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Nicole Patton Terry, Theme Editor

# PERSPECTIVES

## ON LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

A Quarterly Publication of the International Dyslexia Association

Volume 46, No. 2



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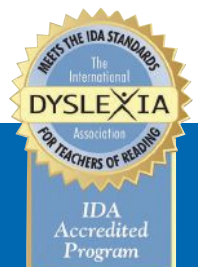
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## ON LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

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The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, scientific and educational organization dedicated exclusively to the study and treatment of the specific language disability known as dyslexia. We have been serving individuals with dyslexia, their families, and professionals in the field for over 70 years. IDA was first established to continue the pioneering work of Samuel T. Orton, M.D., in the study and treatment of dyslexia.

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## Diversity, Differences, and Disparities in the Context of Dyslexia

An unfortunately large percentage of students continue to struggle to become competent readers. The most recent statistics from the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicated that nearly a third of fourth-grade children in the U.S. do not read at a Basic Level and 65% are not reading at a Proficient Level. Many individuals think of children who are struggling readers as a homogeneous group. The fact of the matter is that struggling readers are quite diverse. Diverse in terms of reading, spelling, and writing skills, but also diverse in terms of the context in which these children experience life. Students in today's classroom are diverse in culture, family income, proficiency in English, nutrition, access to quality teaching, effective interventions, and knowledgeable educators cognizant of reading difficulties and cultural variability. In fact, most of the differences that have been attributed to ethnic and racial issues are actually linked to disadvantages due to poverty and lack of access.

Although most teachers in the United States tend to be White (77%), most students in their classrooms are culturally and linguistically diverse (53%). Teachers whose training did not prepare them to address reading failure often feel frustrated when attempting to help children become competent readers, a situation that is exacerbated with children from diverse backgrounds, particularly students of color. When it comes to reading difficulties, the student's actual environmental experiences and cultural background are frequently not considered. Children of color historically have experienced higher levels of misdiagnoses, grade retention, harsh discipline, and are less likely to receive proper educational support even if they have been identified for special education services.

The good news is that children who are struggling readers, regardless of background or disadvantages, can become competent readers. For this to be possible it is critically important that children's potentials and access to high-quality interventions are not determined by their economic realities. Equally important is understanding and believing that children of color with dyslexia can excel if provided with proper interventions.

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## Diverse Vulnerable Learners with Reading Disabilities A Call to Action

by Nicole Patton Terry

Special education has always been a civil rights issue in the United States and in many other nations. In fact, it could be argued that the legal rights of children with disabilities began with the fight for Black children. The passage of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954 prompted the filing of several legal cases on behalf of children with disabilities for their right to equal protection guaranteed by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. These efforts ultimately resulted in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, currently the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)—a law that protects the legal right of children with disabilities to a free and appropriate public education delivered in the least restrictive environment and governed by an individualized education program. It is, thus, quite ironic that Black children and many other racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse learners have had such a troubled history with special education.

Educational disparities in U.S. schools are well documented and discussed extensively by contributors to this issue. While those schools continue to grow more diverse, diverse learners

continue to be more likely to grow up in poverty (Koball & Jiang, 2018). Meanwhile, because race and poverty are confounded systematically in the U.S., these learners are particularly vulnerable to conditions that may lead to difficulty in school. That is, for example, they are more likely to attend low-performing schools, to live in under-resourced communities, to have a family history of difficulty in school, and to have limited access to quality health care and associated services to identify and treat conditions that may impair learning. Given this context, academic difficulty among vulnerable children in school should not be surprising. Rather, perhaps it should be expected and acted upon immediately and intensively to prevent academic failure. Yet, this context also makes it particularly difficult to identify and respond to any disability, let alone dyslexia and other language-based disabilities whose diagnostic criteria include ruling out other plausible causes for learning difficulty like inadequate instruction, language differences, and/or the sequelae of poverty (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, &

*Continued on page 8*

### Abbreviation

EL: English learners

Barnes, 2019). This prerequisite is particularly difficult for diverse vulnerable students to achieve—they often experience conditions that may be related to their learning difficulty and may perhaps even exclude them from identification and eligibility for treatment with a learning disability.

In truth, simply not enough research has been conducted with diverse vulnerable learners with disabilities to provide empirical evidence of how to ensure their success in school (Ford, 2012). Continued innovation in research and practice is required. Nonetheless, the contributors to this issue and I contend not only that the current research base provides a roadmap for how to begin to address reading difficulty and disability among diverse learners, but also that we as a field have a responsibility to do so with immediate urgency. After all, it is their legal right too. Thus, this issue presents a call to action on behalf of *diverse and vulnerable learners with learning disabilities and their families*. Collectively, the contributors wrestle with the troubling intersection of race, class, and disability as applied to students with dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities that impair reading and writing achievement.

We begin with a discussion of *Brown v. the Board of Education* and IDEA. Gwendolyn Cartledge and Shobana Musti-Rao's review makes clear why legislation alone is not sufficient to ensure equitable educational opportunity for learners whose ability is questioned, whether because of race or disability (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). Noting that systems-level remedies may be necessary, they turn to Response to Intervention (RTI) as a Multi-tiered System of Support approach to preventing and remediating reading difficulties among diverse learners. Although the evidence base for the effective implementation of RTI with diverse learners is lacking (Cartledge, Kea, Watson, & Oif, 2016), they provide preliminary evidence from a study that integrates RTI with culturally responsive pedagogy to improve reading achievement.

Next, Lakeisha Johnson and Brandy Gatlin-Nash focus on African American learners—a student population vulnerable to experiencing reading difficulty in U.S. schools not only because of the consequences of institutionalized and systematic racism toward Blacks but also because of oral language differences that are common in African American communities related to poverty and to spoken dialect variation (Terry, Gatlin, & Johnson, 2018). The critical importance of oral language to reading development and achievement is well documented. Thus, the added presence of a reading disability makes African American learners even more vulnerable to poor school achievement. After briefly reviewing the literature on the relations between poverty, spoken dialect variation, and reading performance, they discuss the implications for assessment and provide recommendations for language-infused reading instruction to improve reading outcomes.

Then, Philip Capin, Colby Hall, and Sharon Vaughn focus on English learners (ELs)—another student population vulnerable to experiencing reading difficulty in U.S. schools not only because they are disproportionately more likely to be

growing up in poverty but also because of the cognitive and linguistic demands associated with learning multiple languages (Kieffer, 2008). The added presence of a reading disability makes ELs even more vulnerable to poor achievement in school. Accordingly, Drs. Capin, Hall, and Vaughn summarize recent research evidence on the effects of academic language and reading interventions for ELs with reading difficulties and provide recommendations for evidence-based assessment and instructional practices to support ELs with or at risk for reading disabilities.

Implicit in the recommendations offered to support diverse vulnerable learners is an explicit recognition of the historical and sociocultural complexities in U.S. society that have allowed conditions that beget vulnerability to exist. Thus, part of responding effectively to their needs is acknowledgment of these conditions, which in many cases are not happenstance. To be clear: centuries of mal-intended policies and practices both inside and outside of schools are responsible, in part, for the emergence of these persistent and seemingly intractable achievement gaps (Rothstein, 2017). Admittedly, these discussions are uncomfortable. Nonetheless, intentional and unintentional biases influence teachers' interactions, behaviors, and instructional practices with students (Gay, 2010). With reports of a lack of diversity among the teaching workforce (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017) and that fewer than 50% of teachers feel competent working with diverse learners (Chu, 2011), diverse learners are particularly vulnerable in these classrooms. Disability only exacerbates the problem. Thus, Endia J. Lindo and Okyoung J. Lim provide an introduction to cultural competence, listing steps educators can take to increase their own cultural competence and ultimately improve their capacity to respond to the needs of diverse learners with disabilities.

The issue ends with two stories that bring these issues to life: one from the perspective of a team of educators working to improve reading achievement in distressed communities and the other from a parent. With a mission to empower communities to serve dyslexic learners, Kim Day, Josh Clark, Jennifer Barton Burch, and Leslie Evans Hodges at The Dyslexia Resource at The Schenck School discuss the challenges and opportunities to forming partnerships with schools and community organizations to improve reading outcomes of vulnerable learners growing up in impoverished communities and attending low-performing schools. They provide 10 lessons learned from years of working to close the research-to-practice divide as an independent school that serves students with dyslexia.

Finally, the Tidwell family provides their own unique experiences as a Black family who navigated the special education system for their children with learning disabilities. Their efforts ultimately resulted in the formation of the National Association for the Education of African American Children with Learning Differences, where they trained hundreds of parent advocates across the nation to support the needs of diverse and vulnerable learners with disabilities. Their story reflects countless experiences of parents of children with disabilities who struggle to



have their children's needs met, and should resonate with many readers of this issue. Yet, that story as told from the lens of people of color is rarely heard and critically important to addressing the needs of their children. Borrowing from Nancy R. Tidwell, who borrowed from the late Dr. Ronald Edmonds, "It seems to me, therefore, that what is left of this discussion are three declarative statements: (a) We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; (b) We already know more than we need to do that; and (c) Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far" (p. 23, 1979).

Collectively, the contributors to this issue and I believe that, although there is room for significant innovation to improve outcomes for diverse vulnerable learners with reading disabilities, we know enough to begin and to do it well. We hope you, like us, feel that the time has come to take action.

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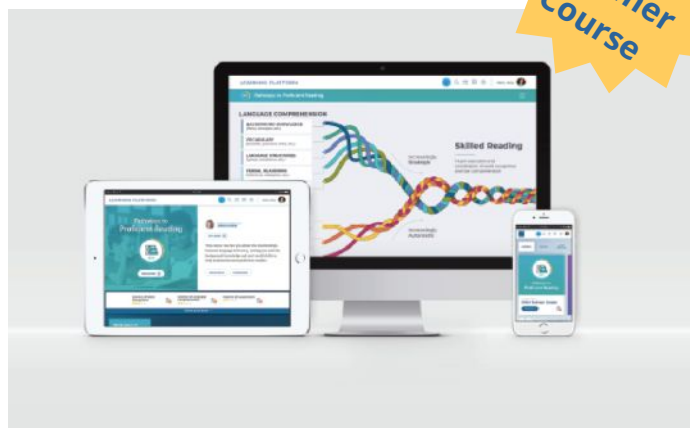
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# Diverse, Vulnerable Learners in Special Education

## Policy and System Analysis to Improve Educational Quality

by Gwendolyn Cartledge and Shobana Musti-Rao

Our public schools are increasingly ethnically and racially diverse. The most recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019) on elementary and secondary public school students, using the following categories, documents from 2000 to 2015 the percentage of White students decreased from 61 to 49% and Black students from 17 to 15%. During the same period, Hispanic students increased from 16 to 26%, Asian/Pacific Islander students increased from 4 to 5%, Native Americans remained constant at 1%, and students documenting two or more races were recorded in 2015 at 3%. By 2027 these percentages are expected to be 45 for White students, 15 for Blacks, 29 for Hispanics, 6 for Asian/Pacific Islander, 1 for Native Americans, and 4 for students reporting two or more races (see Figure 1). This shifting diversity has major implications for the way that this society continues to structure its schools and the expected outcomes. Students from diverse backgrounds are particularly vulnerable for failure and some students (i.e., Blacks) have the worst outcomes of all the students in schools in the U.S.

The educational history of most culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners in the U.S. has been a troubled and nearly intractable one, especially for students from Native, Hispanic, and African American groups. Looking past the painful periods of bondage (African Americans) or boarding schools (Native Americans), education for much of the past century for these groups has been characterized largely by segregation, scarcity of resources, insufficient instruction, restricted opportunities, and limited school success. Midway through the last century two major governmental actions occurred that were designed to remedy some of the noted shortcomings as well as to extend educational promise to another group of locked out youth, those with diversity profiled by ability differences (physical, cognitive), rather than principally race or ethnicity.

### Brown v. Board of Education

First, there was the U.S. Supreme Court ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Topeka, Kansas*, 1954. Prior to this ruling,

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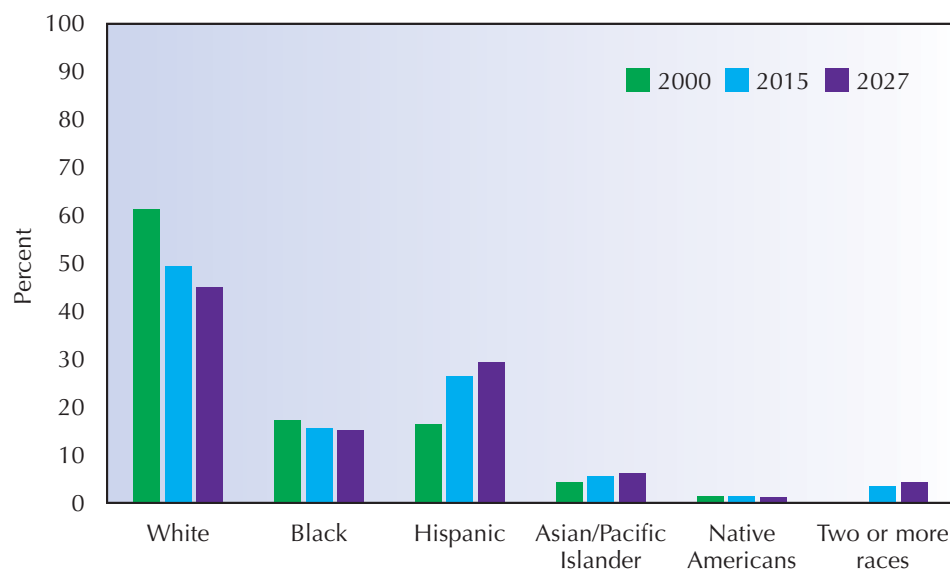


Figure 1. Past and projected race of U.S. elementary and secondary students from 2000 to 2027.  
Source: National Center of Education Statistics (NCES, 2019)

### Abbreviations

CLD: Culturally and linguistically diverse  
CRP: Culturally relevant pedagogy  
IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

RR: Repeated reading  
RTI: Response to Intervention

Black children in certain locations, particularly in southern states where segregation was the law, often had to travel long distances past White schools to attend Black schools, which typically were underserved or under resourced compared to the White schools. In the North, Black children were subjected to “de-facto” segregation due to the fact that their families were forced to live in Black residential areas and their children were assigned to attend their “neighborhood” schools. In 1954 the court ruled that within public schools the doctrine of “separate but equal” had no place and that separate facilities were inherently unequal. The schools were to be integrated with all deliberate speed (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005).

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*Initially, the Brown v. Board ruling appeared to have some payoff for Black students with evidence of a declining Black-White achievement gap until purposeful school desegregation was halted. Blacks benefited, with no deleterious effects for White students.*

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Shortly after the Supreme Court ruled that school segregation by race was unconstitutional, White parents in the South began to form private schools, especially through the church, so that few, if any, White children remained to attend racially integrated schools. One particularly egregious example was Prince Edward County in the state of Virginia (Green, 2015). In the North, where schools were residentially segregated through governmental design of social engineering (Rothstein, 2017), a brief period of limited integration took place until the country succumbed to pressure of anti-integrationist and elected politicians such as Ronald Reagan, who insisted that the focus should be placed on improving the performance of minority students through upgrading their schools rather than through racial integration (Hannah-Jones, 2016). Although this position was welcomed by the majority of Whites (Hannah-Jones, 2019) and many Blacks (Shealey, Lue, Brooks, & McCray, 2005), it can be legitimately argued that this policy was misguided. Hannah-Jones points out that it was during this period of integration that racial minorities were making the most progress in school. She presents findings from studies showing the narrowing of the achievement gap between Blacks and Whites and Blacks performing well beyond their Black peers in segregated schools. Johnson (2015), for example, in a longitudinal study found “that for blacks school desegregation significantly increased both educational attainments, college quality, and adult earnings, reduced the probability of incarceration, and improved adult health status” (p.2).

