

January 2016

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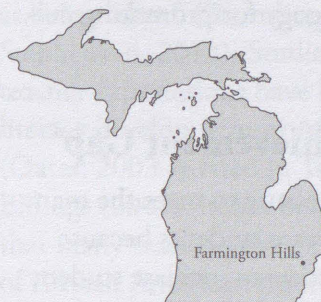
Recommended Citation

Wang, Jackie and Valentine, Sandra (2016) "Implementing Dialogic Reading in a Culturally Relevant Classroom," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 48: Iss. 2, Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol48/iss2/4>

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Implementing Dialogic Reading in a Culturally Relevant Classroom

by Jackie Wang
with contributions by
Sandra Valentine



Jackie Wang

Jackie's Experience

It was my first year teaching elementary school, and Michael, an African American male, was in my second grade class. He was funny and loved attention. He was a competent and fluent reader, who read at grade level and enjoyed reading chapter books. Although he was a capable reader, his skills didn't transfer to other subjects, and math was his biggest challenge. I tried all strategies I had learned in teacher's college: having him sit close by me and in front of the class, small group teaching and re-teaching, and assigning one to two problems and checking to see how he was progressing. I knew he needed more help, but as a first-year teacher, I didn't know what else to do to support Michael in his learning. As an educator, I wanted to add more strategies to my tool belt so I could better assist students like Michael in improving their academic success.

Sandra's Experience

When I reflect on my previous teaching, I think about an African American student by the name of Kevin. As a student in my second grade class, Kevin was quiet and did very well in math and science. He did so well in math that he would demonstrate two-step addition problems to the class. He would explain the problem showing two different methods to his peers to help them understand how to solve the problem. When he shared his math abilities, his confidence showed. However, during language art lessons in small group, Kevin showed little interest; he demonstrated this by slouching down in his chair and

looking around the room with vacant eyes. I tried to help engage Kevin with language art lessons by using different reading strategies and approaches with text. I assumed as a teacher, I would be able to help raise Kevin's interest level by trying various reading tools. I tried everything possible to encourage Kevin during language arts. As an African American educator, I wanted to know what other strategies I could use in my classroom to support my male students and improve their academic success.

How Do We Help Close the Achievement Gap?

We are elementary school teachers who are deeply concerned about the achievement of *all* students, but because of our teaching experiences and concerns, we are particularly interested in understanding and helping African American male students. We chose to focus our research on reading strategies that can be implemented within the classroom to close the achievement gap. However, as we delved into our research, we discovered that closing the gap requires more than just excellent teaching pedagogy; it requires teachers to implement excellent teaching pedagogy in a *culturally relevant classroom*. Before our research, we had never heard the term culturally relevant classroom. Therefore, our research focuses on three areas: unpacking the achievement gap, understanding how to create a

culturally relevant classroom, and understanding dialogic reading as a pedagogy for promoting culturally responsive practice.

Unpacking the Achievement Gap

As teachers, we feel the pressure to meet the many academic needs of our diverse students because there is a demand for teachers to increase student achievement. However, before we can motivate students to learn and to care about their academic success, we need to meet their emotional and social needs. If we think about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, we know students need to feel loved and safe before they are motivated to learn. Well-developed culturally relevant classrooms will help African American students feel safe, loved and to build their self-esteem. When educators meet these needs, only then will our instruction be effective. Like many classroom teachers, we teach a diverse set of students with a variety of factors which affect their academic success. Because students of various academic, social, and emotional needs enter our classroom, and because of the demands that are made of teachers to foster all students' academic success, we may feel overwhelmed and unsure of how to reach our students. Some of us may blame students' parents, home lives, and socio-economic status for their circumstances. Yet teachers can empower students to become academically successful. Educators and legislators have been working toward closing the achievement gap over the past 40 years without much success (Tatum, 2008). Shouldn't we be closer to closing the achievement gap by now? Researchers believe educators must take a closer look at their own teaching and biases, and work toward building a culturally relevant classroom.

Studies show that we not only have an achievement gap, but also a racial achievement gap. African American students in general lag behind European and Asian American students (Barbarin & McCandies, 2004). We know that socioeconomic status (SES) and poverty are predictors of

academic achievement (Barbarin & McCandies, 2004), however research shows that SES is not the only factor that impacts student achievement. Once SES is statistically controlled, the achievement gap continues to exist with African American families across all SES levels, even at higher levels. Some think the gap may be a result of how school culture treats or responds to African American students and their families (Barbarin & McCandies, 2004, Brewster & Stephenson, 2013).

