

Recommendations for research to improve reading achievement for African American students

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There is little debate among researchers, policymakers, and educational stakeholders that reading achievement among African American students is an important issue (Strickland, 1994). For example, Paul (2000) advanced the view that teachers and parents of African American students do not spend adequate time focusing on reading materials that students value. Further, Craig, Connor, and Washington (2003) contend that African American students are more likely to read below the levels of their peers and recommend that early language and literacy development take place during the preschool years. In another study, Charity, Scarborough, and Griffin (2004) found that African American students who are familiar with school-based communication and speech patterns had higher achievement in reading in the early grades.

While several scholars have contributed greatly to the research literature on matters pertaining to African American students and reading (e.g., Edwards, 2004; Entwisle & Alexander, 1988; Flowers, 2003; Hale, 2001; Thompson, 2004), additional research is needed to examine in greater detail the factors that influence these students' achievement. Furthermore, research is needed to support the development of appropriate strategies and dispositions required for African American students to become proficient readers.

Despite some recent gains among African American students, data from statewide and national tests indicate that reading achievement gaps by race still persist among the nation's school children. For example, results of the 2005 National Assessment of

Educational Progress indicated that the average reading scale score for African American eighth graders was 243 while the average for white eighth graders was 271 (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). Data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 show similar results (Ingels et al., 2005): African American tenth graders were less likely to score at the highest level, where advanced skills in the ability to analyze text and make judgments based on a comprehensive set of information are demonstrated. These data also suggest that, on average, African American students score at a lower proficiency level than white students, and they are equally likely to score lower than students from other racial and ethnic groups. Taken as a whole, the results are somewhat mixed. While there is some evidence suggesting that the achievement gap in reading between African American and white students may be narrowing, there is little evidence to show that it is likely to disappear altogether.

To assist researchers in examining African American students' reading achievement, this article highlights promising areas of research and related educational practice, some of which are currently overlooked in relation to this student group. I offer several recommendations for reading researchers, categorized by the following themes: (1) standardized testing, (2) teacher quality, (3) after-school programs, (4) parent involvement, (5) reading and study skills, and (6) computer games and simulations. The strength of the recommendations is in their collective implementation; that is, no single research study,

teaching method, or reading strategy will have the same impact as an array of strategies implemented by a number of constituent groups working together in cooperation to achieve a common goal.

Standardized testing

In this era of high-stakes testing and accountability in public schools, reading researchers must continue to examine how standardized tests affect reading achievement for African American students. While standardized testing is a viable approach to measure reading achievement, perhaps there are other more valid and reliable strategies that can be used. These strategies might take the form of more authentic assessments that better simulate the reading practices and skills that students use on a daily basis (Valencia, Hiebert, & Afflerbach, 1994). Researchers should pursue ways to identify alternatives to standardized tests that can be used to obtain similar judgments about students' abilities.

Because of the importance of standardized tests in the United States under No Child Left Behind, additional research is needed to examine how to improve the test-taking skills of African American students. Research is also needed to consider the possible range of explanations for test results, such as per-student expenditures on reading instruction, students' socioeconomic status, and their background knowledge. Other factors that may be worthwhile to study include students' academic orientations, school safety, language development, and the curriculum (Perry & Delpit, 1998; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2004; Thompson, 2004).

Further, relevant information about African American students' reading test scores might be better understood by comparison with other African American students' scores. Perhaps scores by gender within this racial group will reveal more about relative gain in reading achievement and ability than does simply comparing African American students' scores with those of students from other racial groups.

Additional research might also explore the extent to which teachers are adequately trained to interpret standardized test scores. Findings from this research may account for some of the variation seen in test scores by race. Given that standardized tests are intended to be used in a constructive manner to identify areas of concern and lead to development of educationally appropriate strategies to address those concerns, this area of research may add an important dimension to the reading assessment literature.

Teacher quality

Teacher quality is another important area that has implications for African American students' reading achievement (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Research must address the role of teacher perceptions of African American students' reading achievement. For example, researchers should analyze the extent to which a teacher's prior knowledge of the racial achievement gap in reading affects African American students in the classroom. Outcomes of such research may account for variance in predicting African American students' reading knowledge and help explain how some African American children perceive their own ability to read and comprehend information from texts.

Researchers should also study the effects of teacher knowledge of diversity issues on African American students' reading abilities. Perhaps it is the case that teachers with more knowledge about African American culture and history are more equipped to teach African American students. It is also plausible that a teacher's knowledge of diversity issues influences how he or she manages the classroom and plans lessons (Delpit, 1995). The line of research could be expanded to determine which aspects of a teacher's knowledge and training are detrimental to African American students, and which particular experiences, knowledge, values, skills, and other characteristics of teachers positively influence African American students' reading achievement. For example, researchers should consider the extent to which preservice teachers take courses about the African American experience in education and how this knowledge base might foster academic achievement for students and improve parent-teacher relationships. Researchers should also examine the type of content that is addressed in diversity courses in teacher education programs and investigate to determine whether preservice teachers are being exposed to enough content in the area of literacy that reflects the complexity and comprehensiveness of the African American experience. A content analysis of a sample of course syllabi from selected teacher education programs may be an appropriate place to start in examining this important topic.

After-school programs

According to a national survey of students' after-school experiences and parents' perceptions of after-school programs, African American youth are

more likely to participate in after-school programs than are youth from other racial and ethnic groups (Afterschool Alliance, 2004). This conclusion is supported by research conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (Carver & Iruka, 2006). In addition, the Afterschool Alliance study found that approximately one-quarter of all African American youth are unsupervised after school; thus, a considerable number of African American parents express a desire to have their children participate in well-developed after-school programs. Given these data, I contend that another important area of research that has not been adequately explored is the role and relevance of after-school programs in improving reading achievement for African American students. This line of research could also be expanded to examine the benefits of an extended school day to enhance African American students' reading abilities.

