Effective Literacy Instruction for Urban Children: Voices From the Classroom

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In an attempt to bring readers “on-the-ground” insights about effective urban literacy instruction, we interviewed three literacy educators who have extensive experience with learners in urban school environments. Each of them has taught literacy and developed teaching practices for urban schools, as well as conducted action research to test the efficacy of their practices. Diana Carry is a teacher researcher whose work in the areas of writing and word knowledge is well known to school districts across the country. Neshellda Johnson teaches elementary school children and is best known for investigating and developing strategies that utilize literacy to enhance children’s appreciation for ethnic differences. Des Remona (Mona) Morgan is a middle school teacher who works in an urban middle school. She has developed literacy strategies, used them in her own classroom, and shared them widely with teachers in schools in the mid-south. She is perhaps best known for creating and researching a strategy that she calls Genre-Spinning.

We asked these three urban educators to respond to five issues, which together would provide insight into the question of what counts as “effective” literacy teaching practices in urban classrooms:

1. Needs of urban learners—What are the most striking unmet needs of urban learners?
2. Principles/theoretical framework for literacy teaching—What principles do you find most useful to guide your literacy practices in urban schools, and what theoretical framework underlies them?
3. Literacy instructional practices—What do your principles look like when translated into literacy teaching practices in the urban classroom?
4. Evaluating outcomes—What types of student responses signal that an instructional practice is working well for students?
5. Change—What changes are needed to move us toward a pedagogy of success for urban learners?

We looked across their responses, searching for commonalities and differences; and we noted the following patterns.

Needs of Urban Learners

It was interesting that in their responses these educators talked as much about the needs of urban teachers as they did about urban learners, thus showing the connections they saw between the two. One of the important reminders was Mona’s point that the urban learner of today “is no longer ‘just’ the African American child but also students of Hispanic, Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and increasingly Caucasian descent.”

Neshellda identified three significant needs of children in the urban learning environment: “emotional
support, exposure, and changes in attitudes toward education.” She noted that most of her students
are from families of low economic status..., tend to have several siblings, and live in single parent households. Many come to school hungry and tired from a disheartening evening. In some cases the children are raising not only other siblings but themselves.

As a result, she finds that, “They often enter school with a defeated spirit.” Thus, the children she teaches need "support by being compassionate enough to look at each child individually and realistically, to communicate genuine care and concern for the student, and to help the students move past emotional issues being dealt with at home.” Exposure means that the children need to “see another side of life” and “be exposed to more positive environments.” Emotional support and exposure, then, become the key ingredients in changing what she sees as some children’s misconceptions into more positive attitudes toward education.

From the teacher perspective, Mona considers one of the gravest unmet needs of the urban learner to be teachers’ failures to take into consideration who their students are—linguistically, ethnically, and economically. And if that happens, as Neshellda points out, “It is easy for a teacher to label these students as lazy or unmotivated.” Diana believes in urban children:

I believe that all children have ideas, all children have words, and all children have a voice that can be developed effectively through writing. But let’s face it,... oftentimes when children share their ideas in writing, the teacher reads the first draft and judges it to be inadequate—episodic, lacking in focus, elaboration, sentence fluency, and voice. Sometimes the writing does not even make sense.

Helping teachers “know who their children are” is absolutely necessary to respond with effective instruction to a situation like the one described by Diana. All three of these educators discussed the need for high-quality professional development to enable urban teachers to provide effective literacy instruction, especially, as Mona reminded us, for teachers who work with English-language learners.

Principles/Theoretical Framework for Literacy Teaching

How about this sampling of responses to this issue from these three urban educators?

- Accelerate student achievement to the greatest extent possible (Diana).
- Appreciate the critical role of a diverse literacy-rich environment in the motivation and attitude of students (Mona).
- Employ a range of language and literacy teaching and learning strategies that are explicit and systematic to ensure both confidence and competence (Diana).
- Deliver instruction that is hands on, differentiated, provocative, and collaborative—and most important, fun, creative, relevant, and meaningful (Diana).
- Employ constructivist principles that see students and teachers as partners in the learning process: “allowing students to play a role in identifying what they want to learn, how they want to learn it, and what they can do with the information thereafter” (Neshellda).

What was perhaps most striking about what they had to say with respect to teaching principles is that no one said the same thing, and yet in many respects they were very much on the same page in terms of what underlies literacy instruction that will reach urban children across the elementary and middle school grade levels.

