

## **8 Teaching Diverse Students to Read**

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### **Introduction**

Today, as in years past, teaching children to read is a major challenge and a complex process. However, the challenge is getting greater. Our classrooms are changing – more than ever before, students in classrooms are poor and represent many racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. While children from all socio-economic backgrounds can experience difficulties in learning to read, it is widely documented that low levels of reading achievement are highest among poor children, ethnic minority children, and children who speak home languages other than English (Donohue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzo, 1999; Anderson, 1994). Still, observation of effective teachers and examination of current research on teaching continues to highlight that the classroom teacher has a tremendous influence on whether or not children are successful in learning to read (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 2002). Children do not become effective readers by merely growing older. Reading success depends largely on the type and quality of instruction.

### **Realities of the Classroom**

Children who experience success in learning to read are successful not only throughout their school experience but also in life (see Morgan, this volume). The ability to read enables children to open up a whole new world of imagination, wonder, information, and excitement. Successful students are able to use reading as a tool to satisfy a variety of purposes ranging from reading for specific information to satisfy a job requirement to reading fine literary works for pure enjoyment. These students learn the “how” of reading and develop the desire to read and learn on their own. Children who struggle in learning to read often fail in school and are at high risk for dropping out. These children are also at greater risk of experiencing various social and economic risks, such as continuing in the poverty cycle, low paying jobs, and crime. Despite these realities, many diverse children become literate and lead successful, productive lives.

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Compounding the achievement gap between diverse and mainstream students are two compelling points: one, the number of diverse students is on the rise in U.S. schools and two, the teaching force is becoming less and less diverse in nature (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). It was reported that in 1994, the teaching force in the U.S. was 87% white, with only 13% teachers of colour, whereas the student population of colour approximates 50% nationwide. Most teachers in the work force and those preparing to teach will undoubtedly be teaching students in their classrooms with backgrounds quite unlike their own.

### **Multicultural Education**

Multicultural education has many meanings. Reflecting the standards of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), Gibson (1984) defined multicultural education as “the process whereby a person develops competencies in multiple systems of standards for perceiving, evaluation, believing, and doing” (p.112).

Multicultural education involves not only accepting and respecting students’ cultures, but also celebrating each individual with regard to his or her cultural background. A student’s culture affects how that student perceives both the school’s structure and learning objectives. Also, the current U.S. school system reflects the institutionalised culture in our society. In most cases this is the white middle class, although this is changing. The meanings of instructional activities in school take on a different measure of importance depending on culture. Thus, many times the dominant culture of the school is at odds with the cultural background (both overt and covert) of many students. Classroom teachers of reading need to adjust their instruction to meet the natural strengths of the cultures represented in their classrooms. Au (1993) has labeled this type of teaching as ‘culturally responsive instruction’ and defines it as being “consistent with the values of students’ own cultures and aimed at improving academic learning” (p.13). Accepting, respecting, and celebrating cultural differences automatically increases both the satisfaction and the complexity of the teaching-learning process. It also challenges teachers to provide equal access to all students.

### **Effective Teaching**

Teaching involves those attitudes, skills, and abilities needed to guide student learning. More specifically, teaching can be defined by describing those teaching behaviors necessary to teach students what they need to

know. Teachers in diverse classrooms need to provide the same high quality instruction that teachers provide in effective mainstream classrooms. Over the years, scholars in teaching have analysed the teaching process by describing what teachers do when they teach. Jere Brophy (quoted in Berliner, 2000), a noted authority on effective teaching, summarised the recent teacher effectiveness research as follows.

***Principles of Effective Teaching***

1. With regard to a supportive classroom environment: Students learn best within cohesive and caring learning communities.
2. With regard to opportunity to learn: Students learn more when most of the available time is allocated to curriculum-related activities and the classroom management system emphasises maintaining their engagement in those activities.
3. With regard to curriculum alignment: All components of the curriculum are aligned to create a cohesive program for accomplishing instructional purposes and goals.
4. With regard to establishing learning opportunities: Teachers can prepare students for learning by providing an initial structure to clarify intended outcomes and cue desired learning strategies.
5. With regard to coherent content: To facilitate meaningful learning and retention, content is explained clearly and developed with emphasis on its structure and connections.
6. With regard to thoughtful discourse: Questions are planned to engage students in sustained discourse structured around powerful ideas.
7. With regard to practice and application activities: Students need sufficient opportunities to practice and apply what they are learning and to receive improvement-oriented feedback.
8. With regard to scaffolding students' task engagement: The teacher provides whatever assistance students need to enable them to engage in learning activities productively.
9. With regard to strategic teaching: The teacher models and instructs students in learning and self-regulation activities.
10. With regard to cooperative learning: Students often benefit from working in pairs or small groups to construct understandings or help one another master skills.
11. With regard to goal-oriented assessment: The teacher uses a variety of formal and informal assessment methods to monitor progress toward learning goals.

