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## **A Critical Review of Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction**

**Elaine Cheesman and Randall De Pry**

Eliminating the racial and ethnic achievement gap in reading and writing is a national priority. Providing literacy instruction that is both culturally responsive and evidence-based requires an understanding of culture, effective instructional practices, and how the two intersect. Although many suggestions for implementing culturally responsive reading instruction are intuitively appealing, more research evidence is needed to determine if these practices increase student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

The goal of reading instruction is to help children acquire the skills necessary to comprehend printed material at a level consistent with their general language comprehension (Torgesen, 2000). The ultimate goal is to produce fully literate, successful, and self-assured adults who are empowered to live as they wish, not as they must with limited skills. Helping all children become fully literate requires skillful instruction from knowledgeable teachers (American Federation of Teachers, 1999; Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; International Dyslexia Association, 1997; McCutchen & Berninger, 1999; Tangel & Blachman, 1992; Vaughn, Moody, & Schumm, 1998).

Reading failure has devastating consequences with respect to self-esteem, social development, and opportunities for advanced education and meaningful employment (Lyon, 1999). Consider these facts. The majority of incarcerated youth have low literacy skills (Baltodano, Harris, & Rutherford, 2005; Krezmien & Mulcahy, 2008). Among inner-city adults who sought help for severe literacy problems, Gottesman, Benett, and their colleagues (1996) reported that lower literacy levels were inversely proportionate to dramatic increases in social difficulties. Low reading skills have severe health consequences as well. For example, in a study of 3,260 Medicare beneficiaries in managed-care plans in Cleveland, Houston, Tampa and Fort Lauderdale/Miami, investigators found that those with an inability to read and understand basic health-related materials such as prescription bottles and appointment slips, were 52% more likely to die than those with adequate literacy (Baker, et al., 2007).

The 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for fourth grade reading continues to show achievement gaps by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Nationally, approximately 40% of all fourth grade students lack even the most basic reading

skills. White students averaged 27, 26, and 24 points higher than African-American, Hispanic American, and American Indian / Alaskan Native students respectively, but one point lower than Asian-American/Pacific Islander students. Students eligible for free/reduced lunch scored 27 points below more economically advantaged students; and females outperformed males by seven points. Still, fourth grade African-American and Asian-American/Pacific Islander students made greater gains on the NAEP since 2005 than White students. An analysis of state achievement tests by the Center on Education Policy showed that reading achievement gaps between male and female elementary students have narrowed in 24 states, but have widened in 14 states (Chudowsky & Chudowsky, 2010). In some states, this gap exceeds 10 percentage points. Closing the achievement gap in literacy continues to be a national priority.

### **School Reform Efforts**

Attempts to close achievement gaps have resulted in school reform efforts, including federal investment in research-based reading instruction, response to intervention (RtI), and culturally responsive teaching (CRT). This section briefly describes each initiative.

Federal Investment. In 2001, President George W. Bush reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 by signing An Act to Close the Achievement Gap with Accountability, Flexibility, and Choice, so that No Child is Left Behind, commonly known as the No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB ("No Child Left Behind Act of 2001," 2002). NCLB is "based on the belief that high expectations and setting goals will result in success for all students" (NCLB, 2001, p. 2). This initiative mandates that states, school districts, and schools increase their standards of accountability and provide parents with more flexibility in choosing schools for their children. Most importantly, NCLB established Reading First as one way to eliminate the achievement gap among children from families with incomes below the poverty line. This program provides assistance to states and districts to establish scientifically based reading programs for students enrolled in kindergarten through third grade. Funds also support increased professional development to ensure that all teachers have the skills to teach these programs effectively. Finally, funds support the use of screening and assessment tools to measure how well students are reading and to monitor their progress.

