Evidence-based literacy education and the African American child

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African Americans hold a historically unique place in education. As heirs to the legacy of slavery in early America, followed by educational sequestering in “separate-but-equal” school systems before the Brown v. Board of Education decision, their emergence into full citizenship was hindered to an agonizing extent by willful others. African American parents, because of their unique roots, are keenly aware that the pathway to social justice for their children is necessarily cobbled with literacy stonework.

The insistence on evidence-based solutions to literacy problems in U.S. urban schools has generally been helpful and illuminated a number of critical issues. More to the point (as is often the case in such things) good research has helped us better understand how much we do not know about helping urban children living at the poverty level to become literate. This is particularly so for African American children who live in poverty conditions in urban settings. For example, what are the cultural aspects of African American life that influence children in language acquisition? Yet there are some emerging themes to be found in evidence-based research that are helpful for teachers working with these populations.

In this column we review two evidence-based literacy studies conducted with low-income urban African American children that we feel offer promising avenues for education. The first body of work was a longitudinal study focused on developing prerequisite early literacy skills with preschool African American children living at the poverty level. The second study focused on effective practices at the elementary level.

The Language Enrichment Activities Program

One of the most rigorously researched preschool initiatives with poverty-level African American children is the Language Enrichment Activities Program (LEAP). This project originally began in 1990 with major funding by the Texas Instruments Foundation as an educational outreach. Texas Instruments Foundation, working with a public school district and two universities, created a model preschool for 90 four-year-olds—the Margaret Cone Preschool. Cone is a Head Start Center in an area marked by poverty, crime, and unemployment. (Head Start is a U.S. federally funded program that focuses on the school readiness of young children in low-income areas.) The long-range goal was for the graduates of the Cone center to complete high school and secure employment, with the possibility of further educational achievement and career opportunities (LEAP, 2005). The operational goal of LEAP was to prepare children to enter kindergarten functioning at an age-appropriate level of development (LEAP, 2005). Over the years, a full array of services much like those in other Head Start Centers emerged, but so did a comprehensive curriculum for the preschoolers.

The LEAP curriculum and teacher training components emphasized the areas of receptive and expressive language, phonological awareness, knowledge of the letters of the alphabet, basic concepts, and prewriting fine motor skills. Pre- and postassessments document the superior gains made by the children who participated in the program. Results of more than a decade of evidence-based
research into LEAP were summarized thus by a Texas Instruments Foundation director (Abbas, 2001):

After several years with the LEAP curriculum, the children soared to levels ranging from the 60th percentile to as high as the 94th percentile in vocabulary and pre-reading skills. Our [Iowa Tests of Basic Skills] and Stanford-9 data clearly show that children from low-income, minimum family support environments can perform at levels comparable to children from a much higher socioeconomic level given a quality preschool experience.... At the beginning of the collaboration, 42 percent of third graders passed TAAS [the state academic test]. This year, 98 percent passed, and Frazier earned the coveted status of “Exemplary” per the Texas Education Agency. (p. 2)

Key elements of the LEAP preschool curriculum

The LEAP curriculum required a great deal of research and development to find the most effective curriculum for these African American children living at the poverty level. Following is a description of each critical component that resulted in effective teacher development and student learning.

**Language with stories.** Reading aloud to children was found to be essential in helping low-income African American learners acquire preliteracy language skills. Reading aloud helped learners develop a sense of story structure and syntax used in written language and built children’s listening and speaking vocabularies. Experiences with books were an integral part of the daily LEAP curriculum.

Books for this component were selected from widely recognized children’s classics and multicultural literature. They had to be developmentally appropriate for children whose language development was between the ages of two and four years. Each week teachers chose five or more books from a thematically organized bibliography. Lesson plans included ideas for introducing the book, leading a discussion, and expanding concepts and vocabulary into different areas in the classroom. Repeated readings also were used to cement preliteracy learning.