12. With regard to achievement expectations: The teacher establishes and follows through on appropriate expectations for learning outcomes. (p. 366-367)

Culturally responsive instruction emphasises the above qualities but also takes into account a student's culture and fundamental elements of teaching reading to students who are culturally, linguistically, and racially different. For example, students will differ in terms of values, learning styles, communication patterns, and orientation to schooling to name a few. These differences not only affect how well students will learn but also should indicate differences in how they should be taught.

### **Performance Indicators in a Culturally Diverse Classroom**

Impressions of experience and recent research on teaching diverse learners have yielded indicators of teaching that when applied appropriately enhance student learning and growth (Au, 2002; Blair, 2003). Teachers can spend their time and effort in a variety of ways in teaching struggling readers, and research on teaching has helped us discern which efforts in teaching are more helpful than others. Clearly not all efforts in teaching are helpful. The emphasis on these multicultural indicators illustrates a change from traditional classroom thinking and practice to new, culturally sensitive ways of delivering instruction. The quality of life and the academic achievement in today's diverse classrooms can be enhanced when teachers focus on the following multicultural performance indicators of instruction:

- Capitalise upon the interests, background knowledge, past experiences, language, family lifestyles, and cultures of your students
- Stress oral language development activities (listening, speaking)
- Take special care to build background knowledge on instructional topics
- Design classroom activities that promote critical thinking
- Utilise peer tutoring and cooperative grouping plans
- Plan and carry out highly interactive discussions
- Continually tell students why they are doing what they are doing
- Focus on student comprehension of ideas, not decoding abilities
- Remind students that they will learn and be successful in your class (regardless of previous problems)
- Provide a curriculum that is cognitively challenging

It is proposed that future teachers of reading not only become knowledgeable regarding the research-based components of effective instruction including knowledge of the reading process, teaching strategies, and materials but also multicultural performance indicators of classroom practice. These indicators seek to answer the crucial question: What teaching strategies must classroom teachers of reading be able to perform as they work with struggling readers in the classroom?

There is much we would like our new teachers to know and be able to do. The list of objectives is indeed endless. While acknowledging the desire for new teachers to know a great number of topics, it is proposed that future teachers need a baseline of multicultural performance indicators and a self-monitoring attitude to be successful in multicultural classrooms. While we certainly know some of the elements of effective instruction in diverse classrooms, no simple formula can be given for all classrooms. A formula for effective instruction for all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, age, grade, interests, needs, learning styles, and learning rate is incompatible with our knowledge of students and learning. We simply cannot prepare new reading teachers to handle all situations with expert skill. What is compatible and reasonable, however, is the development of a self-monitoring, reflective attitude that generates useful information about the students, the content being taught, the classroom context and physical environment, and possible teaching strategies to accomplish your goals (Blair, 2003). It is proposed that new teachers who engage in a process of monitoring their own teaching become more culturally sensitive and are able to provide culturally responsive instruction in the classroom. Culturally responsive instruction is instruction that is sensitive to students' cultures and capitalises on the students' cultures in designing and delivering instruction. An approach to teaching reading based on this proposition encourages teachers to become self-monitors who reflect on their teaching and ask, "Why am I doing what I am doing? How does it work? Why did it happen this way? How might it work better next time?" The ability to observe oneself honestly, monitor one's teaching, and modify one's teaching is a hallmark of a true professional.

### **Conclusion**

The highest priority in reading education should be to develop in teachers the dispositions to be successful in teaching reading to all children, especially those children who are struggling or failing to learn to

read. Teaching struggling readers is not for the faint of heart – it is a difficult job. Yet, this goal is achievable if teachers modify their instruction by capitalising on the culture and background of their students. Cultural differences influence the performance of all students and should influence the way classroom teachers teach reading.

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