Scientifically based reading research (SBRR) has helped identify the causes of reading failure and document the results of evidence-based reading instructional practices. SBRR confirms the effectiveness of an instructional practice using a large sample of participants. However, for a study to be considered "research-based," it must meet certain criteria. First, the study has

been published in a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of experts. Second, the results of the study have been replicated by other scientists. Third, there is a consensus by scientists that the study's findings are supported by other, independent studies (P. J. Stanovich & Stanovich, 2003). Adoption and use of SBRR is particularly important in closing the achievement gap because these studies provide compelling evidence that involves large numbers of teachers and children from diverse backgrounds, rather than the experiential evidence of one or two teachers and small numbers of children, and thus be generalized to other children beyond the research sample. At the request of the United States Congress, a meta-analysis of decades of reading research was compiled by the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). This panel reviewed more than 100,000 studies of reading instruction before rendering conclusions about the essential elements of effective reading instruction—systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness (the ability to notice individual speech sounds in spoken words), phonics (using the association between speech sounds and letters to read and spell), reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. By applying this research to classroom practice, it is estimated that the current reading failure rate of 20 to 30 percent can be reduced to less than six percent (Torgesen, 2004). Despite this compelling evidence, recent reviews of university reading courses suggest that few colleges of education adequately prepare teacher candidates to use valid, evidence-based instructional practices with respect to literacy instruction (Greenberg & Jacobs, 2009; Sweet, 2004; Walsh, Glaser, & Wilcox, 2006).

There is evidence that instruction in these essential elements delivered by knowledgeable teachers help narrow the racial/ethnic achievement gap. For example, students in Reading First schools show improved decoding of unfamiliar words (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007). Children with better decoding skills have better comprehension, but those with poor decoding skills have lower levels of reading comprehension (Shankweiler, et al., 1999). Teacher who are both knowledgeable and skilled and who use validated tools for assessment and instruction can positively affect reading achievement (Moats, 2004). For example, as part of a four-year study of 1,400 primarily African-American students in high-poverty schools in Houston, Texas and Washington DC, Moats and Foorman (2003, 2008) found that between 70% and 80% of kindergarten and first grade children were at risk for reading failure at initial screening. Moreover, initial assessments of teacher content knowledge revealed that about 20% of the kindergarten through Grade 4 teachers demonstrated very limited knowledge of reading content and instruction, and another 45% demonstrated only partial conceptual understanding of language, reading development, and informal assessments (Moats & Foorman, 2003). These teachers received intensive professional development on the essentials of

research-based instruction that addressed these gaps in knowledge. In addition, teachers received training on how to assess student progress and interpret errors, with ample opportunity to collaborate with each other in assessment, lesson planning, and instruction. After four years, the majority of these children finishing third and fourth grades achieved nationally average scores on standardized tests of reading comprehension (Moats & Foorman, 2008).

Response to intervention (RTI) is a multi-step process that provides evidence-based instructional support to all students. This process is also used to address struggling students in both academic achievement and behavior issues, and must include interventions that are research-based and have been proven to be effective for most students. First, student progress is closely monitored. Next, results of this monitoring are used to assess students' academic or behavioral progress and make decisions about the intensity of instruction required for student success as part of a defined problem-solving process (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, August, 2005). As a systems change model, the RTI process is designed to limit the amount of academic failure, to increase early intervention, and to reduce the number of children who are inappropriately identified as learning disabled when their actual learning problems may be due to other factors (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006; Klingner & Edwards, 2006). The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems are "encouraged by the potential of RTI to improve education opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse students and to reduce their disproportionate representation in special education" but caution that, without due attention to student cultural considerations, RTI models will simply be like old wine in a new bottle, in other words, another deficit-based approach to sorting children, particularly children from marginalized communities" (National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, Fall, 2005, p. 1; P. J. Stanovich & Stanovich, 2003).

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a collection of teaching practices designed to enhance the academic success of students who are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Gay, 2000). Defining culture is complex. In most research studies, culture is described in terms of an individual's race, ethnicity, native language, disability or socioeconomic status (SES). However, each of these elements of culture is admittedly multifaceted. Cultural factors can include individual, family/community, and school variables and how these intersect and interact (Harris, Baltodano, Artiles, & Rutherford, 2006). An individual's culture can be described as the interaction among race (ethnicity), native language (vocabulary, syntax, dialect), and socioeconomic factors (eligibility for free and reduced lunch). Family/community culture overlaps with individual culture and includes home environment (value placed on literacy and education, literate models, acceptable behavior, literate habits and models, home and school communication) and

community environment (benefits of reading and writing, priority of reading to other factors). Finally, one must consider the school environment (number of teachers or schools attended, methods of instruction, school attendance, teacher attitudes and expectations) as a means of understanding culture.

