

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN DISCOURSE
AND ITS IMPACT ON THE LITERACY
ACHIEVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
STUDENTS

By Valerie R. Jones

In a candid conversation with my 12-year-old sons, I informed them that one's vocabulary and one's ability to write can prevent or grant access to positions of power in our society. Given that my sons had recently expressed interest in attending a high school with rigorous admissions criteria and an equally rigorous curriculum, I felt the need to share two elements of literacy that have historically served as roadblocks for African Americans who wanted to enroll in prestigious universities or secure influential positions of power. My sons and I began discussing academic paths that would lead to prosperous careers of their choice. Understanding the oral literacy tradition in African American communities and understanding how texts can be used to enhance language practices may be necessary for educators who want to shatter these roadblocks.

In many African American communities, instilling cultural values, instructing the young, entertaining family members, and passing down "lessons learned" have been part of an oral literacy tradition. The role of literacy in the African American community has "cultural and community-specific meanings."¹ Whether this tradition is seen in the African trickster tales of Anansi,² the historic folktales of the adventures of "Bruh Bear, Bruh Rabbit and He Lion,"³ or in the politically inflammatory rap lyrics of Nas,⁴ discourse within the African American community has served as a thread for survival, communication, and community empowerment. It is this rich oral literacy tradition that many African American students bring to classroom life. In this article, I provide an overview of historical and current perspectives on cultural differences in discourse, and discuss the impact that connecting students to historical cultural practices and culturally relevant text has on student achievement.

*Historical and Current Perspectives on
Cultural Differences in Discourse*

African American children's previous experiences with language and discourse can be used to promote reading achievement. Honoring cultural differences in discourse can be particularly helpful to support the literacy development of African American students who initially have difficulty learning to read and do not see their culture reflected in texts. There are authentic ways of using student experiences in the form of discourse to stimulate prior knowledge for comprehending text.⁵ The process involves the teacher using expert questioning techniques, leading students in discussions of their prior experiences that relate to the text, using conversation to discuss parts of the text and clearing up any misunderstandings, and making clear the connections between the content discussed in the text and students' outside experiences or knowledges.⁶ Students who can connect with text in meaningful ways have a better opportunity to gain meaning and knowledge from the text than students who remain disconnected from texts while reading. Teachers should reflect on their own "philosophy of literacy, instruction and learning" as they consider ways to improve student literacy achievement in their classrooms.⁷

When considering why one should study cultural connections found in classroom literature, the work of ethnographer Shirley Brice Heath comes to mind.⁸ She spent time in three different communities in the Carolinas. Differences in the three communities caused Heath to wonder: "Why were some students able to give elaborate direction and tell fantastic stories on the playground, but unable to respond to assignments calling for similar responses about lesson materials?"⁹ Working with a group of practicing teachers, Heath inspired them to "unlearn" previously held misconceptions, and to view the classroom, environment, and language processes through the perspectives of the mill families found in two communities - Trackton and Roadville.⁹ Some of the teachers realized that they shared views of language and education similar to the business owners known as the townspeople. Learning about language, education and the roles in one's environment and its various power structures through the eyes of the children and families in Trackton and Roadville better equipped those teachers in planning and teaching higher level reading and writing activities.

The Impact of “Cultural Connections” to Text on Student Achievement

Due to the diverse roles that literacy and discourse have played in the African American community, students can experience heightened degrees of self-efficacy in their transactions with particular texts.¹¹ Culturally relevant texts and culturally responsive teaching are tools for empowering African American students to actively engage with texts to help them make sense of their worlds and validate their lived experiences.¹² Researchers have found positive results in student engagement, motivation, self-efficacy and reading achievement when using culturally relevant texts with bi-lingual and bi-cultural students in classrooms.¹³ Students connected with events and characters from text with experiences similar to their own. They learned and shared critical perspectives when reading culturally relevant texts.¹⁴ “Students have culturally connected with a text when they become engaged and motivated and develop a sense of self-efficacy that positively impacts achievement.”¹⁵ Texts should be selected on the basis of enabling students to make connections to real-life experiences and to their background with challenging ideas and content.¹⁶ These texts, because of their impact on the students, have the potential to become a part of the student’s textual lineage.¹⁷

Using literature is one way for educators to teach the contributions African Americans made in “science, technology, medicine, math, theology, ecology, peace, law and economics.”¹⁸ Using texts that African American students see themselves through a positive light gives them a license to write of their own experiences and put their “voice” on record.¹⁹ Instructional texts must, therefore, be chosen carefully and purposefully.