Instructional Practices

Instructional practices are where the rubber meets the road. As we looked across the responses given by the panel, we saw three themes emerge repeatedly in what they said about instructional practices that would meet urban children where they are: (1) authentic, (2) motivational, and (3) focused and differentiated (i.e., strategies that teach specific skills in reading and writing that kids need and will serve them well). The emphasis on authenticity was unanimous: Mona includes “teaching literacy skills via authentic literature,” Neshellda’s student-constructed
description of the memory of her deceased mother is confined to nice, good, fun, happy, sad, mad, and so forth. “Words let us think, create ideas, reason, and express. Shirley and children like her need dynamic vocabulary and word choice strategies to document their experiences in a compelling voice.” For teaching Shirley, Diana employed a strategy she developed called Vocabulary Mingle (Carry, 2003). As she said, “Tier It Up! Tier It Up!” is the chant children use to signal they are ready to explore the nuances of word meaning in their search for just the right word. They raise their hands in incremental heights until they are waving high in the air. Then they begin to “mingle” with their vocabulary in search of the precise word to express meaning. By using a system of supports, we help urban learners make a commitment to stretching their language and learning how to move from familiar to sophisticated word choices. The supports include hands-on, color-coded vocabulary manipulatives, questioning strategies, graphic organizers to teach word consciousness, and even word dramatization activities, interactive writing, and guided and independent writing. Shirley became so engaged with finding the just-right word to tell about her happiness when she and her mother went shopping that she exclaimed, as if she had struck gold, “This is it! This is the word I’m using for my momma! She is altruistic! I like this word for my momma! This word rocks!”

A segment of Shirley’s revised writing about her mother went like this:

My momma’s name was Clareen. She is the person I admire. I am on cloud nine when I remember her, talk about her, and tell people about the things we did together when she was living. She is not living anymore. My momma passed away last year. I looked in the box of words we have in our classroom to find the one that tells how I feel about her. But they didn’t make one for that feeling. So I put two of them together a red one and a green one: astonishing sorrow. The thing I really admire is how my momma was unselfish. A [sic] even better word is altruistic. We don’t have lots of money, but she was giving and getting things for us even when she needed stuff for herself. She put her children first.

As Diana noted, Shirley is an urban learner whose word choice projects center on the fact that “learning has to be meaningful to students,” and Diana stresses that “Good practice should incorporate and develop the interests of children.”

The motivational issue is closely linked to authenticity, but it was also stressed in other ways. In talking about getting students to become readers, Mona said, “I love to hype books—I find that motivation is contagious.”

Here’s Diana on the issue of differentiating instruction that focuses on specific strategies that will be of use to children: “a challenge is getting teachers to teach writing rather than merely assign writing.” In other words, to have quality writing instruction, we must ensure that teachers have the skills, resources, and strategies that empower them to provide explicit and systematic instruction in areas like vocabulary so that students are engaged in an exploration of language and word choice that increases both their skills and their enthusiasm for writing, while honoring their culture and learning styles.

Diana went on to relate the story of Shirley (pseudonym), a sixth grader, who, to most eyes, seemed to be a resistant, nonparticipatory learner. When Shirley wrote to the teacher assignment of “Tell about someone whom you admired,” she wrote for less than 10 minutes and produced the following, about which she said, “Sure. Here it is. It’s not so good.” when Diana asked to see it:

My momma is the person I admire. She was really nice. That is what I remember about her because she passed away. And I am sad. She was really, really nice and good. Are [sic] preacher said she was giving. She was really good to me. One time she took me shopping and we had fun. We were happy. I really love her. My momma was always doing nice things for us. She was nice. My momma always did things right even when daddy would get mad. I admire my momma. My momma is someone I admire. I admire her.

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Evaluating Outcomes

Recall that this question asked about what kinds of student responses signal that an instructional practice is working well. Let us just say as our first observation that not one of these educators mentioned standardized tests as an effective means of assessing student literacy learning. What they did say were things consistent with this quote from Mona: “The level of participation in a book discussion or a lesson is also a good indicator of whether or not a strategy is working.” Diana referred to the writing of Shirley as exemplifying student response that clearly indicates the learning that is taking place.

Interestingly, evaluation was also tied to the aforementioned issue of motivation. As Mona noted, “I know when a strategy is working when the students are excited about the product they are producing. When I employ the Genre Spinning strategy, my students want to share every detail of what they are writing with me.” Neshellda even noted that, “Many of my students have often asked to do additional projects for no credit at all.” Thus, the key to effective literacy assessment that meets urban students’ needs is, for all of these educators, assessment that is situated in everyday student activities so that it feeds directly into the teacher’s decisions about what to teach next, and how.

Change

Finally, what changes are needed to move us toward a pedagogy of success for urban learners? The message that came through loud and clear from all three was teacher professional development. As Mona put it, “The fact is that the urban teaching environment presents complex literacy challenges that require well trained literacy educators, not a teacher assigned to teach reading.” But effective teacher professional development does not come out of thin air, and so Neshellda stressed that “administrators should dialogue with teachers [about professional development] instead of forcing mandates/practices on practitioners.” All of these educators recognized the challenge of teaching literacy in urban schools, and they also freely stated that there are problems with what is happening in the name of literacy instruction in general in urban districts. But they also emphasized that many good things are going on, and it is these that we need to build on. Although the literature is rich with descriptions of research- or evidence-based literacy strategies, it is necessary to deepen our specific knowledge about ‘effective’ practices in urban learning environments, and the work of these three urban educators helps us see how to take another step forward.

References


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