The Effect of Teachers' Cultural Proficiency Training on Sixth Grade Students' Reading Achievement

Diane Wells-Rivers
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/studentwork

Part of the Education Commons

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation
Wells-Rivers, Diane, "The Effect of Teachers' Cultural Proficiency Training on Sixth Grade Students' Reading Achievement" (2011). Student Work. 3471.
https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/studentwork/3471
The Effect of Teachers’ Cultural Proficiency Training on Sixth Grade Students’ Reading Achievement

By

Diane Wells-Rivers

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration and Supervision

Omaha, Nebraska

April, 2011

Supervisory Committee

Kay A. Keiser, Ed.D. Chair

Jeanne L. Surface, Ed.D.

Larry L. Dlugosh, Ph.D.

Julie A. Delkamiller, Ed.D.
Abstract

THE EFFECT OF TEACHERS’ CULTURAL PROFICIENCY TRAINING ON SIXTH GRADE STUDENTS’ READING ACHIEVEMENT

Diane Wells-Rivers

University of Nebraska, 2011

Advisor: Dr. Kay A. Keiser

This study evaluated the overall reading achievement of African American (n = 42) and White (n = 21) sixth grade students in an urban Midwestern school, after their teachers’ engaged in culturally proficiency training provided by The Minnesota Humanities Center. Data for students in the study was collected for comprehension levels or acuity (CTB/McGraw-Hill, 2010), text gradient levels (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008), and oral fluency levels (Berglund & Johns, 2006; Fountas & Pinnell, 2008) during year two of their teachers’ participation in the training.

There was significant improvement from the beginning to end of the study by both groups of students, and there was a significant difference between groups in oral fluency. African American and White students’ results overall indicated steady growth in reading acuity as a measure of comprehension, guided reading or text gradient, and oral fluency levels; however, the achievement gap has not been bridged at this point. After two years of culturally proficient training, results indicate movement in the direction of positive progress for all students, and some narrowing of the achievement gap through gains made by African American students. This research may add to the knowledge of cultural proficiency programs, pre-service teacher college programs, school districts’ staff development training, and reading pedagogy.
Acknowledgements

The praise and glory is not mine. Many others have walked with me, provided support, encouragement, and guidance throughout this journey. My sons, grandsons, ancestors, and future generations were my inspiration and provided encouragement. I thank them now and in the future, for all of their understanding and sacrificial attitudes. My husband, Ronnie, and sons, Gabriel, Marcus, and Nicholas gave freely of their love, support, and time for my efforts. Ronnie’s great sacrifice was a source of constant inspiration. My mother, the late Elizabeth Fuller Wells, and my father, the late Clarence R. Wells, had a dream that propelled our large family from a rural life as sharecroppers to a future of success and social action career choices. I thank them both for being a reflection of what one can do in spite of small beginnings. They instilled a strong work ethic and a resilient spirit within me and neither has ever failed me. To Dr. LeDonna York, Dr. Kay Ferguson (retired), Dr. Laura Schulte (retired) and others who never gave up on me – my gratitude is immeasurable. I want to thank Dr. Kay A. Keiser, my dissertation advisor, whose scholarly support helped me to make sense of the process and provided a reminder of the joy of the journey. I also am extremely grateful to my dissertation committee, Dr. Jeanne Surface, Dr. Julie Delkamiller, and Dr. Larry Dlugosh for their support and feedback.

A special thanks to the entire staff of the Minnesota Humanities Center for their unwavering support, collegiality, and commitment to excellence. Mrs. Kate Gipp and Dr. Matthew Brandt from the Minnesota Humanities Center were especially supportive in this endeavor. Dr. Omowale Akintunde, chairperson of the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s Black Studies Department, deserves accolades for guiding me in the direction
of deconstructing and reconstructing curriculum and framing cultural proficiency as a way of life. I thank him for his humor, love of learning, and inspiration.

I want to thank the central office staff in the Research Department and the Educational and Professional Library. Thank you for all of your professionalism and willingness to help me grow in my ability to conduct in-depth research.

I want to thank my sons and grandsons Gabriel, Marcus, Nicholas, Malik, and Micah whom I love and appreciate. You gave me strength and love during my long hours away from you. Again, thank you to my deceased parents, Elizabeth and Clarence, whose humble beginnings inspired me to reach beyond the visible. I will treasure your example of a strong work ethic. Another thank you to my sacrificing husband, Ronnie, you were content to let me shine, provide balance to my passions, and supported all of my dreams. Your love and sacrifice are very humbling, and I love you dearly.