Hanushek and Rivkin (2009) analyzed school achievement data for Black and White children and observed that the achievement gap increased when Black children were in class-

rooms with higher concentrations of Black students, where they were more likely to have inexperienced or first-year teachers, and were less likely to have access to advanced academic classes. According to the U.S. Office for Civil Rights (2014), most Black and Hispanic children are segregated by race and class. These schools with high concentrations of Black and Hispanic students are also less likely to have the academic resources and advanced classes that will promote their achievement. Initially, the *Brown v. Board* ruling appeared to have some payoff for Black students with evidence of a declining Black-White achievement gap until purposeful school desegregation was halted. Blacks benefited, with no deleterious effects for White students. Currently, U.S. schools are equally, if not more, segregated than prior to the *Brown v. Board* ruling (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Furthermore, these segregated conditions are just as harmful for racial minority children with disabilities as they are for those without disabilities.

### Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

The *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court ruling led to the passage of the second landmark decision, which was the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Undergirded with the premise that separate was inherently unequal, parents of children with disabilities, who previously had been excluded from public schools, litigated and in 1975 achieved the integration legislation. This law made children with disabilities eligible for free and public education and specified that the children were to be taught in the least restrictive environment. Along with *Brown v. Board*, IDEA brought an additional measure of hope for parents of minority students. That is, even their children with disabilities could expect to enjoy full educational citizenship. Unfortunately, the promise accompanying both of these pieces of legislation is yet to be realized.

The faded promise for minority children in special education parallels that found in general education. A decade after *Brown v. Board* and before the legislation leading to IDEA, professionals began to observe that special education classes, particularly those for children with cognitive and behavior disabilities, were disproportionately populated with Black students, especially Black males, thereby questioning the merits of special education and whether special education is a viable source of treatment or simply a place to put children (Dunn, 1968). The issue of disproportionality for minority students festered for several years but began to receive increasingly greater attention in the past two decades (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

This issue is of special concern given the poorer outcomes for Black students both during and following formal schooling. Researchers and other authorities report that Black students in special education are likely to be in urban settings where the educational options are more limited compared to more affluent districts (Skiba et al., 2008), they have fewer positive in-school and post-school outcomes compared to White peers (Blanchett, 2006), and they have the poorest outcomes of all



the students in U.S. schools (Ford, 2012). There are significant problems associated with minority disproportionality and special education in that there are areas of under identification as well as over identification (Morgan et al., 2015; Travers, Krezmien, Mulcahy, & Tincani, 2014), there is variance according to poverty (Skiba et al., 2008; Wiley, Brigham, Kauffman, & Bogan, 2013), disciplinary actions (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2011; Sullivan, Van Norman, & Klingbeil, 2014), developmental factors (Morrier & Gallagher, 2012), location (Travers et al., 2014), disability type (Travers et al., 2014), and so forth. Some researchers (e.g., Wiley et al., 2013) would argue that under identification in disability areas such as emotional behavior disorders is a more egregious error than over identification because the former condition would deprive the learner of valuable treatment. That argument would have considerable merit if we could confirm that the school experiences afforded to Black students in special education, including programs for emotional behavior disorders, resulted in superior outcomes compared to similarly diagnosed unserved Black students.

Another related factor is that although IDEA authorizes that students with disabilities be taught in the least restrictive environment, minority students with disabilities are found to be in the most restrictive placement (Cartledge, 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Parrish (2002), for example, found that Black students in California were nearly two times more likely than White students to be labeled emotionally disturbed and more likely than White students to be referred to the juvenile justice system, further underscoring special education's failure to meet the needs of Black children. Algozzine (2005) sums it up this way: "If special education worked, few would be concerned about the distribution (or, 'over-distribution') of services; but, special education does not work all that well for many children receiving it; and therefore, research, reassessment, and reform should be redirected to the quality of services students receive not who receives them" (p. 64).

### **Systems for Quality: The Promise of RTI and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Accepting the challenge to focus on quality to improve the academic achievement of all learners, researchers have given increasing attention to systemwide approaches to educational success. Specifically, within the field of special education, focus has turned to Response to Intervention (RTI), a multi-tiered system designed to improve upon previous special education models causing the learner to experience considerable failure before providing intervention. In RTI approaches, instruction is delivered with increasing intensity and dosage to determine appropriate supports needed for a student to benefit from instruction, which may or may not include special education services. Ideally, RTI is a schoolwide model, where the first tier would provide high quality, effective instruction for all students. Students failing to reach mastery with this instruction would receive more intensive, small group or individualized instruction at the second and third tiers.

Despite its widespread use and prominence in legislation, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of this RTI for CLD learners is lacking. In a recent review of the literature, Cartledge, Kea, Watson, and Olf (2016) found no schoolwide Tier 1 RTI

interventions for Black students with special education risk. The researchers did find four studies that used Tier 2 interventions within general education classes in urban schools with large Black student populations. All of the studies reported positive findings, with three of the studies achieving large and convincing effect sizes. A follow-up of one of the studies showed treatment students who initially showed risk at the end of kindergarten were subsequently performing better than control students who did not show risk at the beginning of the study. These are small, single-subject studies but they are promising and need to be replicated on a larger scale.

Meanwhile, largely outside of the field of special education, culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) has gained considerable attention as a systemwide approach to teaching effectively all learners, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. Arguing the importance of cultural teaching that embeds key principles such as caring, high expectations, and social justice, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) proposed that CRP would result in improved educational achievement for CLD learners. CRP is considered to honor the linguistic and cultural differences of students of color by using children's culture as a vehicle for learning and by enabling educators to gain insight into themselves and the structures that may prevent or promote an equitable society. For example, in teaching reading teachers might emphasize reading materials that reflect the children's personal lives, experiences, and language (Ebe, 2012).

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Special education researchers and practitioners have advocated for interventions that combine CRP/RTI for CLD learners with and at risk for disabilities (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). A CRP/RTI model would include a) a balance between skills and whole-child instruction (for example, a balance between teaching reading through decoding skills and reading books largely through the attraction of exciting literature); b) teachers knowledgeable of both evidence-based reading instruction and evidence-based instruction for English learners and other linguistically diverse learners; and c) student-centered competency-based tasks that promote success and challenge students. Such models would avoid placing blame on the students and focus attention on ways to leverage student interests and experiences as a means for constant learning and growth.

Despite the inherent attractiveness of this model, we do not yet have validating research. There are significant barriers to implementing CRP/RTI. Orosco and Klingner (2010), for example, examined the use of a schoolwide CRP/RTI model in a school with a predominantly Hispanic student population.

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Using a qualitative design, the researchers reported challenges that are often observed when implementing RTI with this student population, including misalignment between instruction and assessments and between assessments and students; unrealistic expectations for how students should respond to instruction; and unpreparedness to facilitate student learning. Many teachers had little understanding of the students' home cultures and tended to blame the students and their families for poor achievement. Thus, even in contexts where CRP/RTI is intended, teachers and staff may need significant support to integrate CRP into whole classroom, small group, and intensive individualized instruction.

Another barrier to implementing CRP/RTI is funding. RTI and other multi-tiered schoolwide models can be very expensive to implement and particularly taxing on districts with limited resources and large minority, low socioeconomic populations (Bryant, 2019; Hernandez Finch, 2012; Orosco & Klingner, 2010). School funding is a pervasive and persistent issue, with most of the costs for school funding coming from underfunded and unequal state and local governments. In many states, inequities arise because districts depend on property taxes to increase the funding for their schools and such taxes are notoriously difficult to accrue in poor neighborhoods (Blanchett et al., 2005). If poor districts are disproportionately burdened with large numbers of students who would benefit from RTI and other multi-tiered instructional models that are too expensive to implement effectively, then it is unlikely that the desired effects of reductions in special education services and disproportionality will be observed.

Finally, CRP/RTI requires culturally relevant instructional materials. Meaningful content that draws upon students' personal background and experiences is integral to CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Struck & Vagle, 2014). However, there is a lack of high quality, culturally relevant instructional materials for all students, let alone students with disabilities. Thus, teachers who want to implement CRP/RTI may be faced with developing their own materials.

### **Implementing CRP/RTI: A Case with Repeated Reading Fluency Instruction**

Within a multi-year investigation, Cartledge, Bennett, Gallant, and Ramnath (2015) attempted to embed CRP within a RTI/multi-tiered intervention. The researchers interviewed 50 (25 first- and 25 second-grade) students in urban schools to get information about their lives, such as their favorite in-school and after-school activities, foods, books, music, pop culture, television, and so forth. Additionally, the researchers observed the children during school hours, questioned teachers and parents about the children's preferences, and reviewed popular children's books for additional content. They used this information to develop 100 (first-grade) to 200 (second-grade) word passages of equivalent difficulty to be used in a repeated reading intervention delivered through computer software. Authorities in beginning reading and culturally diverse literature validated the reading and cultural relevance components

of these passages. That is, the reading authority determined that each passage had the appropriate number of decodable and nondecodable words for each grade level. The cultural relevant authority had a professional background in multicultural literature with an emphasis on children's urban literature. She reviewed each passage for its appropriateness for the target population (Cartledge, Keeseey, Bennett, Ramnath, & Council, 2016; Cartledge et al., 2015).

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*Studies provide promising emerging support for using CRP/RTI models to increase reading fluency and comprehension for first- and second-grade students in urban schools with reading risk.*

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Passages delivered through computer software within a repeated reading (RR) instructional paradigm formed the RTI aspect of this project. The computer-based RR intervention directed the learner to read repeatedly a selected passage until the learner read at the desired pace without error. RR is an evidence-based Tier 2 intervention to improve reading fluency primarily, with reported secondary benefits for comprehension (Therrien, 2004). The researchers observed that: 1) students read the CRP passages more fluently than they did the non-CRP passages, 2) students valued most the CRP passages that they personally identified with, in that they either had engaged in a similar activity or that was something they wanted to do, 3) targeted students improved in both reading fluency and comprehension, 4) improvements in fluency and comprehension with CRP passages generalized to non-CRP passages, suggesting that CRP can be instrumental in a wide range of critical classroom learning, 5) a paraprofessional was able to implement the intervention with integrity, 6) first-grade students with reading risk exceeded non-treatment fluency rates, and 7) most children retained treatment gains in follow-up assessments (Bennett, Gardner, Cartledge, Council, & Ramnath, 2017; Cartledge et al., 2015; Cartledge et al., 2016; Council, Gardner, Cartledge, & Telesman, 2019; Telesman, Konrad, Cartledge, Gardner, & Council, 2019).

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

The role of CRP within RTI models remains a major question mark. To our knowledge, there is no definitive research that clearly situates CRP within RTI in schools. Furthermore, existing research has not clearly determined what aspects of CRP might be particularly effective for which CLD groups of students (Hernandez Finch, 2012). For example, Lovelace and Stewart (2009) found that their intensive training helped to improve vocabulary development but no added gains resulted from using books with Black versus White characters. The use of CRP materials did seem to aid some of the children in the fluency



studies (Bennett et al., 2017; Cartledge et al., 2015) but more robust, extensive studies are needed for a conclusive statement on the most facilitating reading material for this population.

The above studies provide promising emerging support for using CRP/RTI models to increase reading fluency and comprehension for first- and second-grade students in urban schools with reading risk. In addition to student growth on the practice passages, the researchers found that fluency and comprehension skills generalized to non-practiced and non-CRP passages. Initially, the RR interventions were labor intensive to develop and implement, placing personnel and equipment demands that are typically lacking in many low-income schools. However, although the initial investment may be burdensome, results from these studies suggest that the return on investment may be particularly beneficial in schools with limited resources. For instance, with regard to personnel, following training, students in these studies quickly adapted to the instructional program and were able to move through the sequence with little prompting. Moreover, varied school staff including teachers and paraprofessionals were able to implement the intervention with fidelity.

Studies also suggest the promise of technology as a cost-effective means to deliver critical content to young learners. Leveraging technology to deliver an evidence-based strategy as additional, secondary instruction may allow for desired levels

of pupil independence. Cheung and Slavin's (2013) review of the effectiveness of educational technology in improving the reading outcomes of struggling readers revealed that the largest effects were observed when instruction was delivered in small-group supplemental instruction programs and for younger students compared to older students, further emphasizing the importance of targeted, small group instruction and early intervention in improving outcomes for struggling readers. Thus, intensive reading interventions delivered using technology can be motivating to students and can address issues with lack of the personnel and financial resources available in schools to carry out the Tier 2 interventions for struggling readers.

Finally, for many special educators, an important first step in implementing CRP/RTI is to learn more about CRP. CRP does not involve a set of strategies or lesson plans but instead requires educators to examine their pedagogical practices as they relate to the students they teach. Although research in this area is still emerging, there are resources available, as online articles, podcasts, and books, to increase professional knowledge in this area as a starting point. See Table 1 for a sample listing of online resources for this purpose. Given below is a list of professional books useful to teachers and other educators in creating culturally appropriate learning environments for their students.

*Continued on page 16*

**TABLE 1. Online Resources for CRP/RTI**

#### Websites and Articles

- The RTI Action Network, a program of National Center for Learning Disabilities, hosts a Diversity and Disproportionality website that includes several articles about CRP and RTI.  
<http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/diversity/cultural-adaptations-when-implementing-rti-in-urban-settings>
- National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt) aims to provide professional development to support state and local school systems in implementing culturally responsive practices for all students.  
<https://www.nccrest.org/about.html>  
*Becoming Culturally Responsive Educators: Rethinking Teacher Education Pedagogy* is a NCCRESt publication for practitioners.  
[http://www.niusileadscape.org/docs/FINAL\\_PRODUCTS/NCCRESt/practitioner\\_briefs/%95%20TEMPLATE/DRAFTS/AUTHOR%20revisions/annablis%20pracbrief%20templates/Teacher\\_Ed\\_Brief\\_highres.pdf](http://www.niusileadscape.org/docs/FINAL_PRODUCTS/NCCRESt/practitioner_briefs/%95%20TEMPLATE/DRAFTS/AUTHOR%20revisions/annablis%20pracbrief%20templates/Teacher_Ed_Brief_highres.pdf)
- Metropolitan Center for Urban Education in New York University has an article on Culturally Responsive Classroom Management Strategies.  
<https://research.steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/uploads/005/121/Culturally%20Responsive%20Classroom%20Mgmt%20Strat2.pdf>
- Workforce Diversity Network hosts a professional resource called Guide to Educating Multicultural Students: Tips, Expert Advice, and Resources for Building Inclusion in the Classroom.  
[http://workforcediversitynetwork.com/res\\_resources\\_GuidetoTeachingMulticulturalStudents.aspx](http://workforcediversitynetwork.com/res_resources_GuidetoTeachingMulticulturalStudents.aspx)

#### Podcasts

- Episode 78: Four Misconceptions about Culturally Responsive Teaching.  
<https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/pod/episode-78/>
- Transformative Talk: Critical Conversations for Teachers.  
<https://anchor.fm/transformative-talk/support>
- The Edvocate Podcast, Episode 4: How to Create a Culturally Responsive Classroom.  
<https://www.theedvocate.org/the-edvocate-podcast-episode-4-how-to-create-a-culturally-responsive-classroom/>
- EdGuru 7: Culturally Responsive Teaching! Moving our Kids from Dependent to Independent Learners.  
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/edguru-7-culturally-responsive-teaching-moving-our/id1374748946?i=1000421086911>

## Recommended Books

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Landsman, J., & Lewis, C. W. (Eds.). (2011). *White teachers/diverse classrooms*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2001). *Educating culturally responsive teachers: A coherent approach*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.

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# Evidence-Based Practices in the Assessment and Intervention of Language-Based Reading Difficulties among African American Learners

by Lakeisha Johnson and Brandy Gatlin-Nash

Researchers across several fields, including education, speech and language pathology, sociology, and psychology, have focused attention on the language and literacy skills of Black children for several years. Since its first administration in 1969, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has revealed significant gaps in reading achievement between groups of children, notably between children of color and their White peers. On the most recent administration of the NAEP (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019), only 18% of Black fourth graders were reading at or above grade-level expectations, compared to 45% of White students. Little narrowing of this achievement gap has been observed over time (see <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=4>). The decline in NAEP reading achievement scores from 2017 to 2019 was significant among the lowest performers, which consist of students of color and those who are poor. A staggering 79% of fourth graders eligible for the National School Lunch Program did not meet reading proficiency benchmarks (NCES, 2019). Despite the many advances made in our understanding of language and literacy development and instruction over the past few decades, many Black children continue to struggle with reading due to many external factors, such as poverty.