According to Ladson-Billings (2009), the divide between white and African American students will continue until society recognizes that African Americans not only make up a distinct racial group, but they also have a distinct culture. Ladson-Billings states, "It is presumed that African American children are exactly like white children but just need a little extra help" (p.10). Culturally relevant teaching may be the pedagogy to lead us to a more inclusive philosophy of teaching, but what is culturally relevant teaching?

Culturally Relevant Teaching

Culturally relevant teaching is a term used to describe a "pedagogy that empowers students emotionally and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Coffey, n.d.). Connecting curriculum and instruction to a student's culture helps to create a bridge between students' home and school lives (Coffey, n.d.). With our multicultural classrooms, it is inevitable that students and teachers will come from dissimilar backgrounds. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to connect and engage with students and "construct pedagogical practices in ways that are culturally relevant, racially affirming, and socially meaningful for their students" (Coffey, n.d.).

Schools need to create an inclusive curriculum that caters less to the status quo and more to the changing multicultural classroom. When teachers incorporate experiences from various traditions, norms, and values, this helps to reduce the overwhelming

presence of whiteness, which may be intimidating to students of color and English Language Learners (Irish & Scrubb, 2012). Therefore, teachers need to consider the norms and values their students bring to the classroom and plan lessons that connect students with their reality. For example, teachers can ensure that their classroom library reflects the cultural makeup of the classroom, and that students have access to books in which they can see themselves. Instead of assigning a specific novel for students to read, provide a variety to choose from, ensuring that all students' cultures are represented. For example, primary grade students can read and learn about the *change makers* in history such as Martin Luther King, Ruby Bridges and Rosa Parks. In junior grades, students can read King's speeches, analyze, discuss and debate whether his "I Have a Dream" speech has changed people so that they judge African Americans by their character and not their color. This can develop into a deep discussion that can include all students in talking about race, stereotypes, and bias. Not only are we teaching history, but we are also teaching students to become critical thinkers. African American students, just as students of all cultures, need to feel that they belong, and that their history is equally important to the histories of white students. We need to move past focusing on black culture only during Black History month and work toward teaching culturally relevant curriculum throughout the academic year.

Believe Students Can Succeed

Teachers who exemplify culturally relevant pedagogy believe that each student is capable of learning and success (Ladson-Billings, 2009). However, studies indicate that most teachers do not believe that all students are capable of succeeding academically. The American education system embraces the view that students are born with innate intelligence, and intelligence is not malleable (Hilliard, 1988 as cited in Baumberg, 1994). Therefore, bright students who enter a classroom are more likely to receive positive and

high teacher expectations than children perceived as being "slow" (Baumberg, 1994; Brewster & Stephenson, 2013). Studies indicate negative teacher expectations have been shown to affect literacy development of African American males (Oates, 2003 as cited in Tatum 2008). Ladson-Billings (2009), in her book *Dream Keepers*, states that many teachers not only have low expectations of African American students, but they have biases and "racist notions" that interfere in the treatment of African American students because these students' behaviors or values do not resemble those of white students (p. 25). Teachers may not recognize or identify their treatment of black students as stereotypical or even racist. Unfortunately, public perceptions of African American males are influenced by the largely disproportionate amount of negative media coverage related to criminal activity rather than positive community coverage, which contributes to an overall fear of African American males (Brewster & Stephenson, 2013). For some teachers this fear can translate into "racist notions" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 25). Therefore, it is vital for teachers to be aware of implicit bias and stereotyping. Robert Marzano (2010) believes that teachers' behavior can be more important than expectations, because children can see a teacher's behavior toward them and can infer the teacher's bias from their observations; therefore, teachers need to be consciously aware of their own bias. Marzano describes a four-step process of becoming aware. (1) Teachers need to identify the group of students of whom they have low expectations. (2) They need to identify similarities among these students. For example, are these students from the same race, or ethnic group? (3) Teachers need to identify how they are treating this group of students differently. (4) Finally, they need to make sure to treat all students with a high level of expectation (Marzano, 2010).

Ladson-Billings states that culturally relevant teachers believe that all of their students can succeed rather than fail. These teachers see themselves as a reciprocal part of the community, and

they help students make connections between their local, national, racial, cultural, and global identities by developing a community of learners and by learning collaboratively. They work with students to strive for success by “helping students to develop that knowledge by building bridges and scaffolding learning” (p. 28).