Culturally responsive teaching includes several key principles. Most importantly, culturally responsive teachers believe that all students are capable of learning and have high expectations for student success (Gay, 2000). Culturally responsive teachers understand that their students' success will lead to an improved quality of life. These teachers know relevant content and how to teach this content to culturally and linguistically diverse students. To be culturally responsive, teachers must understand the role of culture in education and throughout society, take responsibility to learn about their particular students' culture and community, use students' culture as a foundation for learning, and design and deliver instruction in a caring manner (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Finally, culturally responsive teachers use academic experiences that connect their students' perspectives to the larger social context (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

The purpose of this article is to summarize the research evidence regarding effective reading instruction and to apply that knowledge for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This discussion will help educators distinguish between effective research-based instruction and practices based on unsubstantiated theories.

### **Causes of Reading Failure**

The act of reading is complex and involves two main processes—decoding written words and comprehending meaning in oral language (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). To decode words in an alphabetic language such as English, the beginning reader must first understand that oral words are comprised of individual speech sounds, or phonemes, and then discover how phonemes map to letters and letter clusters in written language (A. M. Liberman, 1999). In addition to phoneme awareness, skillful decoding also requires an awareness of morphemes, such as prefixes, roots, and suffixes (Carlisle, 1993; Nagy, Berninger, & Abbott, 2006). Listening comprehension requires both an understanding of semantics, or word meanings, and syntax, which deals with word order and the way phrases and sentences are put together (Crain, Shankweiler, Macaruso, & Bar-Shalom, 1990; Kamil, 2004; Mann, Liberman, & Shankweiler, 1980; Shankweiler, et al., 1995). A breakdown in either decoding or listening comprehension will compromise reading acquisition (Oakhill, Cain, & Yuill, 1998; Shankweiler, 1989).

## **Reading Disability**

Reading disability, or dyslexia, is characterized by an unexpected difficulty in learning to read in children and adults who otherwise have the requisite intelligence, motivation, and adequate instruction (Lyon, 1995). Reading disability is characterized by a deficit at the phonological level, which impairs a reader's ability to segment words into individual phonemes (Bruck, 1993; Byrne & Ledez, 1983; I. Y. Liberman, 1973) and ability to name and write alphabet letters (Lyon, 1996; Share, Jorm, Maclean, & Matthews, 1984). As a consequence, these individuals have extraordinary difficulty learning to decode individual words, which ultimately affects reading comprehension (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Juel, 1988). Conversely, if a would-be reader can decode and pronounce a word, but the meaning is not recognized, comprehension will also be impaired. Evidence suggests that children from economically advantaged homes have heard 30 million more words than children from disadvantaged homes (Hart & Risley, 1995), and thus begin school with a significant advantage in vocabulary knowledge. Thus, children who enter school with requisite skills in phonology, decoding, vocabulary, and listening comprehension will continue to thrive, whereas children without these skills will likely learn to read and write at a slower rate, if at all. Stanovich (1986) referred to this phenomena as the "Matthew Effect," where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

## **Students with Challenging Behavior**

Some students who struggle with meeting academic benchmarks exhibit concomitant problem behaviors that are disruptive to teaching and learning. Inadequate or ineffective instructional strategies that do not fully address the instructional and behavioral support needs of these students may be a critical factor associated with suspension, expulsion, and disproportionality rates of culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Skiba, et al., 2008). Trout, Epstein, Nelson, Shynhorst, and Hurley (2006) cite compelling data that demonstrates the challenge of providing a continuum of instructional and behavioral supports for students with challenging behavior. They write:

Across measures of academic performance (e.g., school dropout, truancy, course failure, grade point average) students with behavior disorders (BD) revealed the poorest outcomes, when compared to both students without disabilities and students in other disability categories (e.g., learning disabilities, mental retardation). Socially, children with BD

also had discouraging outcomes, with low levels of enrollment in postsecondary education (i.e., 2- or 4-year college), poor opportunities for competitive employment, and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships within the employment arena and family relationships. (p. 207).