Both neurobiological and environmental factors are related to reading difficulty, including reading disabilities like dyslexia (Snowling, 2019), and family socioeconomic factors like poverty (Neuman, 2008). For Black students in the U.S. in particular, these individual factors are often coupled with structural conditions in and outside of schools that contribute additional risk to reading achievement, including insufficient and inadequate school resources and instructional quality, school segregation and re-segregation, concentrated neighborhood poverty, and political strife that can be linked back to the enslavement of African people (see Lee, 2007 for more extensive discussion).

Despite the multiple and compounding vulnerabilities that many Black students face in regards to reading achievement, a vast amount of research evidence has demonstrated that students, regardless of racial, ethnic, economic, or learning differences, can meet grade-level expectations for reading achievement with systematic and explicit instruction (e.g., National Reading Panel, 2000). Unfortunately, increased availability of evidence-based instruction has not resulted in improved outcomes for many Black students in U.S. schools,

the majority of whom are African American (AA). Recent evidence points to one critically important, but often overlooked factor that is particularly significant for AA students: oral language. Although oral language is important for all students learning to read, in this article we discuss why oral language and variation is particularly important for AA students' reading achievement. We will also discuss the implications for assessment and treatment of language-based reading difficulties in AA students.

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*Two factors are particularly important to consider when exploring the oral language abilities of African American students: poverty and spoken dialect variation.*

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## Oral Language Considerations for AA Learners

Oral language matters for reading achievement for all students (e.g., Language and Reading Research Consortium [LARRC], 2015; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD] Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). Children who enter school with strong language foundations tend to have less difficulty learning how to read. A major influence of oral language development for young children is their interactions with primary caregivers (e.g., Zimmerman et al., 2009). Researchers emphasize, however, that language influences include not only the number of words that a child is exposed to (quantity), but also the quality of those language interactions. For instance, intentionally exposing young children to new vocabulary during daily conversations can provide for richer and more robust language experiences above and beyond simply talking to children. In addition, it is important to remember that language is more than simply vocabulary. Rather oral language consists of a variety of micro- and macro-level structural components including phonology, morphology, syntax (i.e., grammar), semantics, and pragmatics (LARRC, 2015; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005).

Two factors are particularly important to consider when exploring the oral language abilities of AA students: poverty and spoken dialect variation. With regard to poverty, the most

*Continued on page 20*

## Abbreviations

AA: African American  
AAE: African American English

MAE: Mainstream American English  
NAEP: National Assessment of Educational Progress

recent available data indicate that among children under 18 years old in the U.S., 41% live in low-income families and 19% live in poor families (Koball & Jiang, 2018). Children of color are disproportionately low income and poor, with 61% of Black children living in low-income families and 34% living in poverty compared to 28% and 12% of White children, respectively. The impact of poverty on oral language development and achievement is well-documented. Children in higher income homes may be exposed to millions of words more than their low-income peers as most infamously cited in Hart & Risley's (1995) seminal study. More recently, Logan and colleagues (2019) estimated that a child who is raised in a literacy-rich environment, that is, who is read to an average of five times per day, is potentially exposed to 1.4 million more words by the age of 5 than a child who is seldom or never read to. Among AA students who are growing up in poverty and low-income households, the quantity and quality of their language experiences in the school, home, and community matter as they learn to read.

Regarding spoken dialect variation, many AA students enter school speaking a dialect of Mainstream American English (MAE) called African American English (AAE; Wolfram & Schilling, 2016). Although dialects carry different levels of prestige in society, it is important to understand that dialects are common in most languages. In fact, in the U.S., all English speakers speak a dialect of American English. Whether referring to a "Southern drawl" in the Southeast, "mountain speech" in the Appalachians, or a wicked Boston "r" in the Northeast, dialects are not "bad," "incorrect," or "broken" English. Rather, they are systematic, rule-governed variations from MAE, with different rules for expressing the same form, content, and use of a language. Often, these differences do not map well onto English orthography, making spoken dialect variation an important consideration for reading instruction. Specifically, among AA students who speak AAE, phonological, morphological, and syntactic differences between AAE and English orthography matter when learning to read.

Researchers have studied AAE extensively in the context of language and literacy achievement, largely focusing on children from low-income backgrounds. The extant literature base suggests that the use of AAE is associated with numerous reading and reading-related skills, including decoding, phonological awareness, spelling, reading comprehension, and composition. A synthesis of recent studies has suggested that there is indeed a moderate and inverse relation between the amount or frequency of spoken dialect production and reading and writing outcomes (Gatlin & Wanzek, 2015). In other words, the more dialect a student uses in his or her spoken or written language, the lower his or her literacy scores tend to be. Further, for students with language and reading disabilities, the association between dialect production and word identification may be even greater (i.e., more negative) than that of their typically developing peers (Gatlin & Wanzek, 2017). Recent findings suggest that adding language-based dialect-informed instruction to evidence-based reading and writing instruction could

improve achievement among AA students (Johnson, Terry, Connor, & Thomas-Tate, 2017). However, more research is needed in order to determine if, for example, dialect itself is an actual determinant of reading and writing difficulties, if it is better characterized as an indicator of language abilities overall, or if the potential effects should instead be attributed to factors associated with living in poverty.

### Implications for Assessment of Language in AA Learners

*Mrs. Thomas is a first-grade teacher with a classroom full of 25 eager learners in a large, urban city. A speaker of AAE herself, she notices many of the students in her class use the same dialect. During the first two weeks of the school year, she screens each student to determine their reading abilities. Approximately half of the students do not pass the screening. Mrs. Thomas knows she should utilize a variety of assessment techniques to ensure she gets a valid idea of her students' reading ability, but she is not sure where to start. She does not want to penalize students for their linguistic differences.*

Although achievement gaps may be present at school entry, it is important to consider whether the emergent literacy skills of AAs from low-socioeconomic status environments have been assessed adequately. The International Reading Association (IRA, 2003) suggests that culturally relevant strengths of minority children such as storytelling, may be overlooked in screenings and diagnostic assessments. As home and early literacy experiences vary by socioeconomic status, it is important that educators do not interpret diverse experiences as having less value than those exhibited in children from more affluent families (IRA, 2003). Alternate measurements, such as dynamic assessment and processing-based tasks, have been proven to be less biased towards AA and other culturally and linguistically diverse students (Laing & Kamhi, 2003).

**Dynamic assessment.** Dynamic assessment combines assessment and treatment approaches, as it examines independent and assisted performance on a task. In this assessment approach, current levels of functioning and responsiveness to instruction are determined concurrently through careful task analysis. The test-teach-retest model of dynamic assessment has proven effective in discriminating between students with language differences and those with deficits. For example, students who are speakers of AAE (a language difference) will show more modifiability during the test-teach-retest model than those with true language deficits (Laing & Kamhi, 2003).

**Processing-dependent tasks.** Processing-dependent tasks are recommended for AA students as they are minimally dependent on prior knowledge and experiences, unlike those found on most standardized language assessments. Working memory, competing stimuli, and nonword repetition tasks, for example, are designed to be equal in familiarity to all test-takers regardless of language knowledge, decreasing biases toward AA students. Tasks such as these allow practitioners to distinguish



poor performance that reflects language processing deficits from differential background knowledge (Laing & Kamhi, 2003).

Mrs. Thomas, the hypothetical teacher in the aforementioned vignette, would need to consider whether standardized or alternate measures would be most appropriate for the struggling readers in her class. Before utilizing any standardized test, it is the role of the practitioner to review the psychometric properties of the tests, identify potential sources of bias, and to determine how responses to specific items may be influenced by linguistic variation when administering assessment to AA students. Several assessments provide alternative scoring rubrics that take linguistic variations into account. While the norms of the standardized test are invalidated if the administrator deviates from the manual, alternative scoring may provide a better understanding of the student's abilities.

*Given the links between poverty, oral language ability, and spoken language variation, it is important to explore how oral language and linguistic differences can be used as a catalyst to improve the reading outcomes of AA students.*

Implications for Instruction and Intervention in AA Learners

*Mrs. Thomas notices that the same students who are struggling readers also seem to have lower language skills. She wonders if targeting oral language skills would boost their reading outcomes as well.*

Given the links between poverty, oral language ability, and spoken language variation, it is important to explore how oral language and linguistic differences can be used as a catalyst to

improve the reading outcomes of AA students. The relation between oral language skills and reading and writing outcomes is well established (e.g., LARRC, 2015). Language ability provides a strong foundation for the development of literacy skills. Each of the five language domains are related to later reading and writing success. Developmentally, language precedes reading and writing, but we know these systems develop in parallel. Additionally, each system builds off strengths in the other. Children with spoken language problems frequently have difficulty learning to read and write (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005).

Both educators and speech-language pathologists play a critical role in helping struggling readers. Above and beyond the negative effects of poverty and other potential risk factors for difficulties, language can be leveraged to understand and ameliorate observed achievement gaps between AA children and their peers. A recent study by LARRC (2015) found that an estimated 60% of the variance in reading comprehension was explained by children's language skills by the third grade, suggesting improving overall language may lead to better reading comprehension. Explicitly teaching oral language skills such as grammar, vocabulary, text structure knowledge, comprehension monitoring, and inferencing were shown to positively impact performance on measures of language and reading comprehension in first through third graders (LARRC et al., 2019). To gather a comprehensive understanding of a student's language skills, the student must be assessed both receptively (language you understand) and expressively (language you use). Table 1 demonstrates the alignment between the components of oral language and reading through activities that can be used to target skills simultaneously.

The linguistic differences of AA students should be viewed positively in the classroom and may be used as a launching pad to teach target skills. Many speakers of AAE are considered bi-dialectal, fluently speaking two linguistic varieties of the same language (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016). Specifically, the skills needed to be bidialectal, such as the linguistic flexibility

*Continued on page 22*

TABLE 1. Language-Infused Reading Instruction Practices		
Language component targeted	Reading skill targeted	Language-infused reading instruction practices
Phonology	Alphabetic Principle & Phonological Awareness	Teach sound awareness activities, such as alliteration, onset/rimes, segmenting, and blending
	Decoding	Teach common sound-spelling patterns
Semantics	Vocabulary	Utilize word webs, semantic maps, word continuums, semantic feature marking, concept diagrams, and four square feature analyses to teach word meaning
	Comprehension	Teach inference-making and comprehension monitoring strategies
Morphology & Syntax	Decoding & Word Analysis	Teach chunking and sounding out strategies Teach common word parts (e.g., morphemes) and high-frequency words
Syntax		Teach text structure awareness

required to code switch in varying contexts, can be considered a strength in regard to reading instruction (Terry, Gatlin, & Johnson, 2018). For instance, practitioners can utilize instruction and interactions that explicitly draw students' attention to how language can vary by context, supporting their ability to use existing knowledge to read and write. Research has shown that this kind of dialect-informed language instruction is positively related to reading achievement in second through fourth graders (Johnson et al., 2017). Other programs have also focused on helping students become bidialectal through explicitly contrasting MAE and AAE, including *ToggleTalk* (Craig, 2014), which is designed for kindergarten and first graders, and *Code-switching Lessons* (Wheeler & Swords, 2010) for third to sixth graders. Table 2 shows several skills that increase bidialectalism that can be taught in conjunction with evidence-based practices for reading and writing instruction.

Additionally, authentic texts that include spoken language variation can increase students' awareness of linguistic differences and how authors use them to express meaning and style in different ways. Authentic texts also provide real-world examples of how language is used in everyday life. When choosing authentic texts, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages recommends that they are context appropriate, age appropriate, and meet the students' linguistic level. These texts are often motivating and allow students to take on the perspectives of the characters, which supports comprehension. Several authentic texts that feature AAE can be found in Table 3.

### Recommendations for Practitioners

It is important to reiterate that all children, no matter their race or language ability, can learn to read through systematic and explicit instruction (Foorman et al., 2016). That said, the research evidence reviewed here and elsewhere suggests that culturally sensitive approaches can be leveraged to improve outcomes for AA children. Specific recommendations include:

- Do not make assumptions about a student's abilities based on race, ethnicity, gender, linguistic background, or any other cultural variables.
- Students may use nonmainstream dialect forms during reading assessments; therefore, practitioners should learn about the characteristics of these dialects (like AAE) in order to determine whether the student's performance is likely due to a language difference versus a disorder. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association provides information on AAE, as well as many other languages and dialects (see <https://www.asha.org/practice/multicultural/Phono/>).
- When available, use standardized assessments that accommodate language variation in their scoring. If those are not available, informal measures and approaches (e.g., dynamic assessment) can be used to gain supplemental information about a student's abilities.
- Consider the student's background knowledge when assessing vocabulary and reading comprehension skills and its impact on performance.

**TABLE 2. Strategies to Increase Bidialectalism**

Strategy	Language Component Targeted	Activity	Example
Contrastive analysis	Pragmatics – Different linguistic patterns are appropriate for different contexts	Sentence Sorts – Have students sort sentences into home or school language based on use of past tense -ed.	"Yesterday, I play kick ball" versus "I planted flowers last weekend."
Identification	Morphology – Receptive measure of student's knowledge of morphemes	Grammatical Feature Identification – Have students choose which grammatical feature is being used.	Mom found Tommy's lost sock under the sofa.
Transforming	Morphology & Syntax – Spoken sentences can be changed from AAE to MAE and vice versa	Cloze Sentences – Have students choose the word that would be appropriate for school language.	The (girl/girls) is finishing her snack.
Formulation	Morphology & Syntax – Expressive measure of student's knowledge sentence structure; can be done at either the sentence or connected text level	Sentence Creation – Provide students with a picture and have them create sentences using a target feature, such as plural -s.	Three dogs were running down the street.



**TABLE 3. Children's Books That Feature AAE**

Title & Author	Recommended Grade Level
<i>I Got the Rhythm</i> by Connie Schofield-Morrison	Preschool – 1
<i>Honey Baby Sugar Child</i> by Alice Faye Duncan	Preschool – 1
<i>So Much!</i> by Trish Cooke	Preschool – 2
<i>I Ain't Gonna Paint No More!</i> by Karen Beaumont	Preschool – 3
<i>Creativity</i> by John Steptoe	Preschool – 3
<i>Don't Say Ain't</i> by Irene Smalls	1 – 4

- Take advantage of opportunities to learn about culturally appropriate teaching strategies (e.g., dialect-informed instruction and culturally responsive teaching) and utilize them in the classroom.
- Explicitly infuse oral language skills in literacy instruction to boost reading performance.

Through utilizing the advances seen in reading research, as well as teaching oral language skills in parallel, we hope to see the trajectory of AA students' reading development rise. It is the responsibility of all practitioners to ensure best practices are being used to teach students who are facing reading difficulties. Arming ourselves with information on the cultural and linguistic differences of the children in our classrooms can help to leverage the strengths of AA students to support reading skills.

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# Evidence-Based Practices in the Treatment of Reading Disabilities Among English Learners

by Philip Capin, Colby Hall, and Sharon Vaughn

As a first-year teacher, Patricia Gonzalez was looking forward to teaching her class of second-grade students—most of whom were acquiring English proficiency at the same time they were learning to read. Ms. Gonzalez learned to read in both English and Spanish and did so readily with few challenges. She was excited about fostering her love of reading in the students in her class. Working in an inner-city school in San Antonio, Texas, with many students growing up in low-income homes, she quickly realized that several of her students experienced challenges acquiring reading proficiency, particularly with word reading and spelling. Because these students were also English learners (ELs), she was unclear as to whether their challenges learning to read were related to acquiring proficiency in English, to serious reading problems like dyslexia, or perhaps to both.

ELs in the U.S., like those in Ms. Gonzalez's class, are vulnerable to reading problems for several reasons. First, ELs encounter the linguistic and cognitive demands associated with learning two languages, demands which likely fluctuate across development and level of language proficiency (Lesaux & Geva, 2006). In addition, ELs in the U.S. experience disproportionately high levels of poverty and often attend poorly resourced, low-performing schools (Capps et al., 2005). As a result, ELs in the U.S. may have fewer opportunities to access instruction, texts, and literacy experiences that contribute to successful literacy acquisition. Finally, like native English speakers, ELs may demonstrate dyslexia as a result of complex interactions between neurobiological and environmental factors that impact neural systems related to learning and reading (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2019). Collectively, these factors place many EL students at risk for experiencing problems with reading and English language knowledge in school.