**Language with words.** Oral expression using complete sentences employing standard English grammar and syntax was encouraged using posters of common concrete objects and activities as a stimulus (LEAP, 2005). Using a themes approach, posters were extracted in summary form from an English as a Second Language (ESL) program, which was drawn from *The New Oxford Picture Dictionary* (Parnwell, 1988) and the Montessori instructional paradigm of “this is, show me, what is.” This provided teachers with an instructional scaffolding for addressing vocabulary, grammar, and syntax in spoken standard English. Lesson plans gave teachers ideas for expanding vocabulary and concepts each day. Children listened to the teacher’s description of a picture and responded to open-ended questions. Teachers incorporated ideas for expanding the vocabulary and concepts through other activities.

**Language with sounds.** Phonological awareness was first introduced in spoken whole word units that began with sounds in the child’s name as a unit of speech (LEAP, 2005). Words were recognized in two- to three-word phrases and sentences before introducing compound words. Children also practiced segmenting and blending syllables in two- and three-syllable words. While concepts were presented orally, students also received tactile-kinesthetic support.

**Language with letters.** Children were introduced to the alphabetic principle (consonants first) by manipulating objects with the same beginning sound. They learned to segment and name the beginning sound of a spoken word and then the name and shape of the letter that represents the sound. Students used “air writing” first to represent the uppercase letter that represents the target sound, recreated the sound, and then learned a keyword associated with the sound.

**Language with ideas.** Games and dramatic play were used to help the children learn the concepts of rhyme, opposites, position words, plurals, and present and past tense words. Manipulatives were used and then placed in different learning centers in the classroom to teach size, shape, color, number, and other concepts.

**Language with prewriting motor skills.** One problem faced by many poverty-level urban
African American children in kindergarten (as with many other five-year-olds) occurs when they are asked to write on lined paper before their grasp has developed sufficiently to grip a pencil. In LEAP, fine-motor activities strengthen the whole hand first and then the “pincer” grasp. These activities were incorporated throughout the day.

LEAP continues to be a powerful program and has received much attention as an effective preliteracy program for African American children living in poverty. There is excellent information on the LEAP website www.leapsandbounds.org.

Addressing the literacy needs of elementary-age African American students

Perkins (2004) studied effective literacy instruction methods used by teachers of African American fourth-grade students. School administrators identified successful teachers according to norm-referenced test data for participation in a naturalistic inquiry to identify instructional strategies they attributed to their students’ literacy gains. Common practices used by these successful teachers are listed in Table 1.

There are other similar studies that add to our understanding of literacy education for these students. For example, Ladson-Billings (1994) also researched and identified several of the same methods as being very useful with African American students through ethnographic interviews with eight teachers. First, parents and principals identified the eight teachers they believed demonstrated effectiveness with these students. Then, Ladson-Billings conducted her study with five African American and three Caucasian teachers to examine effective teaching methods through teacher interviews and classroom observations. She credited culturally relevant pedagogy such as cooperative learning, multicultural materials, phonics, and teachers who care about their students and their culture.

In another study, Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, and Duffy-Hester (1998) surveyed administrators and teachers about elementary reading and language arts instruction. The results were based on teachers’ self-reports of their beliefs and practices. One of the major findings from their surveys was that a majority (89%) of the teachers surveyed preferred a balanced, eclectic approach to elementary reading instruction that involves reading skill instruction and immersion in a rich collection of literature.

We found that teachers design reading and language arts programs that provide a multifaceted, balanced instructional diet that includes an artful blend of direct instruction in phonics and other reading and writing strategies along with a rich assortment of literature, oral language, and written language experiences and activities. (Baumann et al., p. 646)

Talented teachers and relevant curricula are the key

In terms of evidence-based research focusing specifically on the low-income African American child it seems clear that we are still in the early stages. This is not to say, however, that we know nothing of use that can greatly improve literacy learning for these children.