These data are particularly dismal when understood in light of the extensive literature on disproportionality of students from diverse backgrounds (Cartledge, et al., 2008; Townsend, 2000). Understanding the relationship between effective instruction, academic achievement, behavioral support, and demonstrations of chronic or persistent problem behavior is complex. Researchers have used functional assessment to determine the function or purpose of problem behavior in order to gain a greater understanding of the contextual variables associated with the problem behavior and to teach more appropriate responses that will make the problem behavior "irrelevant, ineffective and inefficient" to engage in over time and across settings (O'Neill, et al., 1997, p. 66).

For example, a functional assessment might determine that a student engages in disruptive behavior during reading to escape or avoid a non-preferred activity. Academic measures also indicate that this student is well below grade level due to frequent consequences that result in the removal of the student from the classroom due to his disruption. It is important to note that removing the student from instruction reinforces the escape maintained behavior (see Chandler & Dahlquist, 2010). The team decides that teaching the student to request a brief break from academic instruction when he feels agitated will provide the student with a "functionally equivalent" replacement response. In other words, the student learns a more socially acceptable form of escaping a task for a brief period of time before re-entering the instructional context in a less agitated state. The behavior support team also recognizes that modified instructional support will need to continue to help the student gain the needed skills to be successful academically so that escape maintained behaviors are not necessary when presented with academic tasks.

The importance of integrating instructional and behavioral supports, as illustrated above, was also demonstrated in a recent study that looked at reading instruction with elementary age students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders. Barton-Arwood, Wehby, and Falk (2005) demonstrated positive changes in reading achievement when implementing a research-based reading intervention for children with emotional and behavioral disorders; however, concomitant changes in social/behavioral measures were not demonstrated. The authors concluded that (a) research-based reading instruction can impact reading achievement for students with emotional and behavioral disorders, (b) academic instruction needs to be coupled with integrated behavioral support to maintain



student engagement and interest, and (c) frequent assessment of students helps the teacher to measure student progress and response to intervention over time.

### **Components of Effective Reading Instruction**

A substantial body of research evidence has identified five components of comprehensive reading instruction that are essential for all students (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; NICHD, 2000). Three components support fluent decoding of the written word—phonemic awareness, explicit phonics, and reading fluency. Two components—vocabulary and comprehension—help the reader construct meaning from text. Extensive research evidence shows that students at-risk for reading failure or who already struggle with reading acquisition improve with intensive, systematic, and explicit instruction in some or all of these components (McCardle & Chhabra, 2004). This remains true without regard to culture, socioeconomic status (Blachman, Ball, Black, & Tangel, 1994; Barbara R. Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Mehta, & Schatschneider, 1998; Moats & Foorman, 2008) or learning disability (B. R. Foorman, et al., 1997). Moreover, the combination of (a) strong first-grade classroom instruction in all five components, (b) screening to identify children at-risk for reading failure, and (c) focused interventions for students needing additional support reduces the incidence of reading failure to only 5% or fewer (Mathes, et al., 2005; Torgesen, 2000).

Strong teacher content knowledge and instructional skills are also linked to increased student achievement (Fitzharris, Jones, & Crawford, 2008; McCutchen, et al., 2002; McCutchen & Berninger, 1999; Moats & Foorman, 2003, 2008). However, teacher knowledge and well-designed programs are not guarantees of success. Moats and Foorman (2003) showed that even well designed programs used by less-knowledgeable teachers produced poor results, but strong teachers can get good results even with programs of weaker designs. Brady and her colleagues (2009) showed that teacher attitudes about the content or method of reading instruction also affect student achievement.