Until recently, there was little high-quality research to inform teachers, like Ms. Gonzalez, who are responsible for supporting ELs with reading difficulties. To assist teachers who work diligently to help ELs confront these challenges, educational researchers have conducted substantial research over the last 15 years, which has yielded several important findings. First, it is now well recognized that ELs represent a heterogeneous population of students with a broad variety of strengths and needs, including varying degrees of academic skills, subject matter knowledge, and proficiency in their native language and English, which ought to be considered when designing instruction (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). Second, intervention research shows treatments for

ELs should not be delayed until students possess a certain degree of English proficiency (Richards-Tutor, Baker, Gersten, Baker, & Smith, 2016). Third, although ELs with reading difficulties present particular underperformance in vocabulary knowledge and linguistic processes relative to their native speaking peers due to their status as second language learners, many ELs with reading difficulties also demonstrate difficulties in word reading, which require targeted intervention (e.g., Cho, Capin, Roberts, Roberts, & Vaughn, 2019; Vaughn et al., 2019). Finally, there is a growing body of research identifying features of effective treatments for ELs with reading difficulties, which suggests: a) many of the evidence-based practices for teaching foundational reading skills (e.g., explicit phonics instruction) and reading comprehension (e.g., comprehension strategy instruction) considered effective for native English speakers with reading difficulties are also effective for ELs with reading difficulties; and b) instructional practices that target academic language (e.g., explicit vocabulary instruction and structured opportunities for discussion) are particularly effective for this subgroup.

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*By providing both the evidence and practical implications, we aimed to help teachers identify the most efficacious approaches to improving reading and writing outcomes for English learners with reading difficulties.*

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Thus, the purpose of this article is two-fold. First, this article summarizes the findings from four syntheses reporting on the effects of academic language and/or reading interventions on language and reading outcomes for ELs who have or are at risk for learning difficulties (August & Siegel, 2006; Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta, 2006; Richards-Tutor et al., 2016; Rivera, Moughamian, Lesaux, & Francis, 2008). While these syntheses vary somewhat in their interpretation of the extant research, together they provide a compelling set of research studies addressing instructional practices for this understudied population. We highlight key findings from these studies in Table 1. Second, this article provides recommendations for instruction

*Continued on page 28*

## Abbreviations

CSR: Collaborative Strategic Reading  
EL: English learners  
MTSS: Multi-tiered Systems of Support

PALS: Peer-assisted Learning Strategies  
RTI: Response to Intervention

**TABLE 1. Evidence-Based Approaches to Teaching ELs with or at Risk for Reading Disabilities**

<b>Pedagogical Components</b>	
Assessment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify students requiring intensive word reading instruction based on grade-appropriate dyslexia screeners (e.g., phonological awareness, word reading in early grades) and monitor their response to evidence-based intervention.</li> <li>2. Identify specific areas of need (e.g., word reading, spelling, fluency).</li> </ol>
Designing Instruction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Provide early, small-group language and literacy interventions for students based on assessments.</li> <li>4. Emphasize aligning foundational skills instruction (e.g., word reading, spelling, fluency) to the needs of the learner within the context of promoting language learning.</li> <li>5. Consider comprehensive, multicomponent early reading interventions (i.e., interventions that target multiple reading subskills, such as phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and fluency) that address word reading and academic language development.</li> </ol>
Delivering Instruction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Use systematic and explicit approaches to instruction.</li> <li>7. Use well-trained professionals to provide word reading and fluency practice.</li> <li>8. Use cooperative groups, collaborative groups, and team-based learning approaches that allow for opportunities for both independent learning as well as learning from peers.</li> </ol>
<b>Content Components</b>	
Developing Phonological Awareness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Target phonological awareness primarily in kindergarten and first grade.</li> </ol>
Teaching Phonics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. Teach word reading and decoding accuracy through phonetically based systematic approaches using analytic and/or synthetic phonics methods.</li> <li>11. Use peer-assisted learning strategies to promote phonemic decoding, word fluency, and oral reading fluency.</li> </ol>
Improving Fluency	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. In early grades, use passage reading fluency practice such as modeling reading by advanced reader, echo reading line by line, repeated reading, and partner reading.</li> <li>13. In middle grades, implement reading fluency-focused treatment that includes repeated reading of text, modeled reading by advanced reader, systematic error-correction procedures, goal-setting, and performance feedback through graphing.</li> </ol>
Vocabulary Development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>14. Use explicit vocabulary instruction to enhance general knowledge and promote oral language development (e.g., briefly explain the meanings of new vocabulary words, use each vocabulary word in a sentence, utilize semantic map to show the relation between words, and ask the learner to use each word in a sentence).</li> <li>15. Support students in identifying cognates and making connections between their primary language and English.</li> </ol>
Comprehension Instruction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>16. With developing readers, teach students the meanings of two to three key vocabulary words before listening to a passage from a book. After reading the passage aloud, ask students questions about key ideas in the passage, discuss the meanings of pre-taught vocabulary words in the context of the passage, guide students in story retelling, and intentionally provide them with opportunities to participate in dialogue with other students and/or the teacher about the story.</li> <li>17. With students who read, teach select reading comprehension strategies (e.g., self-questioning, summarizing, and comprehension monitoring) and provide students multiple opportunities to practice applying these strategies.</li> <li>18. Across all grade levels, develop students' general and domain-specific knowledge during reading comprehension practice by explicitly teaching important grade-level content using visuals and/or brief videos before reading and purposively sequencing informational texts (Elleman &amp; Compton, 2017) so as to build domain-specific knowledge.</li> </ol>



**TABLE 2. Recommendations for Instruction by Synthesis**

	K–1				2–5				6–12			
	Richards-Tutor et al. (2016)	Rivera et al. (2008)	Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta (2006)	August & Siegel (2006)	Richards-Tutor et al. (2016)	Rivera et al. (2008)	Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta (2006)	August & Siegel (2006)	Richards-Tutor et al. (2016)	Rivera et al. (2008)	Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta (2006)	August & Siegel (2006)
Explicit and systematic phonological awareness/phonics instruction	X	X	X	X		X	X	X				
Vocabulary and oral language development instruction		X	X	X		X	X	X				
Reading comprehension instruction		X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X
RTI/MTSS framework for providing instruction		X				X						
PALS instruction		X				X						
Cognitive strategy instruction (e.g., summarizing, question generating)							X	X		X	X	X

Note. RTI = Response to Intervention; MTSS = Multi-tiered Systems of Support; PALS = Peer-assisted Learning Strategies

for ELs with reading difficulties. We present recommendations organized by grade groupings (e.g., primary, upper elementary, and secondary grades) in Table 2. By providing both the evidence and practical implications, we aimed to help teachers, like the hypothetical example of Ms. Gonzalez, identify the most efficacious approaches to improving reading and writing outcomes for ELs with reading difficulties.

### Helping Ms. Gonzalez

Considering all of the practices associated with improved outcomes for ELs with reading difficulties, how can teachers like Ms. Gonzalez make efficacious decisions about what reading practices to use? In order to facilitate teacher decision making, we offer the following general guidance by grade grouping.

#### Supporting ELs with Reading Difficulties in the Early Grades (K–1)

- Promote language use and development throughout the day. Provide students with many organized opportunities to turn and talk and to use oral language to summarize ideas with support (e.g., to other students in small groups, or to the teacher or paraprofessional).
- Consider ways to develop word and world knowledge and construct meaning throughout the day. Teach vocabulary related to reading, particularly high-utility words

relevant to social studies, science, and math. Integrate word learning and use as an ongoing part of the day.

- Ensure all students know the names and sounds of the letters.
- Provide fun, game-like ways to promote phonological awareness with an emphasis on blending, segmenting, deleting, and manipulating sounds in words.
- Give students opportunities to engage in participatory story read-alouds, learn story grammar elements, and practice retelling.
- Teach high-frequency sight words and practice often.
- Engage students in reading increasing amounts of text.
- Give students opportunities to think, talk, and write about what they read.

#### Supporting ELs with Reading Difficulties in Grades 2–5

- Maintain a focus on developing academic language and oral language proficiency throughout all reading instruction. For instance, teachers can systematically build academic language during foundational reading skills practice by focusing on words and text within an academic topic and spending time on word meaning, applying background knowledge, and building new knowledge.

- Teach foundational phonics and word analysis skills explicitly and provide opportunities for distributed practice (i.e., provide practice opportunities over a long period of time).
- Intensify instruction for students with persistent word reading difficulties by reducing group size, increasing instructional time, aligning instruction closely to student needs, tracking progress more frequently, and assigning teachers with the greatest expertise to provide instruction.
- Develop peer-assisted routines to support reading fluency and comprehension (partner reading with summarizing).
- Teach students to simultaneously monitor their understanding of vocabulary and text comprehension using the “click and clunk” strategy shown in Figure 1 (Capin & Vaughn, 2017).
- Teach comprehension strategies that can be applied before, during, and after reading explicitly (such as the Collaborative Strategic Reading [CSR; Klingner, Vaughn, Dimino, Schumm, & Bryant, 2001] strategies shown in Figure 1).
- Use structured cooperative learning techniques in which each student is assigned a specific role and responsibility that allows each student to develop oral language skills and practice taught comprehension strategies.

### Supporting ELs with Reading Difficulties in the Secondary Grades

- Engage students in intensive vocabulary instruction using semantic maps focused on high-utility words to build content knowledge (see Figure 2 for an example).
- Build background knowledge and support reading comprehension by presenting students with brief, engaging videos (3-5 minutes) related to the content topic before text reading and introducing a comprehension question that clarifies the purpose for reading the text.
- Use graphic organizers and other visual tools strategically to help students make connections between important concepts.
- Teach students to actively apply reading comprehension strategies (e.g., self-question, summarizing, and comprehension monitoring).
- Incorporate team-based learning approaches that encourage students to read independently and then work with peers to discuss concepts in text and solve problems.
- Provide language supports, such as sentence and paragraph starters, to facilitate academic writing.
- Integrate intensive, small-group word reading interventions for students with word reading and fluency difficulties.

*Continued on page 30*

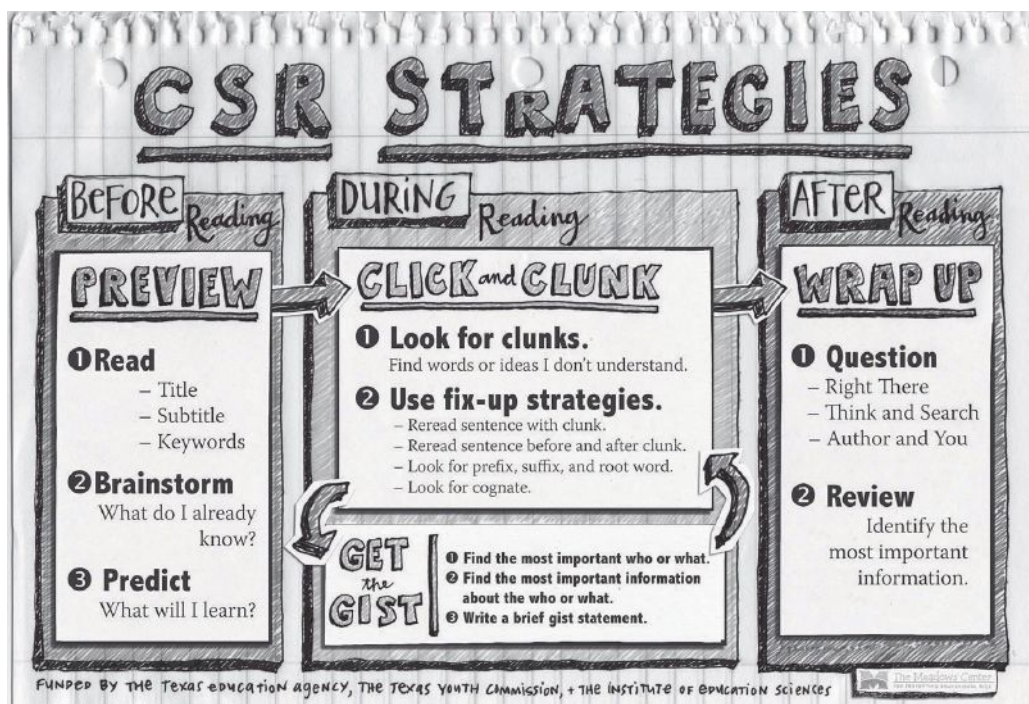


Figure 1. Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) comprehension strategies. Reprinted with permission from the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk (2009). CSR Strategies. Austin, TX. Janette Klingner and Sharon Vaughn.

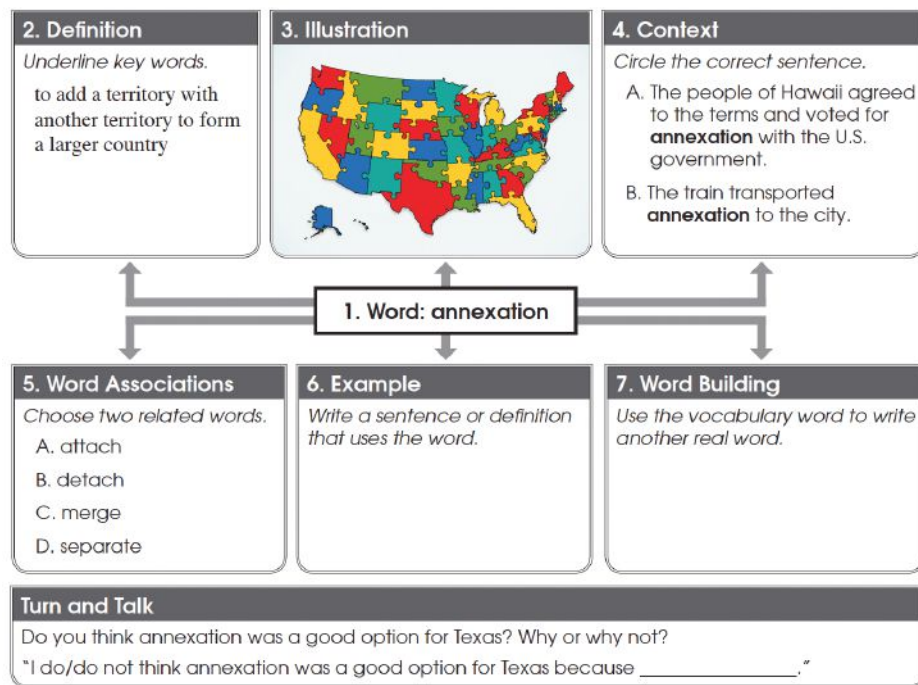


Figure 2. Example of a semantic map for use during vocabulary instruction (Adapted from Simmons et al., 2010).

### Taking A Proactive Approach

Recognizing and treating students with dyslexia who are also ELs is a difficult task for novice and experienced teachers alike. Some educators are convinced that if they wait long enough, students will “catch on” to reading and readily compensate for any of the challenges that they display in early reading. Unfortunately, this way of thinking has placed many students at risk for experiencing significant reading problems much longer than necessary. The important question to consider is, do we want to wait to provide the customized instruction and risk that these students develop significant deficits in reading while their reading difficulties are untreated? Or, would we rather provide the customized instruction to students at-risk for reading disabilities knowing that for a few students waiting might have worked?

We argue that it is more productive to err on the side providing effective instruction to all students until they are on track in reading. We encourage teachers to recognize difficulties with phonological awareness, word reading, and spelling early and to work closely with experts in dyslexia and reading instruction for students with disabilities to provide the necessary customized instruction. Moreover, ELs with reading difficulties and dyslexia have different language challenges from most native English speakers. Thus, it is necessary for educators to employ evidence-based instructional practices that are validated with this particularly vulnerable population. Until relatively recently, making these decisions based on research evidence had been extremely difficult because there was so little research with ELs with reading difficulties. However, within the last 15 years there has been an increase in high-quality studies, syntheses, and meta-analyses investigating the effects

of academic interventions for ELs (e.g., Hall et al., 2017).

Despite this progress, the task facing Patricia Gonzalez and other teachers of ELs who are responsible for addressing the underdeveloped English language and reading proficiencies of ELs with reading difficulties remains considerable, especially in light of the high expectations set forth in progressive state standards. Fortunately, teachers with expertise in the science of teaching reading will likely have strong familiarity with many of the practices recommended for ELs with reading difficulties. We believe those expert teachers who err on the side of providing early interventions to ELs exhibiting risk for reading difficulties and implement targeted interventions that simultaneously address the language proficiency and reading using practices described in this article will be most likely to maximize the learning of ELs with reading difficulties.

