes Charles Eastman Sharon CreechJean	John Bierhorst Byrd Baylor John Rollin Ridge Elias Boudinot Craighead George	Te Ata Gerald McDermott David Cusick Lois Lenski
Latino American Children's Literature	Pura Belpre Piri Thomas Joseph Krumgold Elizabeth Borton	Carmen Lomas Garza Gary Soto Francis Kalnay Scott O'Dell	Nicholasa Mohr Ann Nolan Clark Jack Schaefer Maia Wojciechowska

curriculum. Multiethnic literature, as part of a literature-based reading program, can be used in the classroom to affirm the cultural identity of culturally and linguistically diverse students and to develop all students' understanding and appreciation of other cultures. Integrating diverse cultural literature across the reading and writing curriculum helps students discover the intricacies of language as well as the histories and cultures of various ethnic groups. This view of literature is one of the new patterns of instruction that can facilitate school literacy development of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Au, 1993; Harris, 1992; Norton, 2001).

Final Thoughts

Culturally and linguistically diverse students are not receiving a *free and appropriate education* when teachers are not implementing instructional strategies that optimize student achievement or positively reinforcing their cultural identity. It is not deemed free because society will have to pay for their illiteracy when they are placed on welfare, commit a crime, or require remedial education. Neither is it appropriate when students who come from diverse backgrounds continue to be *left behind*. No reading program, legislative mandate, or high stakes test can ever replace the power and influence that a teacher possesses to improve student achievement. Teachers who embrace culturally responsive literacy instruction will serve as a catalyst for improved reading achievement among students who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

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Additional Resources

Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA)
http://www.ciera.org/
The Children's Literature Web Guide
http://www.ucalgary.ca/%7Edkbrown/
Cinco Puntos Press
http://www.cincopuntos.com/
Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy
http://www.crede.org/standards/standards.html
Improving the Reading Comprehension of America's Children: 10 Research-Based Principles
http://www.ciera.org/library/instresrc/compprinciples/index.html
The International Reading Association
http://www.reading.org/
Knowledge Loom: information on adolescent literacy in content areas
http://knowledgeloom.org/adlit/index.jsp
Knowledge Loom: information on elementary literacy (e.g., practices, suggestions, success stories)
http://knowledgeloom.org/elemlit/index.jsp
National Reading Conference
http://www.nrconline.org/
The National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement
http://cela.albany.edu/
Read Write Think: collection of high-quality lesson plans, standards, Web resources, and student materials for elementary and secondary teachers
http://www.readwritethink.org

About the Author

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