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Tiffany A. Flowers

Perimeter College at Georgia State University

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Book Review - Teaching African American Learners to Read

About the Author(s)

Dr. Tiffany A. Flowers is an Assistant Professor of Education at Georgia State University Perimeter College. Correspondence concerning this review may be e-mailed to tflowers@gsu.edu.

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Teaching African American Learners to Read: Perspectives and Practices, by Bill Hammond, Mary Rhodes Hoover, Irving Pressley McPhail, and International Reading Association. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2005. 357 pages. Reviewed by Tiffany A. Flowers.

This edited book was a compilation of work by members of the National Association of Black Reading and Language Arts Educators (NABRLE). The purpose of this edited work pertaining to African American students is to compile decades of reading research in a single publication pertaining to the best practices for teaching African American students to read. The authors of this work contend that the purpose behind writing this book is to provide information to those interested in reversing the mis-education of African Americans in the United States. Citing past research pertaining to the achievement gap, the schooling experiences of Black children, and current literacy rates, the authors of this volume wrote this work because African American students are the most mis-educated students in the United States. This is especially true as it relates to literacy. This work is organized into four parts. Each section focuses exclusively on theory, reading methods or practices, cultural considerations for African American females and males, and the issues with assessment. Some of the more prominent researchers who contributed to this work include Asa G. Hilliard III, Lisa Delpit, Carol D. Lee, and Dorothy S. Strickland.

Overview of Book

Drawing on the philosophies of Freire, Nyerere and the writings of Malcolm X, Lerone Bennett, W.E.B. Dubois, and Anciet Kemet, Hilliard provides the theoretical grounding in the first section of this work. In *Part I – Theoretical Considerations*, Hilliard outlines the ideas of how history, learning styles, liberation, civil rights are intertwined in the historical and current literacy experiences of Black children. *Part II – Reading Methodologies* this section discusses the reading wars in relation to the education of Black children and what methods of reading are endorsed within the research literature. The methods discussed in this section include using a basic skills approach, high quality literature, guided reading, multicultural children's literature connections, and focusing on comprehension during reading. There are also dissenting views and methods regarding literacy in this section as well. Some of the researchers argue for a more meaningful approach to literacy that includes teaching the relationship between reading and writing, greater reliance on trade and library books, student choice, literacy across the curriculum, and a focus on oral language development. Other researchers endorse a more skills-based approach of teaching isolated reading skills. *Part III – Cultural Considerations* focuses on a collection of historical articles pertaining to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and African American learning styles. Additionally, oral language development, culturally relevant instruction, and classroom studies were discussed. The final section, *Part IV – Assessment Issues* includes historical studies, theoretical papers, and assessments that do not include linguistic, cultural, and political bias.

Strengths and Weaknesses

There are many strengths to this work. First, this edited collection of essays, monographs, book chapters, research studies, and theoretical papers include a good grounding of the research on African Americans and literacy. Second, although not comprehensive, this book should be read and cited by all researchers conducting research on African Americans and reading. Third, this work includes examples of the types of future research needed to further this body of work. As a field of study, there needs to be more research in the area of children's literature, reading, reading instruction, popular culture, graphic novels, media studies, genre instruction, effective reading instruction, comprehension, language development, AAVE, and assessment for African American students. Further, this monumental work includes research studies in classrooms of mainly African American males in relation to reading instruction. Currently, no other collection of research studies on African Americans includes research pertaining to Black males and reading. This is problematic considering African American males are the most vulnerable population within K-12 schools.

There was only one weaknesses in this work. First, the volume itself did not include two key works as they relate to African American males and reading instruction. The first was the Walker (1992) article, *Falling Asleep and Failure Among African-American Students: Rethinking Assumption About Process Teaching*. This article details how African American males fall asleep during process-oriented instruction that is geared toward a skill-based, systematic, and process-product form of teaching. In addition, there was no mention of the educator Marva Collins and her work with struggling readers and more specifically African American males. In Collins (1990) biography *The Marva Collins Way*, Collins discusses the need to provide students with high quality books, encourage higher-level thinking, and to teach students the mechanics of reading through the alphabetic principle, root words, and pronunciation keys in the dictionary.

Implications for the Education of Black Males

Overall, this is a meaningful and important text regarding the reading development of Black males in particular. Strategies such as focusing on comprehension, accepting AAVE as a viable language, and using books with African American male characters are key characteristics of this work. This text has the potential to broaden the discourse on what counts as literacy and reading instruction in relation to Black males. This text is accessible and an easy read for professionals in the fields of English, Anthropology, Communication Studies, Sociology, Media Studies, Community Development Courses, Library and Media Specialist Courses, and African American Studies. It is imperative for literacy professionals in the field of education to read this book in foundational literacy courses at the undergraduate level. This is important considering that teachers are the ones that will ultimately work with African American males in the classroom. Providing an accessible text that provides decades of theory, research, and classroom examples of effective instruction provides beginning teachers with a beginning guide to teaching African American males to read. Additionally, this text should be read in socio-cultural literacy foundation courses at the masters and doctoral level as well.

References

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