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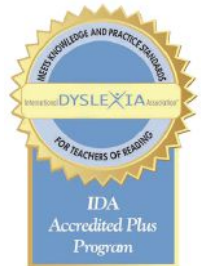
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# Becoming More Culturally Competent Educators

by Endia J. Lindo and Okyoung J. Lim

## What Is Cultural Competence?

Cultural competence is generally defined as the attitudes, behaviors, practices, and values held by individuals, programs, organizations, or systems which empowers them to effectively engage cross-culturally. Applied to teaching, cultural competence refers to “the ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than our own” (Diller & Moule, 2005, p.19). The ability to teach cross-culturally requires engagement in an ongoing process of reflection, knowledge acquisition, and skill development. Culturally competent individuals, schools, and systems value diversity, are self-aware of their culture, are knowledgeable about the nature of cultural interactions, and work to institutionalize this knowledge and adapt to the needs of their populations’ diversity (National Education Association [NEA], 2008).

## Why Is It Important?

In the United States the terms culture, race, and ethnicity are often used interchangeably (Williams & Deutsch, 2016). However, it is important to distinguish between these concepts, as each has different bearings on learning, development, and achievement in school. Culture is defined as a set of learned norms, values, and beliefs that shapes the way one lives and views the world. Although related, culture is distinct from ethnicity and race. Ethnicity signifies one’s affiliation to a social group with common cultural traditions, while race refers to socially constructed divisions among people based on their distinct physical characteristics. For example, an individual who recently immigrated to the U.S. from Panama and a third-generation Panamanian immigrant who grew up in California may both identify with the ethnic label of Latino or Latina, but may have different cultural beliefs and norms and possibly different racial categories (e.g., one is categorized as White and the other Black).

In addition to the concepts of culture, ethnicity, and race being interconnected, they are also heavily associated with access to resources and socioeconomic status. Individuals from racial, ethnic, and cultural minority groups disproportionately face interpersonal and institutional discrimination, and live in poverty and low-income communities; all factors which can hamper the educational opportunities of children in these groups (Williams & Deutsch, 2016).

With regard to cultural competence, culture shapes the manner in which teaching and learning occurs as both the teacher and students bring their own cultural norms and beliefs to their interactions. Teachers’ cultural beliefs and assumptions not only influence their interactions with students, but also

shape the class culture because they are embedded in the practices and activities employed in the classroom (e.g., class management procedures, instructional strategies, evaluation of students, and enrichment/curriculum enhancement choices). Disconnects between the teachers’ and students’ cultural norms can lead teachers to perceive student language patterns or behaviors as inappropriate or deficient, resulting in a lowering of expectations, interpersonal engagement, and overall student outcomes (Gay, 2010; Siwatu, 2011). Cultural differences between students and teachers have also been proposed as one of the primary reasons for the misrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in special education (Ford, 2012). These are just a few reasons why the cultural gap between the U.S. student population and the teachers who serve them has been an ongoing cause for concern.

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*In many U.S. classrooms, the potential for cultural gaps between teachers and their students is significant. Therefore, cultural competence is an essential skill for today’s teachers.*

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Despite recent increases in the diversity of the teaching force in the U.S., the Brookings Institute estimates that the cultural gap between teachers and students will remain long past 2060, if current trends persist (Hansen & Quintero, 2019). Approximately 77% of teachers in U.S. public schools identify as White, while over half (53%) of students in public school systems are from CLD backgrounds. The discrepancy is even larger when you compare the most currently available demographics of special education teachers (81% White, 86% female; Data U.S.A., 2019) to students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (49% White, 33% female) and specifically students receiving services for a learning disability (43.5% White, 38% female; McFarland et al., 2019). Thus, in many U.S. classrooms, the potential for cultural gaps between teachers and their students is significant. Therefore, cultural competence is an essential skill for today’s teachers.

Acknowledging cultural factors influence teachers’ interactions, behaviors, and instructional practices, many researchers emphasize the importance of teachers’ ability to teach CLD

*Continued on page 34*

## Abbreviations

CAP: Cultural self-study, Acquiring cultural knowledge, and Putting knowledge to practice

CLD: Culturally and linguistically diverse



students effectively and successfully (Chu, 2011; Orosco & O'Connor, 2014). Unfortunately, findings from the Council for Exceptional Children's State of Special Education Profession Survey (2016-2019) note that only 43% of special education teachers report high levels of competence working with students from different socioeconomic levels, and even fewer report feeling competent working with families of a different racial/ethnic (37%) or language (22%) background (Bogdan, Bost, Fowler, & Coleman, 2019). These data, along with longstanding achievement gaps between different student groups, highlight the significant work that needs to be done to better prepare the workforce (both pre-service and practicing teachers) to competently engage and implement practices that target the needs of CLD learners.

### How Is Cultural Competence Developed?

A teacher who is culturally competent knows how to integrate students' culture and language in the teaching and learning process, respect their culture, reinforce their cultural identity, and use instructional strategies that meet students' cultural and linguistic needs (Chu, 2011; Siwatu, 2011). Ladson-Billings (1995) noted culturally responsive teaching requires teachers who facilitate the a) maintenance of positive perspectives on parents and families; b) communication of high

expectations; c) learning within the context of culture; d) provision of student-centered and culturally mediated instruction; and e) reshaping of the curriculum and learning environment.

In order to enhance one's cultural competence, teachers need to begin by reflecting on their own attitudes and dispositions regarding their own culture and other cultures and how those attitudes and dispositions inform their teaching. Teachers need to not only intentionally attend to their students' academic achievement, but also develop awareness of and sensitivity to culture as it is related to self and others and engage in critical analysis of systems and societal norms. Figure 1 depicts the key dimensions of cultural competence—institutional, personal, and instructional—and notes the continuum of stages in which individuals experience intercultural relations (i.e., their intercultural sensitivity).

Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (2017) notes that individuals develop their ability to communicate adeptly across culture on a spectrum from ethnocentrism (experiencing one's own culture as central to reality) to ethnorelativism (recognizing one's own cultural experience as one of many viable realities). Across this continuum, individuals experience intercultural relations in stages ranging from Denial to Integration. See Figure 2 for a description of each stage.

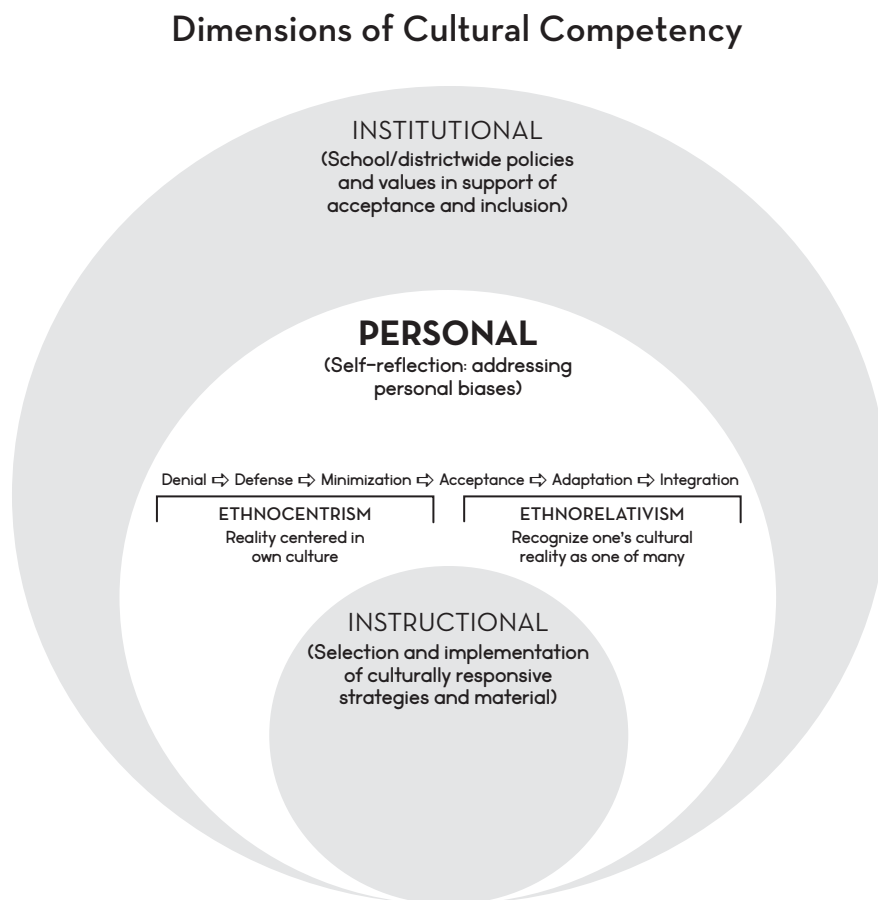
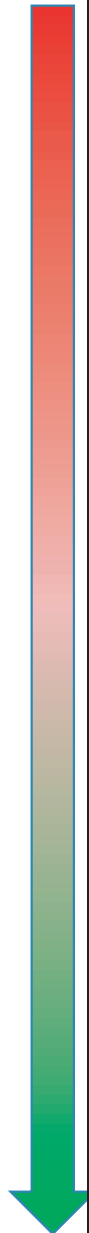


Figure 1. Dimensions of Cultural Competence and Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity



Stage	Description
Denial	One's culture is the only true reality. Cultural differences not experienced. Inability to distinguish between cultural groups ( <i>other</i> = <i>'foreigner'</i> )
Desired Action: Encourage simple awareness that other cultures exist. (e.g., Engage activities that highlight cultural experiences)	
Defense (or Reversal)	One's culture is the superior/ 'evolved' culture. <i>"Learn the language or leave"</i> mindset. [Reversal-one adopts a culture and views as superior their own; "going native" ( <i>"Folks are so sophisticated here, not like at home."</i> )]  Hold onto and reference negative stereotypes. Work to actively remove or exclude cultural difference.
Desired Action: Encourage recognition of common humanity of other cultures. (e.g., Ropes course or other activities designed to create mutual dependence recommended.)	
Minimization	See one's own cultural feature as universal. Everyone is equal; Other cultures trivialized or romanticized. <i>"I don't see color, we are all the same."</i> <i>"melting pot"</i>  Assumption that all activities (instructional styles, methods of communication, etc.) apply equally. Insistence on correcting others cultural behavior to match one's own expectations.
Desired Action: Build one's cultural self-awareness (e.g., Complete self-study questionnaire; activities that encourage the examination of cultural categories/frameworks within one's culture, values and beliefs.)	
Acceptance	Recognize one's own cultural identity; accepting of others (may not agree). Respectful of and curious about other cultures.  <i>"Diverse perspectives lead to creativity, but let's not stray from our core values."</i>
Desired Action: Refined analysis of cultural contrasts and self-awareness.	
Adaptation	Experience with other cultures which yields broader perceptions/empathy and behavior appropriate for that culture. Ability to see the world from the perspectives of other cultures and make intentional change in behavior accordingly. <i>"salad bowl"</i>  <i>"I should allow for more space between us; while I'm comfortable being this close is perceived as rude in his culture."</i>
Desired Action: Widen and deepen ability to make cultural shifts; strive to enhance problem-solving competency, empathy and interpersonal interaction.	
Integration	One has a broader experience which includes multiple cultural points of views. Ability to maneuver across cultures and shift cultural perspectives.
Desired Action: Though rarely achieved, those that do can serve as cultural mediators, serving as a bridge between cultural groups.	

Figure 2. Stages of Intercultural Sensitivity

### Cultural Competence in Practice

The following scenario depicts the journey of a hypothetical teacher named Ms. Walker to becoming culturally competent.

*Ms. Walker, who is White, grew up in a small town in the Midwest where 98% of students were White; student demographics were similar during her teacher training program and prior special education teaching placement. She has now transferred to an urban school district where student demographics are 50% Hispanic, 35% Black, 10% White, and 5% Other. Of the 30 students on Ms. Walker's caseload, 16 are receiving English language supports in addition to special education services, 8 are*

*receiving supports for dyslexia and the remaining 6 are diagnosed with a variety of high-incidence disabilities. When she taught in her hometown, Ms. Walker had wonderful relations with her students and their families, and her students made appropriate progress toward their Individualized Education Plan goals. This year has not gone as well. She has had only limited communication with the majority of her students' families and over half of her students failed to make adequate progress on their goals. Ms. Walker has been reflecting on her practice and student outcomes and has concluded that her students*

*Continued on page 36*

*have different linguistic and cultural needs than her prior setting and she will need to work to ensure she is culturally competent and engaging culturally responsive practices to diversify and adequately address her students' needs.*

### Steps to Becoming Culturally Competent

Ms. Walker was encouraged by a colleague to adopt the practice of reflecting on and engaging her instructional practice using three key steps, referred to as CAP: 1) Cultural self-study, 2) Acquiring cultural knowledge, and 3) Putting knowledge to practice (Diaz-Rico, 2017; Pusey, 2019).

**Step 1: Cultural self-study.** The first step for Ms. Walker is to evaluate her cultural identity using cultural self-study (See Figure 3 for sample questions). Exploring the importance of one's own upbringing and how it is shaped by culture makes it easier to better understand how others have been formed by their upbringing and culture. The baseline set from cultural self-study allows one to compare/contrast, understand, and even appreciate other cultures that are different from one's own. Based on the results from the cultural self-study, which included completing an intercultural competence inventory, Ms. Walker determined she was at "Minimization" on the Intercultural Sensitivity continuum (Figure 1).

**Step 2: Acquiring cultural knowledge.** Teachers should spend some time learning about the cultures represented in their classrooms, respect students' values, make connections, and view differences as assets not deficits, as well as better understand the influence of cultures and languages on learning

and disabilities (See Table 1 for additional resources on cultural competence). Understanding different behavioral, communication, and learning patterns from different cultures is helpful in identifying students' needs and providing culturally responsive services connected to their home and community practices (Orosco & O'Connor, 2014).

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*Building cultural competence is an active process that happens over time as teachers grow in their practice, encounter different students, and engage in life both inside and outside of the school building.*

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Ms. Walker made an effort to research her students' cultural traits, languages, and social customs to minimize her implicit biases and stereotypes. She realized that she may have been misinterpreting behaviors and underestimating the academic capability of her students from different cultures, and that these actions could affect their academic success in class (Staats, Capatosto, Tenney, & Mamo, 2017). Acquiring this cultural knowledge is a critical step to improving Ms. Walker's intercultural sensitivity. However, culturally competent teachers must be equipped with both knowledge and skills to inform their practice.