The LEAP program, developed by Nell Carvell, nurtured financially and philosophically by Texas Instruments Foundation, and then implemented by talented preschool teachers for more than a decade, has provided us with some increased understandings drawn from scientific evidence. African American city preschoolers who live in poverty benefit from

- structured language development aimed at increasing listening and speaking vocabularies;
- direct instruction in phonological awareness followed by exposure to the alphabetic principle and alphabet learning;
- exposure to rich multicultural literature in a variety of genres;
- parent involvement in preliteracy learning activities;
- Standard English grammar instruction;
- word work using rhyme, word opposites, position words, plurals, and present- and past-tense words; and
- prewriting motor skill development.

It is also clear that deep training for teachers on how to correctly implement well researched teaching practices paid high dividends for African
American children and their learning. It was not a commercial program that proved to be successful, it was a skilled teacher. In sum, the knowledge gained from the LEAP longitudinal research relative to impoverished African American urban pre-school students is seminal.

The picture for elementary-age African American students living in poverty conditions is still developing. Findings by Perkins (2004) as well as others cited earlier seem to point in several consistent directions. Most of the literacy learning strategies thought to be most effective are consistent with conclusions described in the Report of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Explicit instruction in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and reading fluency appear to benefit low-income African American elementary-age students in an urban setting, but there is a caveat: African American learners from impoverished environments require several other elements in order to construct a comprehensive literacy program that successfully meets their needs.

There is strong evidence that poverty-level African American students benefit from thoughtful and purposeful instruction that begins with their own unique experiences. Without these connections it is difficult, if not impossible, to construct comprehensive vocabularies or multilayered understandings of the world. Delpit (2003) spoke eloquently to this point:

Part of truly allowing the brilliance of our children to shine forth would be to consciously organize institutions and instruction that expose them to their intellectual legacy; clarify their position in a racialized society; ritually express expectations for hard work and academic, social, physical, and moral excellence; and create alternative reasons for success other than “getting a good job”–for our community, for your ancestors, for your descendents.... Asa Hilliard has identified and documented schools serving low-income urban children that produce some of the highest standardized test scores in their respective school districts.... Interestingly, despite their excellent test scores, the focus of each school is not to raise scores, but to develop a style of education that draws upon, whether consciously or not, traditional African educational thought about how children should be viewed and how they should be socialized intellectually, physically, and spiritually.... [W]e must first stop attempting to determine their capacity. We must be convinced of their inherent intellectual capability, humanity, and spiritual character. We must fight the foolishness proliferated by those who believe that one number can measure the worth and drive the education of human beings, or that predetermined scripts can make for good teaching. Finally, we must learn who our children are—their lived culture, their interests, and their intellectual, political, and historical legacies. (p. 19)

Other enhancements are indicated for comprehensive literacy instruction to indeed be comprehensive for urban African American children. There is strong validation for the use of multicultural literature as a potent means to bridge understandings for these students. There also appears to be consensus from researchers that family literacy programs are helpful, if not essential. Many parents living in poverty are keenly interested in helping their children succeed, but they may lack sufficient literacy skills and need assistance.
Writing instruction is another essential component in assisting these learners. Structured developmental writing helps students apply what they have learned about themselves and the world, as well as ways they can use standard English language patterns and new vocabulary as a tool to express themselves. In early literacy instruction, writing instruction helps students apply new knowledge relative to the alphabetic principle and phonics, which can then have a reciprocal benefit for decoding unknown words in print when reading.

In both reading and writing instruction, there seems to be consensus that children need time every day to practice what they have learned. Cooperative learning activities, such as “buddy reading,” peer editing conferences in writing, and choral reading can be very productive.

Strickland (1994) seems to have gotten it right when she concluded over a decade ago that African American children living in poverty benefit from family literacy programs, instruction in phonics, cooperative group activities, peer teaching methods that promote active learning, direct instruction, teacher modeling, and multicultural literature. The evidence-based methods reported in this column for African American children living in poverty contribute a few of the cobblestones needed to pave the way toward greater literacy.

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References