Unfortunately, some students become disenfranchised with their school experiences and begin to question the relevance of content learned in school to their upcoming adult lives. In the Trackton community for example, “most of [the] children [went] to school with enthusiasm, but by the end of the first half of the first grade, many [were] coming home with reports that their teacher scolds them for talking too much and working too little.”²⁰ By the end of 3rd grade, many Trackton children established a record of failures which often they did not break in the rest of their school careers.²¹

A sociocultural view of literacy has begun to complement cognitive views on literacy.²² Researchers have looked at issues of identity, agency and power found in classroom discourse and instruction.²³ Educators and researchers should become aware of the influence of literacy practices outside the school and how they help shape the identities of culturally diverse students.²⁴ To determine the extent that a student has connected to text through a cultural lens would involve more than just observing the effects of an African American adolescent male reading and discussing the text *Black Boy* by Richard Wright. One does not culturally connect with a text simply because the main characters are of the same ethnicity and gender.²⁵ Cultural connections can be made through similarities in experiences with the character, the historical time period, personal interests, conflicts and resolutions, etc. This suggests that African American males can find cultural kinship with the adolescent experiences of the character Jem Finch in the text *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Such connections depend on the transactions taking place between the student and the text.²⁶

Measuring the effectiveness of cultural connections can be found in students’ writings. For example, researchers have found that African American boys experience sociocultural benefits when writing together.²⁷ Writing positively impacts students’ identities and their resiliency. There is an urgency of using literacy to define one’s role within a community.²⁸ The following quote serves as a powerful example of the ways in which literacy, discourse, and instruction can affect the life and lineage of African American people – a people whose very sustenance and survival depended on a rich oral literacy tradition.



Ms. Lennie, the 82-year-old daughter of a former African American slave stated,

*We never really thought about literacy as people now call it...So, if you want to know how I would define literacy as a Black person, let's say it's reading; let's say it's writing or knowing how to survive in this world – and most of all knowing how to combine all of these things so that you appreciate who you are as a Black person and so you never forget your history.*²⁹

Language has power in both its oral and written forms. Such power structures have direct implications for the classroom where students' literacies are shaped for their later initiation into society as literate beings and influential persons. Conversations such as the one I had with my 12-year-old sons would not have been necessary in a society where differences in students' literacy achievement did not determine their future roles within this hierarchical power structure. Teachers, who are aware of these power structures and who honor cultural differences and discourse through culturally responsive teaching, are in a far better position to positively impact the literacy achievement of African American students. Enrolling in prestigious universities or securing influential positions of power can later become a reality for them. In the end, access and power can be far more equitably distributed within our society.

Notes

1. Vivian L. Gadsden, "Literacy, Education, and Identity Among African-Americans: The Communal Nature of Learning." *Urban Education* 27 (1993): 352-369.
2. Gerald McDermott, *Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti* (Mexico: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972).
3. Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly* (New York: Random House Publishers, 2004).
4. Nas. *Nastradamus*. United States: Columbia Records, 1999.
5. Kathryn H. Au, "Using the Experience-Text-Relationship Method with Minority Children." *The Reading Teacher* 32 (1979): 677-679.
6. IBID.
7. Kathryn H. Au, "Literacy for All Students: Ten Steps Toward Making a Difference." *The Reading Teacher* 51 (1997): 186-194.
8. Shirley B. Heath, *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
9. Shirley B. Heath "A Lot of Talk about Nothing." In *Language Development: A Reader for Teachers*, edited by Brenda M. Power, and Ruth S. Hubbard, 74-79. (New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2002).
10. IBID.
11. Louise Rosenblatt, "The Literary Transaction: Evocation and Response." *Theory Into Practice* 21 (1982): 268 – 277.
12. Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Reading Between the Lines and Beyond the Pages: A Culturally Relevant Approach to Literacy Teaching." *Theory into Practice* 31 (1992): 312-320.
13. Mary-Virginia Feger, "I Want to Read: How Culturally Relevant Texts Increase Student Engagement in Reading." *Multicultural Education* 13 (2006): 18-19.
14. IBID.
15. Alfred W. Tatum, *Reading for Their Life: (Re) Building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2009).
16. Natalie K. Conrad, Lillie Yi Gong, and Lillian Wright, "Using Text Talk as a Gateway to Culturally Responsive Teaching." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 31 (2004): 187-192.
17. Geneva Gay, "Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching." *Journal of Teacher Education* 53 (2002): 106-116.
18. Shirley B. Heath, *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
19. IBID.
20. Au, Kathryn H. Au and Taffy Raphael. "Equity and Literacy in the Next Millennium." *Reading Research Quarterly* 35 (2000): 170-188.
21. Cynthia Lewis, Patricia Enciso, and Elizabeth B. Moje. *Reframing Sociocultural Research on Literacy: Identity, Agency, and Power* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

22. Kathryn H. Au and Taffy Raphael. "Equity and Literacy in the Next Millennium." *Reading Research Quarterly* 35 (2000): 170-188.
23. Alfred W. Tatum, *Reading for Their Life: (Re) Building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2009).
24. Alfred W. Tatum, *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap*. (Portsmouth, ME: Stenhouse, 2005).
25. Louise Rosenblatt, "The Literary Transaction: Evocation and Response." *Theory Into Practice* 21 (1982): 268 – 277.
26. Alfred W. Tatum and Valerie Gue, "Raw Writing: A Critical Support for Adolescents." *English Journal* 99 (2010): 90-93.
27. Vivian L. Gadsden, "Literacy, Education, and Identity Among African-Americans: The Communal Nature of Learning." *Urban Education* 27 (1993): 352-369.
28. IBID.