Steps	Activity
<u>C</u> ultural self-study	<p>Sample Self-study questions: (Diaz-Rico, 2017)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> What symbols or traditions did you participate in that derived from your ethnic group?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> What was your experience with ethnic diversity? What were your first images of race or color?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> What contact do you have with people of dissimilar racial or ethnic backgrounds? How would you characterize your desire to learn more about people from dissimilar racial or ethnic backgrounds?</li> </ul>
<u>A</u> cquire Cultural Knowledge	<p>Develop an understanding of cultures, cultural differences, and awareness of stereotypes and biases. Ask what do I . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>know</b> (e.g., sources of diversity/backgrounds of class)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>notice</b> about aspects of students' culture and personalities</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>feel</b> (reflect on own behaviors and biases)</li> </ul>
<u>P</u> ut Knowledge to Praxis	<p>Consider what you . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>say</b> (avoid reinforcing stereotypes, judgments)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>use</b> (employing lessons and content that reflect the diversity of experiences)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>teach</b> (set high expectations, learn about your students as individuals, acknowledge and honor the various cultural backgrounds in class; make curriculum meaningful/serve as connection to home experience.)</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right;">Adapted from Pusey (2019)</p>

Figure 3. Steps to Becoming Culturally Competent



**TABLE 1. Resources Supporting the Development of Cultural Competence**

CEEDAR Center Course Enhancement Module: Culturally Relevant Education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="https://cedar.education.ufl.edu/cems/culturally-relevant-education/">https://cedar.education.ufl.edu/cems/culturally-relevant-education/</a></li> </ul>
Intercultural Development Research Institute: Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="https://www.idrinstitute.org/resources/bennetts-developmental-model-intercultural-sensitivity-dmis/">https://www.idrinstitute.org/resources/bennetts-developmental-model-intercultural-sensitivity-dmis/</a></li> </ul>
IRIS Center Diversity Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/resources/iris-resource-locator/">https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/resources/iris-resource-locator/</a></li> <li><a href="http://www.nea.org/tools/30402.htm">http://www.nea.org/tools/30402.htm</a></li> <li><a href="http://www.niusileadscape.org/docs/FINAL_PRODUCTS/NCCRESt/practitioner_briefs/%95%20TEMPLATE/DRAFTS/AUTHOR%20revisions/annablis%20pracbrief%20templates/Teacher_Ed_Brief_highres.pdf">http://www.niusileadscape.org/docs/FINAL_PRODUCTS/NCCRESt/practitioner_briefs/%95%20TEMPLATE/DRAFTS/AUTHOR%20revisions/annablis%20pracbrief%20templates/Teacher_Ed_Brief_highres.pdf</a></li> <li><a href="http://www.niusileadscape.org/docs/FINAL_PRODUCTS/NIUSI/toolkit_cd/4%20%20Implementing%20Change/OnPoints/OP_cultural_identity.pdf">http://www.niusileadscape.org/docs/FINAL_PRODUCTS/NIUSI/toolkit_cd/4%20%20Implementing%20Change/OnPoints/OP_cultural_identity.pdf</a></li> <li><a href="https://research.steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/uploads/005/121/Culturally%20Responsive%20Classroom%20Mgmt%20Strat2.pdf">https://research.steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/uploads/005/121/Culturally%20Responsive%20Classroom%20Mgmt%20Strat2.pdf</a></li> <li><a href="http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol6/616-cox.aspx">http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol6/616-cox.aspx</a></li> </ul>
NEA Teacher Leadership Institute's Foundational Leadership Competencies: Diversity, Equity, and Cultural Competence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="http://www.teacherleadershipinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Cultural-Proficiency-Framework.pdf">http://www.teacherleadershipinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Cultural-Proficiency-Framework.pdf</a></li> <li><a href="https://www.teacherleadershipinstitute.org/competencies/foundational-leadership-competencies-diversity-equity-and-cultural-competence/">https://www.teacherleadershipinstitute.org/competencies/foundational-leadership-competencies-diversity-equity-and-cultural-competence/</a></li> </ul>
Teaching Tolerance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/instruction">https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/instruction</a></li> </ul>

**Step 3: Put knowledge to practice.** Culturally responsive teaching includes application of skills, strategies, and pedagogical practices to successfully work with students from diverse backgrounds (Gay, 2010). Ms. Walker, now more self-reflective regarding her culture and perceptions of other cultures, worked to learn more about the cultural experiences of her students and set out to identify and implement practices which were appropriate for the diverse student body she serves. She learned she should work to weave her students' cultural and linguistic experiences into curriculum and class activities to aid in making activities more meaningful to her students. Specifically, Ms. Walker:

- developed lessons to build on students' home and cultural experiences and make explicit connections with their prior learning;
- engaged interactive teaching approaches such as reciprocal teaching and cooperative learning groups (McAllum, 2014; Orosco & O'Connor, 2014), which encouraged important instructional components (e.g., building background, modeling, scaffolding, higher-order thinking skills) to promote the academic and linguistic growth of her students; and
- applied principals of Universal Design for Learning (Kieran & Anderson, 2019) including incorporating multiple means of representation of content (e.g., visuals, manipulatives), expression of skill development and mastery (e.g., oral response/presentation, drawing) and engagement of content (e.g., various forms of instructional grouping, peer tutoring).

Having employed CAP to reflect on her practice beyond the curriculum, Ms. Walker enhanced her cultural competence.

As a result, she found it much easier to connect with her students and their families and saw her students increase levels of engagement and academic performance in response to her more culturally responsive practice.

### An Ongoing Process

As can be seen from Ms. Walker's journey, building cultural competence is an active process that happens over time as teachers grow in their practice, encounter different students, and engage in life both inside and outside of the school building. Reflecting on one's self and practice are critical components to developing as a culturally competent teacher. Without consciously thinking about one's own cultural values, beliefs, social customs, stereotypes, and biases, it is difficult to relate to those from other cultures. Culturally competent teachers understand the role culture plays in learning, are better able to match their practice to the needs of their students, and connect with their students' families (NEA, 2008). Therefore, it is critical for teachers and other school-based professionals to engage in reflective practice and continuously work toward becoming culturally competent to create environments for diverse student populations that are culturally responsive, provide culturally relevant teaching, and adopt culturally sustaining pedagogy.

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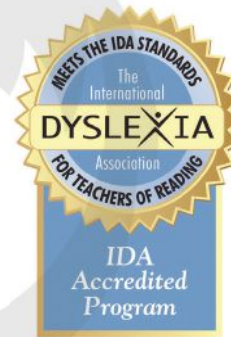
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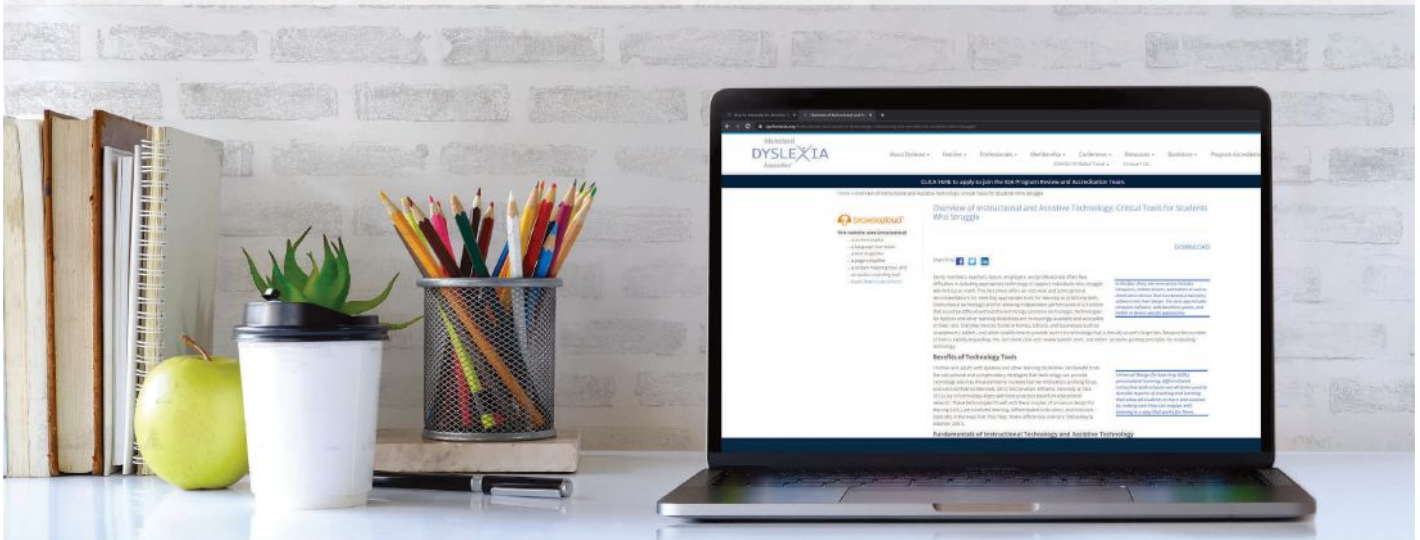
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# Lessons Learned in Building School and Community Partnerships to Improve Reading Achievement Challenges and Opportunities

by Kim Day, Josh Clark, Jennifer Barton Burch, and Leslie Evans Hodges

The Schenck School in Atlanta, Georgia, was founded in 1959 by David Schenck, an Orton-Gillingham trained educator, to serve students with dyslexia. The school also provided tutoring services and training courses in neighboring independent and public schools. Building upon those experiences, in 2013 the school launched a non-profit, The Dyslexia Resource (TDR), to share its reading expertise. TDR's mission is to empower communities to serve dyslexic learners by providing 1) teacher training in The Schenck School's reading model, 2) remediation services for students struggling with reading, spelling, and writing, and 3) partnerships to provide advocacy for individuals with dyslexia, support teacher development, and/or provide targeted remediation within schools.

With the advent of TDR, the school was poised to develop partnerships to have a greater impact across the metro Atlanta area. Questions arose around the type of work we wanted to accomplish. Would we focus on teacher training and direct services only for students identified with dyslexia or other reading disabilities (RD), similar to our school program? Or would we provide teacher training and services for any students struggling to read? We chose the latter, considering only 30% of Atlanta's fourth-grade students scored at or above the Proficient level on the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), with students of color scoring below their White peers by almost 50% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). These scores reflected little progress for Atlanta's students, as the 2017 NAEP scores were not significantly different from the 2015 or 2013 scores. Similarly, Atlanta's students did not fare much better on the end-of-year state exam (Georgia Milestones Test of English Language Arts) with Atlanta Public Schools (APS) reporting only 31.9% of students in grades 3–8 scoring at or above proficiency in 2017, 33.3% in 2018, and 36.9% in 2019 (see APS Insights at <https://apsinsights.org/>).

Unfortunately, these results are comparable to other urban areas across the United States. Atlanta has many students growing up in high-poverty neighborhoods who struggle to learn to read, including many Black students whose families have experienced structural and institutionalized barriers to prosperity for generations (Eaton, 2011; Sharkey & Elwert, 2011; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). APS is attempting to address educational disparities, which are often related to where families live in Atlanta. In 2014, APS initiated a Turnaround Strategy to

improve the educational outcomes for students living in its poorest neighborhoods.

## Lessons Learned

In January 2018, TDR began developing a model for collaboration with low-performing schools in APS. Although only a short period of time, our journey has provided valuable lessons on partnering with schools and districts to support reading achievement.

**Lesson 1: Aligning with the school's and/or district's existing priorities and partners is important to integrating the work into everyday practice.** Increasingly, districts and states are implementing what are commonly referred to as “turnaround” programs to support chronically low-performing schools. In these contexts, schools and districts are often provided with additional resources to work with external partners to implement services to improve student outcomes. Nevertheless, it can be overwhelming and create barriers to supporting teachers and staff. Therefore, we work to align with existing initiatives in schools, so that our support provides “added value” to addressing their needs. From the beginning, we have coordinated our efforts to draw on the expertise of both organizations. Moreover, we meet regularly with school staff so that our efforts are not perceived to be disconnected from the school.

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*Our approach to partnership is phased, so that supports can be delivered in a manner that is responsive to the needs of the school and district.*

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**Lesson 2: Collaborative planning and early successes matter to immediate and continued success.** Our approach to partnership is phased, so that supports can be delivered in a manner that is responsive to the needs of the school and district. The planning phase is devoted to securing necessary approvals, introducing partners to the teachers, students, and families, and establishing a fund-raising strategy for the duration of the partnership. In some cases, the planning phase might also include direct service delivery to students.

## Abbreviations

APS: Atlanta Public Schools  
MAP: Measures of Academic Progress  
NAEP: National Assessment of Educational Progress

RD: Reading disabilities  
TDR: The Dyslexia Resource

**Lesson 3: Relationships with teachers and school staff are critically important.** The TDR remediation specialists rely on the faculty's expertise at every step. Teachers and staff provide feedback on students' performance on reading tasks, share informal reading data, and collaborate in forming intervention groups. They also help with logistical issues such as scheduling intervention groups, space, and understanding school procedures. We find teachers' insights into which students work best together have a profound impact on students' success. We realize that by acknowledging their school and student expertise, teachers and staff are more welcoming of our support.

**Lesson 4: Use the school's measures to demonstrate progress and success.** Schools and districts often have multiple measures that are used (and sometimes mandated) to monitor student progress and achievement. These measures are not designed to inform intensive intervention but rather to determine whether or not students meet grade-level standards. Therefore, schools are challenged to find measures that meet multiple requirements for screening, progress monitoring, and diagnostic decision-making, while also aligning with curriculum and standards. We've learned that using schools' measures is critical to preserving time for instruction and also for communicating outcomes to partner teachers and leaders.

For example, an initial 28 students were selected for remediation during the planning phase at one of our partner schools based on their performance on the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress (MAP; Thum & Hauser, 2015) and teacher and/or instructional coach recommendation. MAP, a computer adaptive reading and math assessment, is administered three times a year to monitor academic growth. Students recommended for intervention scored between the 25th and 50th percentile on the mid-year administration of the MAP reading test (school year 2017–2018). After students were selected, TDR staff used additional measures to target intervention and establish groups (e.g., the TOWRE-2 [Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 2012]; informal measures of real and nonword reading, reading fluency, and comprehension). Administering these measures reduced the burden on teachers and school staff and informed our intervention. Importantly, it also affirmed the school's and teachers' professional practices and created opportunities to support data-based decision-making to inform reading instruction throughout the school.

**Lesson 5: In neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, many students may face extreme trauma, so forming caring and trusting relationships is critical to their academic success.** Prior to beginning intervention in the planning phase, remediation specialists and school staff met to discuss research on trauma-informed education (e.g., Chafouleas, Johnson, Overstreet, & Santos, 2016). Together, we considered positive supports already in place. It was imperative for the remediation specialists to initially build rapport with students in order to create an environment where students felt secure. Remediation specialists also worked with the school's staff to replicate classroom expectations during remediation sessions and to mimic the supports students were familiar with from their classrooms.

**Lesson 6: Building cultural competence is imperative and a continuous journey for practitioners seeking to support**

**educational outcomes for diverse and disadvantaged learners.** Like many teachers and clinicians in independent schools that serve students with disabilities, the TDR remediation specialists had little experience working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners or learners growing up in poverty. Over time, we've learned that our staff needs support to build their own cultural competence (Diller & Moule, 2005). Building cultural competence can be uncomfortable, as it requires not only reflection upon one's own culture, attitudes, dispositions, and biases, but also awareness of and response to systems and societal norms that have created the conditions we are encountering in our partner schools. It also requires self-discipline, tempering an eagerness to share the reading expertise of The Schenck School with patience and deliberation. Ultimately, the lesson we have learned and continue to learn is that our best efforts will not be realized if our approach to engaging with teachers, students, and families is not culturally affirming and sensitive to their needs.

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*We have learned and continue to learn that our best efforts will not be realized if our approach to engaging with teachers, students, and families is not culturally affirming and sensitive to their needs.*

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**Lesson 7: Achieving our goal of helping as many struggling readers as possible will require modifications to our typical approach to intervention.** In our partner schools, large numbers of students need intensive reading instruction, both to remediate current poor performance and to prevent future reading difficulty. This demand presents significant staffing issues, as small group and individualized instruction for only a handful of students will not result in improved reading achievement across the school. If we are going to make a significant impact in reading achievement, we know we need to increase the number of students in small groups while continuing to provide intensive remediation. Doing so required some "outside the box" thinking on our part, as we turned to new technology-based tools. We wanted to be able to work more efficiently with more and larger groups of students. Therefore, we incorporated an iPad application developed by the Hill Learning Center (Hill Learning System, 2017) that generates individualized word lists and controlled text for use with phonics, word recognition, and fluency instruction.

### **Promising Results, Sobering Realities, and More Lessons to Learn**

Armed with the knowledge gained from these lessons, TDR has begun to provide greater support to low-performing schools. For example, in one of our partner schools, with the hiring of one additional remediation specialist and the use of the iPad application, the number of students served increased to approximately 100. The school and our partners asked that we track student outcomes on measures used by the school

*Continued on page 42*

and district: the MAP and/or the state-mandated Georgia Milestones test (for students in grades 3 and 4). Baseline performance from the fall MAP assessment, as well as performance with students who received intervention during the planning phase, helped determine which students would receive TDR remediation in grades 1–4. Our team conducted preassessments on students whose baseline reading score on the MAP fell between approximately the 10th and 30th percentiles using the same informal measures used during the planning phase. We worked with the school’s instructional coaches and teachers to establish small groups with identified students in grades 1–4. Our average dosage was 25 hours (11 hours in fall, 14 hours in spring). This equates to an average of 37 sessions during the 2018–19 school year.