Dialogic Reading at Home and at School

In the past two decades, reading aloud was considered “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985 p. 23). There is plenty of research supporting read-alouds as being beneficial to early literacy (e.g., Morgan & Meier, 2008). Read-alouds provide children the opportunity to listen to a variety of words, thus increasing vocabulary, which can result in the ability to recognize words in print (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). They can also increase listening comprehension and encourage syntactic development. One way to focus on culturally relevant instruction while also supporting student’s academic vocabulary development is to use dialogic reading as a method for reading aloud. What is *dialogic reading*? Evidence demonstrates that read-alouds are most effective when children are actively involved through asking and answering questions, and making predictions, instead of passively listening (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Researchers call this type of reading interactive or dialogic (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). These styles of shared reading result in increased vocabulary, comprehension, and story schema (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Shared reading means the teacher reads the story to the entire class and occasionally makes references to pictures and vocabulary, but students take the more passive role of listening. Dialogic reading (DR) differs from traditional shared reading in that the teacher reads with small groups of children and asks a series of prompts (see Tables 1 and 2). The teacher ultimately has a conversation with the students about the book, scaffolding their language,

extending their length of sentences, and gradually talking less while encouraging children to increase their talk (Flynn, 2011).

DR leads to vocabulary growth, which then translates into improved reading and success in other academic areas (Morgan & Meier, 2008).

DR uses a set of standardized prompts to target young children’s oral vocabulary and comprehension. Teachers: (a) ask open-ended questions about a story’s characters, setting and events in the story; (b) expand on children’s answers or ask further questions; (c) provide praise and encouragement to children for giving input into the story; and (d) build on children’s interests when selecting stories and questions regarding the story. (Morgan & Meier, 2008, p. 12)

This type of reading increases expressive and receptive language for academically at-risk children “as measured by standardized, norm-referenced test measures” (Whitehurst, 1988 as cited in Morgan & Meier, 2008, p. 12).

DR has been used as a literacy intervention in low-income households and Head Start classrooms, and it is now considered to be an “evidence-based literacy intervention” (Morgan & Meier p. 12). Within a regular classroom, the teacher works with a small group of children, typically five students or less, reading one book multiple times over five days. The teacher reads the book the first time for enjoyment and familiarity. The following day, the teacher rereads the story, this time using the PEER and/or CROWD prompts (see Table 1). With each reading, the teacher repeats the prompts, varying the questions, and encouraging students to take more ownership of the discussions. By the fifth day (reading), the teacher takes on the role of the listener, and the students become the storytellers. In between these sessions, parents are asked to use the DR prompts at home with their child.

Table 1*One standardized prompt method.*

(Morgan & Meier, 2008 p. 14)

What does it Stand for?	How do you do it?	Example	How does it help?
P-Prompt	Prompt the child to name an object on the page or ask them about the characters in the story.	Teacher: "What is this?" Student: "A truck."	Increases attention. Engages child in the story. Increases knowledge of the plot. Increases vocabulary.
E-Evaluate	Evaluate whether the child was correct. If not, think about what additional information you can add to expand the student's vocabulary.	Teacher thinks about response and information to add.	Teacher gives the student individual feedback on his/her response and encourages him/her to add more information.
E-Expand	Expand on the student's response by adding a few more words.	Teacher: "Yes, it's a big, red fire truck. Can you say that?"	Encourages the student to say a little more than he/she would normally. Increases vocabulary.
R-Repeat	Ask the child to repeat the response.	Student: "A big, red fire truck."	Encourages the student to use language.

Why is Dialogic Reading Important in a Culturally Responsive Classroom?

DR has been identified as an intervention that supports both vocabulary growth and positive engagement in the classroom. A case study by Doyle and Bramwell (2006) shows DR as a method for not only building oral language and vocabulary growth, but also for building social and emotional learning. This can be done by using texts to develop meaningful discussions about social and emotional life lessons. Earlier, we stated that part of being a culturally relevant teacher is building relationships with our students. The small

groupings used in DR interventions allow teacher and students to build a safe environment for learning. This setting also allows for more verbal interaction and analytic talk, and it is a perfect time to reference, or make connections to, children's background and experiences. Tatum (2008) believes connecting to students' background is vital for developing African American boys' literacy skills and interests. When students are read to in small groups, they demonstrate better reading comprehension because they participate in repeated readings and more extensive discourse, which can help them develop more interpretations of the text than when the story is read in a whole-class setting (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). Teachers

Table 2

Second standardized prompt method

What does it stand for	How do I use it?	Example	How does it help?
C-Completion	Ask the student to complete a word or phrase.	Teacher: "Let's finish this page. I do not like them, Sam-I-am. I do not like ____."	Increases students' listening comprehension and use of language.
R-Recall	Ask the students details about the characters and events in the story.	Teacher: "Who was in the house with Sam?" Students: "A mouse."	Engages students in the story. Increases recall of details.
O-Open-ended	Ask students to describe what is happening in the picture.	Teacher: "Tell me what's happening in this picture."	Opportunity for children to use language.
W-Wh-questions	Point to something in a picture and ask the students to name the object or action.	Teacher: "What's this called?" Students: "A submarine." Teacher: "What does it do?"	Helps build vocabulary.
D-Distancing	Ask questions that relate the story to something in the student's life.	Teacher: "Have you ever eaten eggs and ham? When? Name some foods that you like or don't like."	Helps the student to make connections and their own lives. Opportunity for the students to use language.

can also select culturally-relevant texts and support students in discussing these texts.