Students with low reading achievement may not require intensive instruction in all reading skills. That is to say, weak readers are not necessarily weak thinkers (Rickford, 2001). Teachers need to use data to make informed decisions regarding appropriate instruction to address particular individual needs. Effective teachers know how to integrate knowledge of both the reader and the text to provide an appropriate proportion of word-reading and meaning construction skills in comprehensive reading instruction. For example, students from economically disadvantaged families will likely require more intensive levels of vocabulary (Hart & Risley, 1995). When the purpose of instruction is to expand students' vocabulary, the expert teacher selects texts containing mature words that appear frequently in a wider variety of texts (Beck,

McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Likewise, when the purpose of reading is to comprehend the meaning of written text, proficient instruction integrates unfamiliar vocabulary, priming background knowledge and direct instruction of appropriate text structures. This is particularly important for students with limited English proficiency or who may be unfamiliar with academic language. Likewise, to facilitate decoding of individual words, teachers explicitly demonstrate how written words map speech to print, and how prefixes and suffixes change the meaning of words. In addition to accurate and automatic decoding, proficient teachers help students read connected text fluently, with explicit instruction in punctuation, phrasing, and intonation (Hook & Jones, 2004).

### **Culturally Responsive Reading Instruction: Research-Validated Practices**

One hallmark common to NCLB and CRT is that teachers must believe that all students are capable of learning and have high expectations for success (NCLB, 2002; Gay, 2000). In a review of the impact of teachers' expectations on culturally diverse students' academic outcomes, Sirota and Baily (2009) provided evidence that African-American and White teachers and pre-service teachers held negative views of African-American, Hispanic-American, and economically disadvantaged children. Male children were also viewed less positively than females. Conversely, teachers had higher expectations and more positive views of Asian students. Evidence showed that these views created an unequal learning environment, and were strongly correlated with children's self-perceptions, academic motivation, racial mistrust, and problem behaviors. Tucker and her colleagues (2005) showed that teacher efficacy for working with culturally diverse students can be improved.

Another important principle of CRT involves instructional materials that use students' identities and backgrounds as a foundation for learning and thus connect their students' perspectives to the larger social context. Some proponents of CRT argue that students' academic achievement and school performance improves when curriculum and pedagogy are relevant to students' lives (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009). Although this is intuitively appealing, Brayboy and Castagno offer examples of "exemplary" implementation of culturally responsive instruction for Native American peoples, but offer no evidence of positive outcome results in school retention or academic achievement. More rigorous study is needed to establish this promising practice as fact. Likewise, claims that stories with multicultural themes will motivate students to increase reading practice are not yet supported by research evidence. For example, in a study of 35 black and white third grade students in

Mississippi, Holmes, Powell and their colleagues (2007) found that, contrary to their expectations, students more often selected books with characters of different, not similar, racial backgrounds. Based on the results of their review, the authors conclude that offering books about a dissimilar people may promote interracial awareness and understanding for children of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. In a similar vein, Harris and her colleagues (2006) argued that stories in direct instruction curricula are not likely to be culturally interesting or appropriate for the population in juvenile correction facilities. Yet, evidence suggests that diverse students using these materials make significant progress in reading achievement (NICHD, 2000).