Remediation sessions were conducted at a 1:3 teacher to student ratio, lasted 40 minutes, and occurred twice a week. A typical session had four components: phonemic awareness, decoding, encoding, and comprehension and vocabulary. Each component used the essential elements of the Orton-Gillingham approach: multisensory techniques (visual, auditory, kinesthetic/tactile), direct and explicit teaching, and sequential lessons (i.e., based on the previous lesson’s successes and an analysis of errors; Sayeski, Earle, Davis & Calamari, 2019).

Students receiving TDR remediation demonstrated improved reading skills on the MAP Reading Test. Students showed gains

when comparing percentile scores from fall 2018 to spring 2019 (see Figure 1). As expected, younger students tended to demonstrate greater gains over the course of a school year, as did students who began the year performing more poorly. The MAP Reading Test also provides Lexile scores for students based on their performance (see Figure 2). A Lexile score is a measure of both a child’s reading ability and the difficulty of a text (Clark, 2019), and can be compared to benchmarks established as grade-level Lexile scores. For example, a Lexile score of 520L indicates grade-level reading for third grade, based on criteria established by the Georgia Department of Education (*ga DOE.org*). Third grade is a critical year in Georgia because it is the first year students take the state-mandated Georgia Milestones test. Although the mean Lexile of third graders who received TDR remediation was below grade level, the third graders’ average Lexile score increased from 140L (beginning of first-grade level) to 438L (end of second-grade level). This equates to approximately two years of reading growth in just one year for those students who received TDR remediation.

All in all, these results are promising and suggest our partnership is helping to improve reading achievement. However, we would be remiss if we did not note that gains in student performance were small as many students need continued remediation, especially those in the upper grades. At the end of the school year, the entire partnership team met to discuss

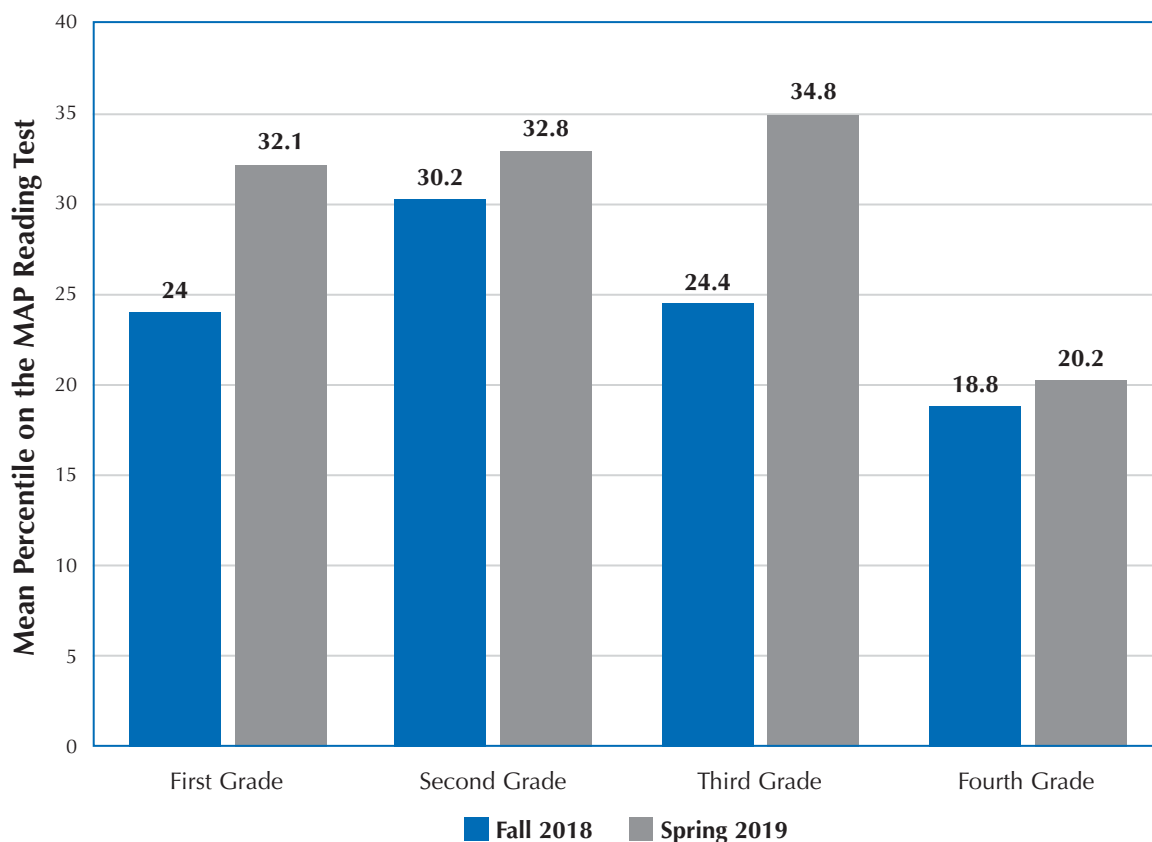


Figure 1. Mean Percentile of MAP Reading Test for Remediation Students. For all grades, the mean percentile on the MAP Reading Test increased from Fall 2018 to Spring 2019 for students receiving TDR remediation services.



lessons learned and to begin planning for the next year. Although students receiving the TDR remediation demonstrated growth in reading, many still ended the school year below grade level as measured by the MAP. Together, we decided on changes with the goal of improving reading skills for students receiving the TDR remediation and their peers who continue to struggle with reading.

**Lesson 8: Balancing time for assessment and intervention is difficult but necessary to produce gains in achievement.**

TDR now works with students earlier in the school year to increase instructional time with students. Preassessments for both the school and TDR are administered within the same assessment window and remediation groups established approximately four weeks earlier. The previous year's end-of-year tests are used to help select any new students for TDR remediation. Finally, in an attempt to determine the optimal dosage for getting struggling students to reading on grade level, we have decided to "double-dose" a group of third graders who have struggled to make gains with reading (i.e., see second grade in Figure 1). This group will receive 40-minute remediation sessions four times per week. Selected students in grades 4 and 5 who continue to fall below grade level (i.e., scores below the 20th percentile) will receive additional literacy instruction through the school's Tier 3 literacy centers and/or Early Intervention Program.

**Lesson 9: Teachers and school staff require continuous professional learning that aligns with the school's curriculum to improve reading outcomes for struggling learners.** We have

learned that alignment is important for instructional consistency, and that teachers and school staff may need support to do so in a manner that doesn't feel disconnected or additive. Therefore, TDR provided professional learning sessions for grade-level teams during the first year and will continue to do so. These sessions are delivered as part of the school's existing professional learning communities, and include sharing instructional strategies and content and reviewing student data with classroom teachers. TDR remediation specialists also worked with instructional coaches over the summer to align the school's scope and sequence for reading instruction and TDR's remediation framework. Thus, in subsequent years of the partnership, students will receive similar information and strategies from classroom teachers and TDR remediation specialists, further reinforcing learning across the classroom and remediation sessions.

**Lesson 10: Scale.** Perhaps the greatest challenge TDR faces is scaling the partnership model and remediation program. Time is a significant factor in each of the lessons we've learned: relationships take time, assessment takes time, instruction takes time, professional learning takes time. Change takes time. We have also learned that schools differ, and we may need to adapt remediation lessons to accommodate the needs of their students. Thus, as we begin to meet with leadership staff of new partner schools, we consider these lessons learned. We know it will take time and intentionality to develop trusting relationships that will ultimately result in improved student

*Continued on page 44*

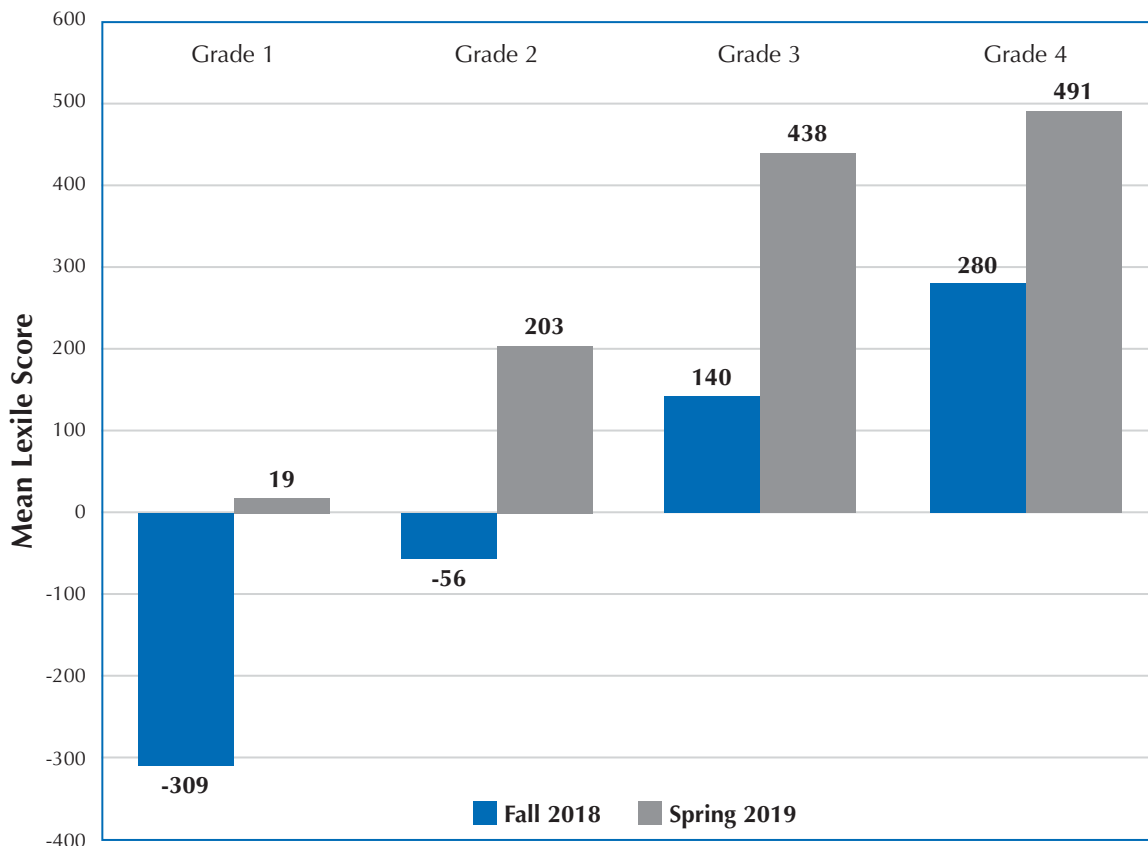


Figure 2. Mean MAP Lexile Score for Remediation Students. For all grades, the mean Lexile increased from Fall 2018 to Spring 2019 for students receiving TDR remediation services.

achievement. Although the challenges are great, the opportunities to partner with teachers and leaders across the city are unprecedented. Together, we will help ensure that all our children are reading and succeeding.

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# Parents as Advocates: My Family's Journey and the National Association for the Education of African American Children with Learning Differences

by Nancy R. Tidwell

Every year parents across the nation send their children to school with the belief that the public or even private schools with prestigious reputations will be able to meet the individual needs of students enrolled. My first child started kindergarten in our neighborhood school. I *trusted* that the teachers who taught my children would know “how” to teach them or at least be able to identify any special needs they might have. That trust was lost by the time my youngest of four children reached second grade.

At year end, my youngest son's teacher sent home a note saying that he was “slipping back into his bad habits of not working to his potential again.” She suggested that he repeat the second grade. She further stated, “he is capable of doing the work when he wants to, but he is immature and does not want to do what is required of him.” Funny thing, we spent night after night going over his spelling words, his math facts, and so on, and by the time we finished he knew the correct answers. It was when he went to school the next day that he failed the test.

This inconsistency in performance led me to believe that there was something wrong—something that no one had been able to explain. He was tested first by the school psychologist who determined that his problems did not result from a “learning disability but rather from poor attention and organizational skills.” What the school didn't know was that this was the same child who rushed home from school on grade report day, unlike his siblings, to see what he got on his grade card because he *knew* that he was working hard. Much to his disappointment, his grades were most often failing marks.

Recommendations were made to his teacher with regard to his instruction, but she absolutely refused to do anything different because there were so many other children in the classroom. Individual instruction was simply not possible. So, we moved my son to a Montessori school where he was guaranteed more individualized attention.

It was there that his self-esteem and academic progress began to improve. His teacher was also the mother of a physically handicapped child in the same classroom. I believe that it was her sensitivity to the needs of the individual child that helped my son so much that year. Yet, it was clear that he was far from over the struggle in learning, so we had him tested by a private psychologist. Some of the wording in that report will be forever engrained in my mind:

*“There is expressed some jealousy of his siblings, for example of their overnights with friends. As well, if he could trade places, he would want to do so with his big brother or sister, possibly because of the easier time they have academically.*

*“In terms of peers, he says that he has a lot of friends and that people think that he is nice. He talks about other people liking him and that he is happy with people. And yet he acknowledges, at one point, that he is sad when he has no one to play with or that he interferes with other children's games.*

*“He likes his new school, especially the teachers and the materials. However, he is concerned regarding failure of language and spelling tests and is worried whether he is going to be allowed to go on to fourth grade.”*

In summary, the psychologist reported, “This handsome nine-year-old is currently showing patterns typical of LD (learning disabled) children, i.e., inattention and inconsistencies. He has problems both in the auditory and visual arena. He probably would benefit from a more specialized LD program. Otherwise, extensive tutoring will be required.” Where is that second-grade teacher and why didn't she know that my child suffered from more than just simply not *wanting* to do what was required of him?

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*With the help of a few very good teachers, summer school, and tutors, my son made it through what was considered the best public high school in the city.*

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Well, we took the psychologist's advice and made yet another move—this time to a private school for children with learning disabilities. For the next four years, he learned “how to learn” and yes, I invited his second-grade teacher and her principal to observe how he was being taught. They apologized and acknowledged that they just didn't have the tools and information they needed to be able to help my child when he first needed it.

He was ready for transition into a traditional school environment at the end of his eighth-grade year. But where would he

*Continued on page 46*

## Abbreviations

ADD: Attention Deficit Disorder  
LD: Learning disabled

NAEAAACLD: National Association for the Education of African American Children with Learning Differences



go that he could receive the kind of support necessary for a child with a documented learning disability? He had never qualified for special services within the public school district.

It had been rumored that an academically rigorous Catholic high school in our area was looking at this issue very seriously because they had lost so many talented students in the past due to the school's inability to meet their needs. We enrolled my son and found that although the counselor very clearly understood the issue and the principal was supportive, the responsibility for success rested on the shoulders of the student who needed to advocate for himself in spite of the fact that many of the teachers on staff did not believe that children learn differently. That year, my son failed everything but health, art, and physical education.

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*Learning differences vary and cultural as well as other experiences have an extraordinary bearing on how children learn, whether they have special needs or not.*

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We had no place to go but to fight for the right to special services through the public school system. We fought and we won with the admonition that “many children fall in this gray area of needing services but not qualifying for them.” With the help of a few very good teachers, summer school, and tutors, my son made it through what was considered the best public high school in the city. When he walked across that stage on graduation day, my eyes filled with tears and I was more proud of him getting a regular diploma with the hurdles he had to face than I was with my oldest daughter who graduated with honors from a private school for the academically talented.

My son went on to attend college for a short time but without the supportive services that he needed to achieve success, he dropped out and went to work in his father's construction company. Eventually, he opened his own painting business and demonstrated that he had the skills to make a profit and earn a decent living.

Most people think that children who have learning disabilities are deficient in everything, which is simply not true. Even today, a good friend remembers taking a group of very young children to a toy store and my son, watching the transaction, told her that she didn't get the right change back. And he was right!

He has always been known for how quickly he can do math in his head. Once when our family was attending a track meet that his older brother and sister were participating in, he (at the age of 7) used the \$5 given to him earlier in the day by his grandmother to buy boxes of candy bars that had been marked down to pennies just to get rid of them at the end of the season. Then, without our prior knowledge, he began selling the individual candy bars to people in the stands at a marked-up price! And when he got his first job in a shoe store at the age of 16,

he went straight to the bank and talked to an officer about investing. At first, I thought it was funny and cute, but little did I know that he had learned enough that day to open his first account and begin investing the money he earned more wisely than most people at any age.

