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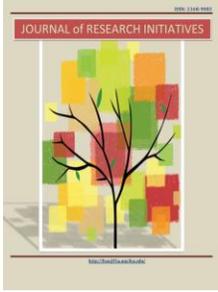
Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction

About the Author(s)
Dr. Kimberly Jones Goods is an educational leader whose passion is to empower teachers with instructional strategies that will help better meet the needs of students. With over 14 years of experience in education, Dr. Jones-Goods has held many titles, some of which include experience as a high school building-level administrator, beginning teacher support coordinator, mentor trainer, advanced placement coordinator, drop out prevention program director, study skills program coordinator, a TEACH site coordinator for Teaching Excellence in American Civic History; a Department of Education grant, master teacher, adjunct professor and Assistant Principal.

A CASE STUDY OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LITERACY
INSTRUCTION

Kimberly M. Jones Goods

Abstract

This qualitative study examined the incorporation of culturally responsive literacy instruction. The purpose was to explore teachers' perception of effective culturally responsive literacy and instruction and ways in which the participants implemented culturally responsive literacy instruction. This study identified and explored three themes affecting three ways in which the participants incorporated culturally responsive literacy into their classrooms. The findings of this qualitative study align with literature on culturally responsive literacy instruction.

Introduction

In 1988, the data to address the lack of research data to support instructional literacy approaches for children of color was initially addressed (Delpit, 1988). Today, one-third of all students currently in public schools are culturally and linguistically diverse; by the year 2035, children of color will represent the statistical majority; by 2050 they will make up 57% of all students; and by 2050 Whites will no longer be the majority population in America (Nieto & Bode, 2012). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (2017) published the Status and Trends in education, which indicated that between 2000 and 2016, the percentage of U.S. children ages 5 to 17 who were White decreased from 62 percent to 52 percent and the percentage who were Black decreased from 15 to 14 percent. In contrast, the percentage of school-age children from other racial/ethnic groups increased: Hispanics, from 16 to 25 percent; Asians, from 3 to 5 percent; and children of Two or more races, from 2 to 4 percent.

Teachers have always been challenged with how to cope with the diversities that students bring into the classroom. The most recent State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce (2016), provides a nationally representative survey of teachers and principals, indicated that 82 percent of public-school teachers self-identified as White. This is problematic as the percentages of racially, culturally, ethnically and culturally diverse students in schools are on the rise, historical data for a conducted more than 15 years ago shows that 84 percent of the teaching staff self-reported as white (US Department of Education, 2013).

Literature Review

Educators face many adversities when it comes to meeting the literacy needs of racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse students. Teachers struggle to find literacy materials that incorporates varied strategies that engage all students. Due to this, these students are falling below grade level and find themselves losing interest in reading. One of the challenges teachers face is how to capitalize on these diversities in their classroom in order to have the greatest impact on students' literacy acquisition?

The National Assessment of Educational Progress tests fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders in reading achievement every four years. The assessment scores are divided into three major classifications: basic, proficient, and advanced. Students scoring below basic are reading below grade level and are likely incapable of performing at grade level on reading-related tasks. Historical data indicates that at grade 4, the White-Black gap decreased from 32 points in 1992

to 26 points in 2015; at grade 8, the White-Hispanic gap decreased from 26 points in 1992 to 21 points in 2015 (Bursuck & Damer, 2015; NCES, 2017). Although this gap narrowed slightly in the most recent national assessment, the difference was not statistically significant, and the achievement gap remains.

In support of closing this learning gap, the International Reading Association (2010a) adopted the belief of literacy theorists who indicated that the incorporation of a student's language and culture, increase the likelihood of success in the culturally diverse learner. developed standards for teaching racially, culturally, ethnically and culturally diverse students by: (a) integrating their differences into the classroom, and (b) utilizing different methods and strategies for teaching them literacy. Researchers strongly believed low academic performance among students from racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse populations is exasperated by the mismatch in cultural backgrounds between students and teachers and (Banks & Banks, Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Culturally Responsive Practices

As defined by Gloria Ladson Billings (1992), culturally responsive practices are Cultural relevance or responsiveness introduced in the early 1990s by scholars those practices that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using their cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This is necessary for inclusion to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective. The absence of culturally responsive literacy instruction may slow the literacy development of students of diverse racial, cultural, ethnically diverse backgrounds. Literature has been minimal in discussing the literacy growth of students from racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse backgrounds. It is believed that students of color are prone to low academic achievement because of the discontinuity between the home and school culture. Many researchers point to cultural bias in teaching as evidenced throughout numerous academic texts and segments across various subjects and researchers in the United States posit the material found in academic texts is usually contributed by members of the majority race (American Psychological Association, 2003; Baker, 2005). Many texts minimize the accomplishments of minorities in the United States while promoting the achievements of the dominant group.