Another area of research could evaluate after-school curricula to assess their utility in supporting the development of reading skills. Also, quantitative data could be analyzed to determine the degree to which after-school programs affect reading test scores for African American students. This type of research will help determine which program components contribute to improving the reading abilities of African American students. Another approach might be to connect after-school programs with postsecondary institutions and establish a link between various constituent groups such as professors of reading education, preservice teachers, student groups, and research centers that focus on the academic challenges of African American students. These types of collaborations could possibly be centered on enhancing reading achievement, improving test scores, and supporting high-quality teacher interactions with African American students.

Parent involvement

One prominent area that requires ongoing investigation is the link between parental involvement and reading achievement. Although extensive research shows the positive benefits of parental involvement on students' academic achievement (e.g., Edwards, 1992; Kaplan, Liu, & Kaplan, 2001; Ortiz, 2001; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005), what is relatively unknown is which particular types of involvement best serve African American children in improving their reading skills. Additional research should examine the most effective methods for working with parents and students to increase parental involvement that leads to gains in reading

achievement (Thompson, 2004; Yan, 1999). This research should use various methodological designs to yield information regarding purposeful strategies to ensure that teachers and parents are equally involved in a child's reading achievement. For example, qualitative studies could be designed to determine which particular teaching strategies or activities could be best implemented by parents who want to help their children improve their reading skills. Strategies could then be developed and tested to work in two-parent or single-parent households. This suggestion is important given that African American students come from a variety of family compositions. According to Billingsley (1992) and recent census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004), a significant number of African American families do not reflect the traditional two-parent nuclear family model. Research and practical applications must also take into account the fact that grandmothers serve parenting functions for some African American students (Billingsley). The point here is that while parental involvement is relevant, innovative paradigms for parental support are needed for African American students (Edwards, 2004; Hale, 2001). Of course, to implement results from this type of research, teachers will need training in customizing recommendations for African American families given each student's reading level and his or her family structure.

Lastly, more research is needed to examine parents' readiness to be involved as it relates to ensuring their children are developing the appropriate reading skills at their respective grade level. Some parents of African American children may want to be more involved but simply lack the skills to support their child appropriately. It is important that this line of research first obtain data regarding parents' perceptions of what it means to be involved. Second, this research should examine what particular skills and knowledge bases are needed by parents to empower them to be more involved in their children's development. Third, this research should address how curricula or instructional modules could be developed for parents who need certain skills themselves before they can enhance their child's skills through purposeful interactions with their child and his or her school environment.

Reading and study skills

Another understudied topic in the research literature on reading achievement is the impact of reading and study strategies on African American

students' reading abilities. Due to the importance of reading strategies, study strategies, and related dispositions for students from elementary school through college, more research is needed to explore the best methods for teaching students how to manage their time effectively when they are learning concepts on their own or completing their homework. This area of research should carefully consider which particular reading and study strategies are most appropriate in developing the many and varied types of reading skills that are needed to perform well in school and acquire higher order reading skills.

Research exploring study skills should also focus on investigating African American students' learning orientations to ascertain their role and relevance across grade levels. This suggestion is based on research exploring the role of motivation in academic achievement, which suggests that more highly motivated students perform better academically (Zimmerman, 1994). If this area of research yields significant findings for African American students, researchers should also examine the extent to which teachers implement procedures to motivate students academically in the classroom. Additionally, research is needed that examines how preservice teachers are being trained to teach study skills and motivate African American students academically.

Computer games and simulations

A considerable amount of research has proliferated regarding the influence of computer games, simulations, and other educational technologies on students' cognitive development in school (Baltra, 1990; de Felix & Johnson, 1993; Gee, 2003). This research suggests that these technologies, if developed and implemented properly, have the potential to enhance students' academic skills. It is clear that African American students in grades K–12 enjoy and spend many hours playing video and computer games (Snyder & Tan, 2005). Development of instructional technology that simulates some of the more engaging features of these games, while also including aspects that enhance students' reading skills, may be worthwhile. Pursuit of this recommendation would involve collaborations among software engineers, teachers, reading researchers, and students to develop another approach to meet the needs of African American students who enjoy actively engaging with multimedia environments. Considerable research on the role of this type of educational

technology for African American learners must serve as the foundation in creating these and other educational devices. Experimental research designs and even single-subject designs may prove useful in providing the appropriate research base.

Conclusion

Improving reading achievement and enhancing reading skills among African American students must remain a top priority for reading researchers. In this article, I have suggested some directions in reading research that might enhance the reading achievement of African American students and have provided a lens through which to view the most pressing topics that need to be addressed to yield research findings and answers to very difficult questions. This article has attempted to posit interesting, meaningful, and relevant objectives and research questions for reading researchers concerned about the reading achievement of African American students.

It is important to acknowledge that in addition to the issues discussed in this article, many other factors and variables require examination to gain a deeper understanding of how to improve African American students' reading achievement in schools, such as the educational environment, school setting, and physical and emotional characteristics of students (Barton, 2003). No single study will answer the many complex questions that affect African Americans, and some strategies and research may only be applicable to a relatively small sample. Reading researchers must therefore exercise caution and sensitivity when interpreting results of studies or recommending particular approaches for African American students. It is disadvantageous, unless methodologically rigorous research substantiates such claims, to suggest that one particular approach or strategy will yield the same results for all African American students.

Finally, it is my hope that, in the future, the effectiveness of reading research will be measured in terms of its ability to produce empirical findings that influence the development of curriculum materials, educational programs, and innovative approaches that yield significant gains in reading achievement for African American students.

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