After 10 years of struggling to build his own painting company, raising a child as a single parent, and taking coursework at the local community college to support his interest in becoming a first responder, he was finally accepted into the local fire academy with exceptional test scores. This was his true passion. He graduated and continues to serve the public with a strong commitment to the responsibilities of his profession. Earning the respect of everyone who knows him, he is responsible for breaking barriers that typically prevented entry into the program, which was known for its lack of diversity and inclusion.

In short, my son grew up to be a good, honest, hard-working, contributing and productive member of society, which is all any of us can ask of each other. But too often, this is not the happy ending that we hear about children whose needs are not being met, particularly those in poor school districts where resources are lacking and impoverished neighborhoods where parents who feel they have no options but to leave their child's education to whoever might be teaching them in any given year.

Together, my four children attended 17 schools—public and private, specialized and religious—preschools, elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, college undergraduate, and graduate professional schools—prestigious schools, Big Ten schools, and state-supported colleges and universities. We've encountered great teachers and bad teachers, good schools and mediocre schools. But the point is that through all the challenges we faced as a family, we seem to have conquered all despite the inequities in many of these educational environments.

My son's story might seem typical of many other children with learning disabilities, regardless of race. And, in fact, a school psychologist in the private school for LD children that he attended once asked me in a rather sarcastic way (after I thought I had noticed a difference in how Black boys were being treated), “Well, you don't think that a learning disability for a Black child is any different than that of a White child, do you?” To her point, a learning disability is a learning disability, if accurately diagnosed. But what I knew was that learning differences vary and that cultural as well as other experiences have an extraordinary bearing on how children learn, whether they have special needs or not.

In my efforts to obtain more information about learning disabilities and how Black children and families were faring in an area of education where additional services are required, I learned that:

- the highest retention rates among schools nationally were found among poor minority youth, even though research failed to demonstrate the benefits of grade retention;

- “learning disabilities” has in the past been considered the “more prestigious” category of special education and was typically reserved for White students;
- the chances of a Black male being labeled “mentally retarded” (now classified as “intellectual disability”) actually increase as factors associated with wealth increase;
- teachers play a major role in referring students for special education services—introducing the chance that personal biases may influence outcomes;
- standardized testing commonly used in the assessment process also can leave children from different cultures at a disadvantage;
- year after year, the overall results of the nation’s report card were dismal for most Black students and far worse than any other racial group;
- higher rates of discipline for students in various racial and ethnic groups cannot be entirely explained away by the assumption of higher rates of misbehavior; and
- dropout rates for minority children with disabilities are higher than White children.

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*During the 15-year existence of the NAEAACLD, it became crystal clear that the concerns of Black families about mislabeling and disproportionate representation in special education were legitimate.*

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So, in 2000, my son and I, along with his older brother who was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) during his first year of college, founded the National Association for the Education of African American Children with Learning Differences (NAEAACLD). It had become clear after so many years of trying to meet the educational needs of my own children—one LD, one gifted, one with ADD camouflaged by his outstanding athletic ability, and one just pretty average until she was pushed in an academically rigorous environment to reach her full potential as a top achiever—that we had a responsibility to give back and make a difference in the lives of other families like ours but who maybe didn’t have the same access to information or educational choices available to them. There needed to be an organization that would inform parents and educate communities about learning differences in school-age children.

During the 15-year existence of the NAEAACLD, it became crystal clear that the concerns of Black families about mislabeling and disproportionate representation in special education were legitimate. There was a loud and very positive response to the creation of the NAEAACLD from Black families and leaders across the country who knew all too well that their children or children in their communities were being short-changed because information was not being received as it should have

been, and school resources were virtually non-existent. Reports beginning with the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University followed by the National Research Council and others as well as statistics available from the U.S. Department of Education Accountability Center and National Center for Education Statistics provided documentation of the same.

The organization grew to have parent leadership representation in more than 30 states. Parent leaders came together in large numbers when called upon. Our first parent leadership training was highly successful and lauded as “one of its kind” by the 41 participants who were parent and community leaders from 16 states. One participant wrote:

*“Attending the AACLD training was one of the most incredible involvements in my advocacy career. It was awe-inspiring to not only be in the company of such a great group of people but to engage in conversation and learn from them was empowering. I returned home with renewed energy to serve African American families with children who learn differently. I have been non-stop in attending IEPs (individualized education plans), becoming more vocal on the boards and councils that I sit on, and I have increased my capacity to build relations for the purpose of forming a coalition that can equip families with the tools they need to gain the best outcomes for their loved ones.”*

Unfortunately, the NAEAACLD was forced to close at the end of 2015 as a result of a lack of funding. Individual families had benefited but not enough. Despite the advocacy work conducted, not much had changed. The overall results of the nation’s report card (National Assessment of Educational Progress) were dismal for most Black students and far worse than any other racial group. Some would say that the NAEAACLD was too specific—that the focus on Black children was too limited for funding sources, which seems oddly contradictory when it was our children who were disproportionately affected.

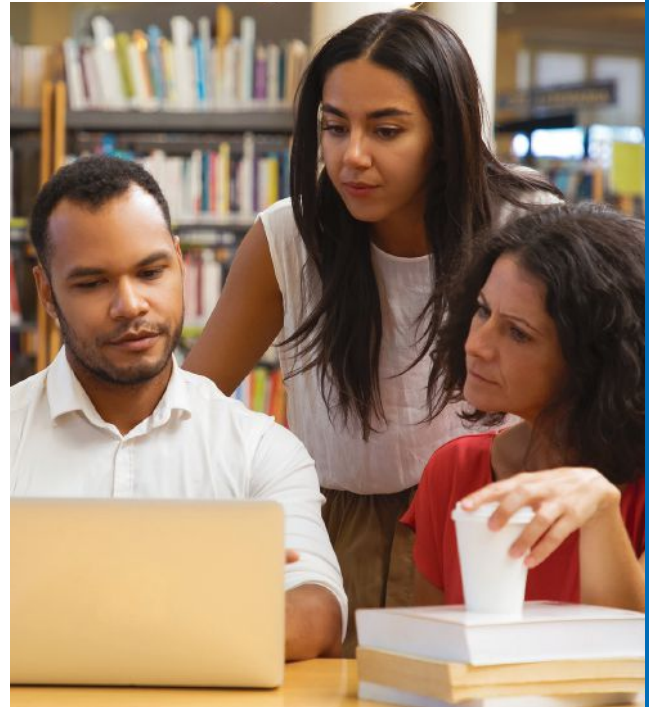
The question today is, what has changed? The late Ron Edmonds, Harvard professor and father of the effective schools movement in the United States, said many years ago, “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do this. Whether we do it or not must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we have not done it so far.”

**Nancy R. Tidwell** has served in advisory roles and on standing committees for the Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities, National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, the Learning Disabilities Roundtable, the National Center for Learning Disabilities, and the African American Leaders Roundtable on Education (hosted by then U.S. Secretary of Education and the National Council of Negro Women). Ms. Tidwell is the author of *One Child at a Time*, *A Parent Handbook and Resource Directory for African American Families with Children Who Learn Differently*, which was published by the NAEAACLD and made available at no cost to individuals, families, and organizations nationwide.

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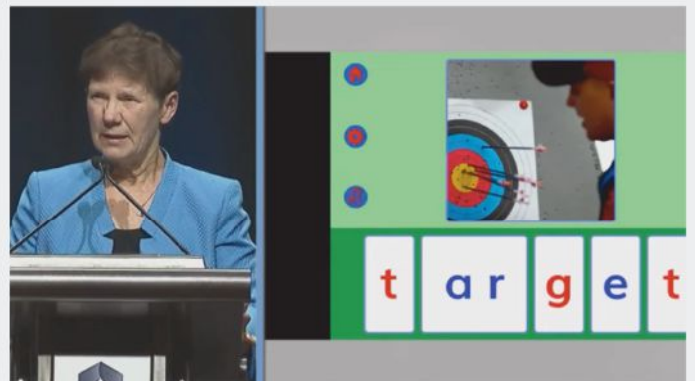
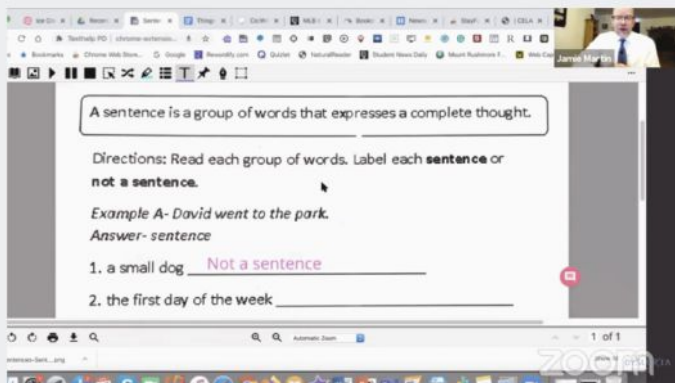
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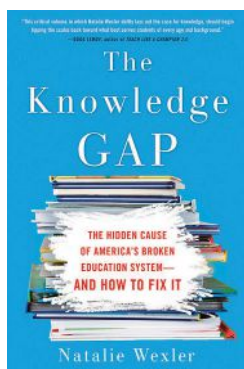


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# Book Review

by Sheryl Ferlito



## **The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System—and How to Fix It**

Natalie Wexler

Avery

336 pages, 2019

In *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System—and How to Fix It*, Natalie Wexler uses her investigative skills as an educational journalist to propose that “elementary school is where the real problem has been hiding, in plain sight.” The problem? A persistent—and seemingly resistant—state of underachievement in reading in the United States for decades despite increasing the amount of time spent teaching reading. Wexler explains this contradiction by making the case that decoding and comprehension should not be treated as one subject, because factors leading to success in each are fundamentally different. The need for direct instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics is settled science; decoding does not occur naturally without systematic skills-focused instruction. Unlike decoding, reading comprehension can be achieved naturally if students have enough information on the topic. Students with the broadest knowledge will achieve the highest scores on reading tests which are really “knowledge tests in disguise” (Willingham, 2017). And so, Wexler identifies the solution to the comprehension problem: increase instructional time building knowledge.

*The Knowledge Gap* is written in three parts: The Way We Teach Now, How We Got Here, and How We Can Change. In the first part, Wexler sounds the alarm about the unintended consequence of an increasing instructional time in reading instruction focused on decoding yielding stagnant test scores. Her research showed a 16-minute daily average on Social Studies, 19 minutes on Science, in contrast to 90 minutes to three hours a day on Language Arts—plus additional intervention time for which students are often pulled from Science and Social Studies. Wexler asserts “that the test-score gap is, at its heart, a knowledge gap” due to a lack of systematic focus on content instruction in elementary schools (p. 31).

Wexler's description of The Way We Teach Now gets more compelling with each chapter. In this part, she describes the differences between what scientists know about the learning process, what higher education faculty have taught teachers to believe, and how schools are failing by teaching reading comprehension as a skill. The chapter summarizing evidence

from cognitive science will likely leave some readers wondering why they did not know that success in decoding and comprehension depends on different factors; and that comprehension does not occur by teaching vague skills instruction like finding the main idea or repeat lessons on making inferences. Readers might even feel frustrated that they were not taught the work of cognitive scientists Mark Seidenberg and Daniel Willingham in college. Readers may nod their heads in agreement that Googling unknown words is inefficient and may be shocked to learn that text becomes “difficult to understand when a mere 2 percent of the vocabulary is unfamiliar” (p. 52).

Wexler warns that reading instruction focused on decoding, and a skills and strategies approach to comprehension using leveled readers that lack necessary content to build knowledge, contribute significantly to low-income students not acquiring knowledge necessary for adequate reading comprehension. She explains that as elementary curriculum has been reduced to math and reading—especially in schools where test scores are low—restricting students to leveled readers at low reading levels disadvantages those who need knowledge the most. This “Matthew Effect” is difficult to reverse; instead it maintains and reinforces existing inequities (p. 35). The author cautions readers about experiencing “confirmation bias” or “cognitive dissonance,” the mental discomfort we feel if this new information conflicts with our beliefs or our previous training. Wexler attempts to convince skeptics to “teach phonics systematically while building knowledge through read-alouds and discussion.”

In a brief but powerful section two, Wexler alerts readers that the National Reading Panel and the Common Core have attempted to help schools improve achievement, however some of their attempts may be problematic. For example, the National Reading Panel endorsed instruction in comprehension strategies while failing to mention that comprehension depends on building knowledge. Regardless of where you live in the United States, you have probably heard that we should teach the power standards (creatively called Jackpot standards in Nevada) in order to increase test scores (p. 195 and p. 55). Since building knowledge takes years, teaching power standards as a quick fix to increase test scores is doomed to failure. Wexler also drives home the point that building knowledge is an essential—and often overlooked—underpinning of the Common Core (p. 185). Standard 10 says that students must read increasingly complex text at their grade level or above, rather than be restricted to their individual level. How will teachers embrace this shift if they don't know about it, teach in a system that depends on leveled literacy and/or lack a knowledge-rich curriculum? How will students pass “knowledge tests in disguise?”

Wexler offers solutions to the literacy crisis in section three. In addition to warning us against quick fixes of teaching “power

*Continued on page 50*

standards” instead of content knowledge, Wexler, also the co-author of *The Writing Revolution*, says, “Don’t forget to Write.” Wexler reminds us that writing needs to be taught with direct instruction and deliberate practice, not just assigned. Writing needs to be taught systematically and explicitly starting at the sentence level because “written English is a second language.” Writing should begin with a planning outline, not “Flash-drafting,” which emphasizes quantity over quality. Wexler’s *Writing Revolution* co-author, Judith Hochman, discovered that writing was the key to unlocking reading comprehension and analytical ability by basing writing instruction on the use of content-rich informational text.

Wexler concludes each chapter by describing and contrasting two real-world classroom scenarios from Washington, D.C., classrooms that serve low-income students of color. Wexler followed one class using a balanced literacy, skills-based approach while the other class used a content-rich curriculum. Each chapter ends with a classroom visit, allowing readers to compare and contrast a balanced literacy skills approach to a content-focused classroom. Notes for each chapter—a hidden gem at the end of the book—include phrases from the chapter in bold print with an expanded bibliography section with direct links for those wanting to learn more about the highlighted topic.

Wexler jumped into the science of reading as discussions were peaking on social media and news outlets. She provided much needed information on the language comprehension portion of the Simple View of Reading (SVR):

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} \text{Decoding} & & \text{Language} & & \text{Reading} \\ [D] & \times & \text{Comprehension} & = & \text{Comprehension} \\ & & [LC] & & [RC] \end{array}$$

This SVR formula makes it clear that strong reading comprehension cannot occur unless both decoding skills and language comprehension are strong. If either is zero, reading comprehension can’t occur. Readers who follow the science of

reading on EduTwitter, education-related Twitter posts, would probably agree that the decoding (D) element of the SVR is getting most of the attention. Wexler attempts to balance the equation with a persuasive book that includes real-world scenarios. Her call to action includes direct instruction in decoding with ample time devoted to systematic instruction in knowledge topics such as science, social studies and knowledge of the world. Wexler encourages readers to follow the evidence from cognitive science, including content-rich read-alouds, discussions, and daily writing about such topics. This book serves as a reminder of our own potential knowledge gap and provides an opportunity for educators to be wiser consumers of information with the ability to “distinguish between approaches that are likely to produce the outcomes we want and those that will only lead to a heartbreaking waste of precious time.”

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*The opinions of this reviewer are not necessarily the opinions of the International Dyslexia Association.*

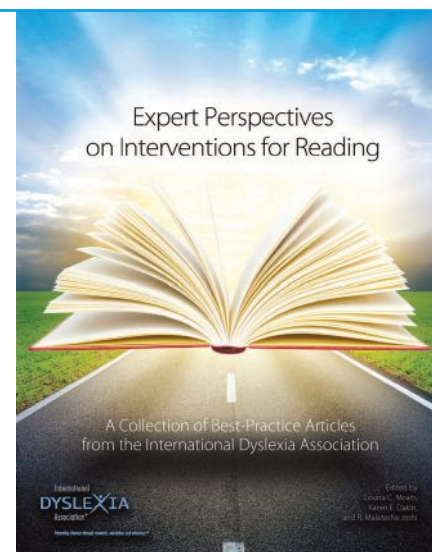
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