In classrooms where the student population largely comprises of racially, culturally and ethnically diverse students, they are often celebrated culturally but their culture is not a positively used in the classroom as a learning tool. Robert Jiménez (2013), posits that culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) can transform literacy education for students of diverse backgrounds. The learning must be real world applicable while acknowledging the student's culture and language acquisition. Researchers believe that if educators were to incorporate elements of culture and language into their curriculum that racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse students would show academic growth in all areas. Scholars agree that as students from diverse racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds become the majority in the United States school system, there becomes a greater need to provide them with an education that is relevant to their cultural experiences.

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need to understand the backgrounds and philosophies of individuals and groups with values different than their own (Rosenberg et al., 2008). This is especially true in classrooms.

Culturally Responsive Literacy

The International Reading Association defines literacy as, "the ability to read, write, speak, listen, view, visually represent, and think to communicate and contribute to society" (IRA, 2018). 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 (Shealey & Callins, 2007).

Literature on culturally responsive literacy acknowledges that the view of literacy is varied based on cultural lenses. A historical study directed by Heath (1983) investigated literacy practices of children in different communities. Her outcomes highlighted the lens by which literacy was viewed by each of the distinctive groups. Her discoveries from the examination uncovered: (a) White children were immersed in print from the time they were born. Their focus on the literal meaning of the text, and (b) Black children were not always read to but were exposed to print within social contexts. Racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse students may not possess the print literacy that seems to be necessary for success in school however, they do have literacy knowledge embedded from their lived experiences (Gee, 2000). These students may not be successful in school because of a mismatch between the culture of the home and that of the school and that the mismatch problem can be remedied by making literacy learning activities responsive to students' home cultures (Au, 1995). The literature reviewed supports the belief that incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices will enable teachers to meet the unique and diverse need of their students.

The Study

Theoretical Framework

To support a students' acquisition of knowledge, teachers must build upon the knowledge the student already has. To do so, teachers should engage their students in literacy instruction relevant to their racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse background. Students must be provided the opportunity to acquire knowledge, question, interpret, and analyze information from their cultural lens. A connection must be made between what is learned and the students' own culture. According to Jones-Goods (2015), this is significant, especially as educators are facing even greater pressures for students to succeed.

This study used a qualitative methodology as a lens for exploring culturally responsive literacy instruction. Qualitative research that produces descriptive data: people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior it is research that produces descriptive data using people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999).

Research Questions

The study sought to answer two research questions to explore the implementation of culturally responsive literacy instruction. After a review of current and historical literature, the following questions guided the study:
1. How does the participant perceive effective culturally responsive literacy and instruction?
2. How does the participant implement culturally responsive literacy instruction?

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher relied heavily on participant feedback by means of observation, informal interviews, and surveys to examine whether their view of learning considers all students as capable learners who make sense of the world around them, the cultural background of a person

plays a significant role in how a person learns (Au, 1993; Banks, 2013; Gay 2013). A Cultural Diversity Awareness Inventory (Henry, 1986) was administered. Participants were able to be reflective in their practice and examine their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior towards racially, culturally and ethnically diverse students. The participants reflected on 28 questions pertaining to their awareness of cultural diversity. A Likert scale rated participants responses to the question by using strongly agree, agree, neutral, strongly disagree, and disagree and answer choices.

Following the collection of data, transcripts were coded for themes and edited and shared with the participants to allow them to check for accuracy and verification. To maintain the anonymity of the individual interview participants, the material does not identify their names or teaching positions within the school.

Participants

The three participants were selected by a convenience sample. Creswell (2014) outlines a convenience sample as one in which respondents are chosen based on their convenience and availability. Participants in the convenience sample were selected from one school. The participants self-identified as educators who believed they utilized culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms. For confidentiality purposes, participants were assigned first-name pseudonyms that are used as appropriate when referring to each participant.

Findings

Three themes emerged from the data: (a) the incorporation of culturally responsive literacy material, (b) strategies and (c) instructional activities. These three themes are further examined below. The results from the study show that curriculum content should serve the "dual purpose of validating students' personal experiences and heritages," while allowing students the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge (Powell & Rightmyer, 2011). Teachers are often not aware that their background influences their selection of instructional materials, strategies for learning and instructional activities of students (Tatum, 1997). When implementing culturally responsive literacy instruction the participants paid attention to the instructional dimension of effective literacy instruction which include an intentional focus on materials, strategies, and instructional activities. Participants' observations demonstrated that regardless of race, lived experiences, or years of teaching, their teaching style demonstrated a willingness to relate the content to student lives, provide rigor and to use relevant materials so that all students in the classroom wanted to engage with the material. Their classrooms were set up for collaboration, in groups of two but no more than four students, however, students were not expected to remain there. Students were encouraged to use each other as resources, to express their diverse perspectives and real-world experiences. They were encouraged to choose the seating arrangement which made them most comfortable for learning, whether it be sitting on the floor, desk, or on the bean bags that were found throughout the classrooms. Multicultural texts were found in the small library in each classroom. Each participants' lessons and tasks appeared to be well thought out, aligned to the standards and provided the appropriate grade level rigor.