To my friends, you know who you are, I thank you for urging me to begin this journey and being there every step of the thousand steps. My experiences have been forged by many people and circumstances and helped to shape who I was, who I became, and who I will yet to be. I thank you for everything!
# Table of Contents

Abstract  i

Acknowledgements  iii

Table of Contents  iv

List of Tables  vii

Chapter

1. Introduction
   
   Background and Rationale  1
   
   Purpose of the Study  5
   
   Research Questions  5
   
   Definition of Terms  6
   
   Assumptions  11
   
   Delimitations of the Study  12
   
   Limitations of the Study  12
   
   Significance of the Study  13
   
   Organization of the Study  13

2. Review of Literature
   
   History and Background  15
   
   Relevance  16
   
   Reading Intervention & Prevention Programs  17
   
   Head Start — Early Prevention and Identification  17
   
   Reading First  20
RTI -- Response to Intervention 20
Success for All 21
Guided Reading by Fountas and Pinnell 23
Early Literacy Programs and Reading Achievement 23
Concept Oriented Reading Instruction 24
Programs, Partnerships, Research, and Practices for Improving Reading Skills 26
Research Bias 26
Epistemologies 28
Teachers’ Attitudes 30
High-Achieving High-Poverty Schools 31
Culturally Proficient, Relevant, and Responsive Teaching 32
Cultural Models for Changing Epistemologies and Closing the Achievement Gap 35
The American Excellence Association 36
The Minnesota Humanities Cultural Proficiency Partnership 37

3. Methodology
Research Design 40
Research Questions 40
Subjects 41
Instruments 43
Data Collection Procedures 45
Data Analysis 45
Objectives 46
4. Results

Student Reading Achievement Levels 48

Research Question 1 52
Research Question 2 52
Research Question 3 57
Research Question 4 57

5. Conclusions and Discussions

Conclusions 61
Discussion 63

Cultural Proficiency and Reading Achievement 64
Pedagogy and Poverty 66

Further Research 67
Recommendations and Next Steps 69

References 71

Appendix A School Site Study Approval 86
Appendix B School District Approval 87
List of Tables

Table 1  Oral Fluency Ratings and the Dimensions of Fluency 49
Table 2  Fountas & Pinnell Text Gradient Levels and Grade Level Correlation 50
Table 3  Socioeconomic Status Grade 6, 2009-2010 51
Table 4  Descriptive Statistics for CTB/McGraw-Hill Acuity 53
Table 5  Descriptive Statistics for Fountas and Pinnell Text Gradient Levels 54
Table 6  Descriptive Statistics for Oral Fluency 55
Table 7  Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Acuity and Race 56
Table 8  Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Fountas and Pinnell Text Gradient Levels and Race 58
Table 9  Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Oral Fluency and Race 60
Chapter One

Introduction

Background and Rationale

The disparity of achievement between the performance on standardized and criterion referenced tests for racial groups was well documented in research since the 1966 Coleman Report. The achievement gap based on race and socioeconomic status between urban African American and White students was also a national challenge in urban schools (Ault, Bentz, & Measkimen, 2001). Marginalized students with low academic achievement have been viewed from a deficit model. But in the last two decades, the focus shifted towards the deficit in cultural proficiency of teachers who teach urban poor students. Researchers and practitioners struggled with the growing disparity caused by the cultural mismatch between students and teachers (Lemke, 1990). White, middle-class dominant culture teachers’ assumptions and values about poor African American urban and poor White urban students can positively or negatively impact their learning. Student and teacher disconnect was characterized by a pedagogy of poverty (Haberman, 1991). This pedagogy, or process of becoming a teacher, along with the strategies or styles of instruction is manifested in classrooms. The pedagogy of poverty is evident in the conflict between teacher expectations and realities in urban schools. A practice where teachers are directing, and students are expected to comply, has not been effective. Critical thinking, engagement, and addressing how students are taught are missing in this type of pedagogy. The pedagogy of poverty has not closed the achievement gap.
Teachers and students benefitted when teachers learned how to consult with students, overcame their fear of loss of control, and ridded themselves of hegemony, the imposition of the dominant culture’s views about history, education, and power over perceived lesser cultures’ perspectives. When teachers’ perspectives on curriculum, history, and Westernized acceptance of these views as absolute truths were imposed on students then hegemony was the result (Freire, 1998). Alleviating and lessening dominant culture bias or hegemony could improve academic achievement.