Dialogic reading is also a wonderful way to build relationships with families. In Jackie's classroom, she advises parents to read to their child every day for 15 to 20 minutes. She informs parents that this is the best homework they can do with their child. Adams (1990) states that reading aloud to children is one of the most important activities parents can share with their child and a vital skill for early literacy (as cited in Edwards, 2010). She also estimates that children who are read to for approximately 30 minutes each night will have acquired 1,000 hours

of print exposure by the time they begin kindergarten. Parents can also be invited into the classroom to participate in classroom dialogic reading experiences. Parents can bring in books and read aloud to students from texts that are important to children's family. This builds positive relationships between families and school and enables families to bring their cultural knowledge into the classroom.

It Takes a Village

Current studies seem to indicate that, for instruction to be effective, it must be integrated as part of a culturally relevant classroom. Therefore, Tatum

(2008) believes that the gap continues to exist for African American boys because the literacy model is incomplete. He describes the literacy model having four literacy needs: academic, cultural, emotional, and social. In essence, explicit and excellent instruction cannot exist in a vacuum. Teachers must meet all four literacy needs: (1) teachers must believe and care for their students; (2) teachers must build relationships by seeking an understanding of students' life experiences in and outside the classroom; (3) teachers must provide texts that students can relate to and create an environment for meaningful discussion; (4) teachers must see students as people who can succeed and not as standardized test scores (Tatum, 2008).

The achievement gap is multifaceted. SES and level of education are only two of the most commonly known variables that contribute to the achievement gap. However, Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2009) *Dream Keepers* and Tatum's (2008) research findings inform educators of how critical it is for us to change our paradigm of African American children, and especially males. Teachers must reflect on their practice and decide what they can do to make changes in their classroom to build a culturally relevant classroom. We must begin to treat our African American students equally by balancing our curriculum to reflect the diversity of *all* of our students, including English-language learners. The best teaching strategies won't be effective unless we build relationships, believe each child can succeed, and accept each child for their culturally diverse background. For those new to building a culturally relevant classroom, we recommend that you start small. Table 3 provides some suggestions to help you get started.

Developing a culturally relevant classroom.

- Continuously purchase more books that represent my diverse classroom
- Maintain high expectations of all my

students and believing each child can succeed

- Scaffold student learning
- Invite parents to share a talent or something cultural with my students
- Integrate more Black history and culture as part of our curriculum, think beyond familiar historical faces, and explore other figures such as artists, scientists, and musicians (rap, Motown, R&B, scientists, etc.).
- African American students may prefer to work cooperatively, so implementing group projects that foster cooperative learning may motivate these students
- Continue building strong, caring relationships with students and parents and home and school connection
- Using the CROWD prompts with struggling readers

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Table- *Recommendations for Schools and Teachers*

- Implement professional development on culturally relevant teaching for all teachers
- Ensure that there is a fair and accurate representation of African American culture included in the curriculum
- Read multicultural literature, poetry, and music lyrics
- Learn about African American historical, cultural, and scientific contributors and include as part of the curriculum
- Ensure that multicultural books of all genres and content areas are included in the classroom and are part of regular curriculum
- Develop meaningful discussions using books to teach lessons about social and emotional content, language arts, and history
- Invite parents and extended family into the classroom and build a relationship with them early in the school year
- Determine the best method of communicating with parents throughout the year (Facebook, e-mail, texting, newsletter etc.)
- Communicate with parents regularly throughout the year, especially about grades
- Don't wait until there is a problem to call a parent/family member; call parents with positive news about their child
- When calling parents with a problem, have a solution in mind or ask parents for insight
- Provide a book fair night showcasing different types of literature available to students
- Create a school library for parents to borrow materials about learning or other resources
- Be a good listener and have an open mind when working with a diverse community
- Build students' self-esteem and ethnic self-identity
- Have high expectations of all students and be conscious of bias, especially with regard to students from low SES
- Don't assume African Americans or other minorities come to school with a deficit
- Learn how to use Dialogic Reading (<http://mypearsontraining.com/products/read-together/index.asp>)

Resources and Recommended Websites

Dream Keepers by Gloria Ladson-Billings

Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain by Zaretta Hammond

www.ready4rigor.com www.readingrockets.org

www.reachoutandread.org

DR training- Read Together Talk Together - <http://mypearsontraining.com/products/read-together/index.asp>

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