Theme 1. Literary Materials

The data showed that the participants used literacy materials designed to effectively teach students how to read and write. The participants created a connection with the reading material and the students' background by creating cultural continuity to home and school. They exposed students to relevant and multifaceted reading material in which they could see their own individual culture. These texts provided validation for the students. Research has shown that if students do not see themselves in the learning, they become disengaged. Gibson (2010) indicates that culturally relevant materials may be a means of enhancing critical literacy skills.

Participant, Laura expressed her perception of culturally responsive literacy instruction when she stated:

>Regardless of the cultural values that were instilled in me, I am committed to implementing culturally responsive literacy instruction. Through use of culturally relevant materials I demonstrate to my students that I understand that their culture plays a part in their learning and that I believe that they have just as much a right as to feel relevant in the content that we are learning. My job is to provide the materials they will need to have an equitable opportunity to learn and demonstrate content knowledge. This has helped my students with their literacy skills because they become more engaged when we read material with other cultures as the focus, they take risks with sounding out words they don't know; they ask more questions. They get excited!

Each participant acknowledged the purposefulness to which they sought out culturally responsive materials for their classrooms although this was not their school experience.

Theme 2. Strategies

Observation and interview data showed that participants used various strategies in their literacy instruction. Through text discussion, students can make connections which positively impacts comprehension. The participants allowed students the opportunity to question, analyze and synthesize texts so that they could construct meaning from their own experiences. This allowed students to show text-based understandings. Participants used metacognitive processing strategies in to demonstrate to students that there is an overlap of the processing skills they use at home and in the real world and in the classroom. For example, the class engaged in storytelling, call and response and reciprocal or cooperative learning that would utilize the social aspects of students' cultural learning style. The participants allowed students to use their home language in the classroom and then build on this to develop their literacy skills and then to transfer these skills to the content. Whole group discussions of text allowed participants to make meaning to their personal lived experiences as found in the reading. The students were highly engaged in meaningful discourse that extended beyond the class instruction. Students made use of personal and collective experiences to enrich the literacy instruction.

The participants incorporated the use graphic organizers, primary language reading materials for English Language Learners, and texts that represented the diversities in their classrooms. Direct and explicit literacy instruction focused on the acquisition of knowledge and vocabulary by using relevant text. Participant Ernest explained:

>I never received the type of instruction I give my students. As a student, I was not expected to have a voice and my experiences were not a part of classroom instruction. I've worked hard to provide my students with the opposite experience. I look for teaching strategies that help me to provide each individual student unique instructional approaches. Because research indicates higher academic achievement when students learn in a sociocultural context, I try to connect my teaching strategies to each student's individual home cultures. I want them to love learning, so if that means that I must put in extra time to find content and materials that are relevant and engaging to them, then that is what I do. Doing so is not easy. It takes more time to plan lessons.

Theme 3. Activities

The data showed that the participants in the study encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning. Participant Melissa facilitated this through differentiated reading instruction specific to individual learning needs. Student were provided choices for completion of tasks, projects, and assessment; readings from multicultural and multi-linguistical

diverse texts and multiple instructional strategies were used to address gaps in student knowledge and make connections.

Observation data and artifacts showed that the participant Melissa used the students' home language versus academic language graphic organizer to organize information and demonstrate the connection between them for the text, Romero and Juliet. The observations showed that students displayed excitement when being able to connect vocabulary that was most often used at home with the academic language that they were expected to use in the classroom. By doing this, participant Melissa acknowledged that students' home life plays an integral part in their learning. Melissa further individualized the lesson by providing students with differentiations for completion of classroom tasks, projects, and assessments. Melissa stated:

If I did not supplement the curriculum for my students with social and academic readings from multicultural and multi-linguistical diverse texts and use multiple instructional strategies that address their diversities, I would lose them. I wish this had been done for me as a student. As a female student, I often felt left out of the instruction. My teachers never took the time to supplement instruction with examples that included females. If I did not make the effort to place my students in the center of my instruction, they would not be motivated enough to access the texts we were required to read in class.

Conclusion

Although teachers often feel unprepared to do so, they must teach literacy in a culturally responsive way or they will continue to perpetuate the statistics of students being disengaged with reading and reading below grade level. Teachers must adopt strategies that work best within the context of their classrooms. While enrollment of racially, culturally and ethnically diverse students are increasing in schools across the country, many teachers still prefer to promote a traditional curriculum that does not require the teacher to acknowledge the diversities in the classroom unless it is already pre-written into the standards.

This serves as a barrier between the school and perpetuates the achievement gap for students. Despite the racial, cultural and ethnic differences that exist between many educators and students, it should not be presumed that these differences automatically make it impossible for teachers to successfully teach them. Teachers must adopt and model attitudes, values, and characteristics that express a competence, understanding and willful embrace of their culture into the classroom.

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