Valerie R. Jones is a doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois at Chicago in the Special Education department. Her research interests include comprehension interventions and culturally responsive instruction for African American students with learning disabilities. Currently, she is an adjunct professor for the Early Childhood Special Education teacher preparation program at Loyola University Chicago, and works as a literacy consultant for public schools in Chicago.

Lesson Plan

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1. Connections to Teacher Preparation

Due to the impact of cultural differences and discourse on the literacy achievement of African American students, it is imperative that teachers understand the historical uses of language and the power connected to that language.

2. Goals of Lesson Plan

The purpose of this lesson is to have teachers explore the impact that cultural differences and discourse has on student achievement. By analyzing the discourse of historical African American figures from a sample quote, poem, and speech, teachers will be better prepared to plan culturally relevant instruction.

3. Objectives

As a precursor to designing a social studies instructional unit, teachers will: (1) examine historical documents to determine how African Americans used language to create a space for themselves within American history, and (2) write a personal reflection on this experience and the implications for planning instruction.

4. National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards: US History Teacher Expectations

History

Teacher Expectations

- assist learners in acquiring knowledge of historical content in United States history in order to ask large and searching questions that compare patterns of continuity and change in the history and values of the many peoples who have contributed to the development of the continent of North America;

Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Teacher Expectations

- help learners understand the concepts of role, status, and social class and use them in describing the connections and interactions of individuals, groups, and institutions in society;
- help learners analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture in both historical and contemporary settings;

Culture and Cultural Diversity

Teacher Expectations

- guide learners as they predict how data and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference;
- assist learners to apply an understanding of culture as an integrated whole that explains the functions and interactions of language, literature, the arts, traditions, beliefs and values, and behavior patterns;
- guide learners as they construct reasoned judgments about specific cultural responses to persistent human issues;

5. Warm up (Anticipatory set)

- Before Class Pre-reading: Teachers will visit <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/39/> to download and read The 1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech by Booker T. Washington.
- In-class Warm Up: Teachers will be prompted to share their thinking on the poem “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou, and identify words and phrases of power found within the poem.

6. Activity (Instruction Input)

- Teachers will be asked to write their definition of literacy in their notebooks. The following quote describing the definition of literacy of Ms. Lennie, an 82-year-old daughter of a former African American slave will then be read aloud to the pre-service teachers.
 - *We never really thought about literacy as people now call it...So, if you want to know how I would define literacy as a Black person, let's say it's reading; let's say it's writing or knowing how to survive in this world – and most of all knowing how to combine all of these things so that you appreciate who you are as a Black person and so you never forget your history.*
- Teachers will engage in a discussion of the similarities and differences noted between their definition of literacy and the definition described in Ms. Lennie's quote.
- After a brief lecture on the intended purpose of Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise Speech, and the historical significance of the time, teachers will be divided into groups of 3 to share their interpretations and thoughts on the speech. Teachers will also be prompted to identify words and phrases of power and resilience found within the speech.
- Following these discussions, the class will reconvene into a whole group to discuss: power and position in American society, the role of language within those power structures, and implications for instructing African American students.

7. Assessment

- **Personal Reflection:** Teachers will write a personal reflection describing their experiences discussing and interpreting the language of African Americans in the quote, poem, and speech from this class session. Included in the reflection will be implications for planning their social studies instructional unit. A key indicator for success will be the extent to which pre-service teachers challenges their assumptions about literacy, language, discourse, and power.
- **Social Studies Instructional Unit:** The teacher's social studies instructional unit will be reviewed for evidence of culturally relevant pedagogy and instances where students' cultural differences and discourse were honored.

8. Teacher Resources

- **Speeches**
 - Speeches by famous African Americans
<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/bhmspeeches.html>
 - Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Speeches that Changed the World* (London: Quercus Publishing Plc, 2010).
- **Essays & Short Stories**
 - Tavis Smiley, *The Covenant with Black America* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2006).
 - Laurel Holliday, *Dreaming in Color, Living in Black and White* (New York: Simon Pulse, 2003).
- **Poetry Anthologies**
 - Arnold Adoff, *I Am the Darker Brother* (New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1972).
 - Edwin Graves Wilson, *Poetry for Young People: Maya Angelou* (New York: Sterling, 2007)
 - Nikki Grimes, *Bronx Masquerade* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002).
 - Langston Hughes, *Vintage Hughes* (New York, Vintage Books, 2004)