Regrettably, existing practitioner materials regarding culturally responsive reading instruction frequently make unsubstantiated claims about the effectiveness of suggested teaching practices (e.g., Algozzine, O'Shea, & Obiakor, 2009; McQuiston, O'Shea, & McCollin, 2008; O'Shea, McQuiston, & McCollin, 2009). Close analyses of some materials reveal errors in basic terminology and suggestions for teaching practices that are contrary to scientific evidence. For example, among the suggestions to improve phonological awareness and decoding skills of culturally diverse high school students, McQuiston and her colleagues (2008) suggest that teachers to use hip-hop music to increase students' awareness of rhyme and alliteration. Although these basic phonological awareness skills are appropriate for 4- and 5-year-olds who need to gain an initial awareness of the sound structures of language, they will not help a 15-year old struggling reader map speech to print (Fowler, 1991). Errors in basic terminology (e.g., "r-controlled digraphs" for r-controlled vowels; "digraphs" for digraphs) further serve to undermine the authors' assertions. Similarly, O'Shea and her colleagues (2009) erroneously state that beginning readers "show fluency by relying mainly on illustrations to attend to print" and that developing readers "still" rely on "visual clues" (e.g., initial and final letters) to decode words. McCollin (2005) recommends that students use context clues to decode unfamiliar words, a common myth with no clear source or evidence to support its use (Adams, Osborn, & Lehr, 1998). In fact, these recommendations directly contradict the evidence that efficient readers do not use picture clues, but attend to every letter of every word (Adams, 1990; Adams, et al., 1998). To increase text fluency, O'Shea (2009) recommended practices (e.g., reader's theater, listening to audio recordings of their own reading and then marking their own miscues on a copy of the text) that also lack support by scientific evidence (NICHD, 2000). While promising, recommending these practices without further evidence serves to undermine the great promise of literacy instruction that combines CRT with scientifically-based reading research.

## **Future Research**

The research literature has clearly confirmed the positive benefits of instructional and behavioral supports grounded in scientific evidence. Although abundant resources provide theoretical guidance for practitioners to implement culturally responsive reading instruction, the content is often inconsistent with the results of scientific research. The time has come to clearly demonstrate, through well-crafted qualitative and quantitative research studies, the significance and power of culturally responsive reading interventions. This research should apply rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures designed to obtain valid knowledge relevant to culturally responsive literacy instruction.

Future investigations should pose clear questions with identifiable outcomes. Investigations need to identify the teacher / school characteristics and instructional components that increase student motivation, engagement, and achievement among students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Several methodological issues should be considered when conducting and interpreting research (Lyon & Moats, 1997). One critical research element concerns the identification of culturally responsive approaches and methods that improve achievement, behavior, and school retention in well-defined samples of students. To determine which factor or factors of CRT are most effective in promoting achievement or school retention, studies need control or contrast groups that lack the factors under investigation. The effects of previous influences must also be addressed if we are to fully understand individual responses to particular culturally responsive practices. How do previous and concurrent practices affect responses to a particular approach? We must explore how individual differences interact with teacher variables and CRT practices. Do factors such as gender, ethnicity, dialect, or SES interact with certain CRT practices differently? What critical conditions must be in place in order for student motivation, achievement, or school retention to improve? What knowledge must teachers possess to maximize positive outcomes? Finally, how can effective CRT practices best be measured and analyzed to address the research questions? Only after well-crafted research studies are conducted and made available through peer-reviewed journals can we know which CRT practices will truly improve the academic and social success of culturally diverse people.

## **Conclusion**

Culturally responsive instruction shows great promise, and has the potential to positively influence the education and life-long success of culturally and linguistically diverse students. One outstanding example of a culturally responsive teacher was Dr. Walter J. Turnbull (1944 – 2007), who founded the Boys Choir of Harlem and the Choir Academy of Harlem. Dr. Turnbull believed that the combination of rigorous musical and academic training would help any

child succeed in life. The organization's mission statement (G3 Entertainment Inc., 2005) reads, in part, "Through a program of education, counseling and performing arts, The Boys Choir of Harlem prepares inner-city youth to become disciplined confident, motivated and successful Americans." This school combines the African philosophy of "it takes a whole village to raise a child" with a commitment to "classical and character education." The Academy stressed basic values, discipline, hard work, cooperation and goal oriented behavior. The measurable outcomes are well known and impressive. Although the neighborhood of Harlem has a 70% school dropout rate, the Academy enjoys a 98% graduation rate, with 98% of these students going to college. Of this group, 95% graduate from college. In sum, Dr. Turnbull implemented the essence of culturally responsive practice and, as a result, improved the lifelong success and achievement of his students. Although this example is encouraging, there is no guarantee that these results can be replicated without well-crafted studies, and held to the same standards as other promising school reform efforts. Our children deserve no less.

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