Job embedded professional development became a recent practice in schools in an attempt to address the teacher preparation gap. The importance of having professional development in schools was evident in academic short and long-term success data related to the achievement of students (Duffy, Gasparello, Mercier, Miller, & Rohr, 2005).

High-quality instruction indices revealed that professional development improved the characteristics of culturally responsive teachers (CRT) (Stronge & Hindman, 2006). A successful CRT teacher is one who possesses the ability to manage students without the loss of instructional time, one who was able to focus on instruction, engage students, teach at the student’s instructional level, and used the students’ culture in the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Cultural Proficiency is defined for this study as a teacher’s level of skill necessary in order to work with students from diverse cultures. It also has also been defined as a teacher’s quality of services in developing, delivering, and understanding cultural differences in curriculum and instruction. Cultural destructiveness, incapacity, blindness, pre-competence, competence, and proficiency were levels noted on the same continuum (Lindsey, Robin, & Terrell, 2003). Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) referred to CRT as the pedagogy of empowerment for students.
This research uses the term CRT to define teaching that creates a connection between students’ home and school cultures and meets the educational mandates of schools. CRT includes students’ backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences to inform teaching, lessons, and methods (Ladson-Billings, 1994). High-quality teaching includes knowledge of how to teach content, set up active learning scenarios, provide a variety of teaching strategies, pay close attention to students’ and needs, and use students’ strengths to help them learn. Marzano (2007) detailed three components for effective classroom pedagogy; (a) the sustained use of research-based effective instructional strategies; (b) the ongoing use of effective management strategies to promote a true community of learning within the classroom; and (c) the use of effective classroom curriculum design strategies. This overlaps with Ladson-Billings’ cultural responsiveness model and high instructional indices: (a) engage students; (b) teach at the student’s instructional level; (c) use the students’ culture in the curriculum; and (d) manage students without the loss of instructional time. Marzano’s and Ladson-Billings’ models for effective pedagogical practices provide a framework for empowerment and inclusiveness for students and teachers.

The preparation gap that newly trained teachers bring from teacher preparation colleges into schools with high-poverty is compounded by other variables (Darling-Hammond, 1999a; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Education Trust, 2005; Holmes Group 1990; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2007; NCLB, 1999; Zeichner, 1992). These variables include the disparity in achievement test designs, societal failure, and cultural construction. Teacher preparation programs’ minimal focus on testing discrimination, curriculum design, and use of sorting students are related to the
preparation gap. The poor health of urban students, lack of wealth in their families, and property tax funding gaps in urban areas and other societal failures underscore the pedagogical construct of how teachers view their learning and teaching. The psychological perspective, and its domination in teacher preparation programs to the exclusion of anthropological and social perspectives, widened the gap when these teachers taught in urban schools with high poverty (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Anthropological studies of cities detail how cultural systems in cities are interconnected (Kemper, 1996). Societal perspectives include having teacher preparation programs focus on social and historical data of cities and studying the demographic and census patterns in cities. Pre-service teachers’ knowledge that cities contain slums and high crime areas areas with changing residential patterns based on employment and economics is essential for preparing teachers to understand the cities where they teach (Duncan & Duncan, 1957). Those variables were related to the assumptions about whether or not an urban teacher had CRT characteristics and were able to apply them in a manner, which impacted urban poor African American and urban poor white students’ achievement over time.

Teachers’ experience, certification, and placement in urban schools does not account for the continuation of achievement gaps of students in poverty (Duffy, Gasparello, Mercier, Miller, & Rohr, 2005). Intentional placement of teachers with mixed experiences in urban schools and studying their students’ achievement over time reveal patterns in achievement for those students in deep poverty or on free and reduced lunch status and those who are non-free and reduced lunch status.
Teachers’ lack, or consistent use, of CRT characteristics may therefore relate to predicting student success in literacy (Duffy, Gasparello, Mercier, Miller, & Rohr, 2005). Exploring the trends and patterns of culturally proficient trained teachers, and examining their students’ reading comprehension, text gradient levels, and fluency scores may aid in evaluating if Cultural Proficiency training is a sustainable and replicable endeavor. Closing the reading achievement gap using long term CRT staff development, pretesting and post-testing to monitor progress and comparing race and socioeconomics can uncover important connections for teachers and researchers.

**Purpose of the Study**

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to compare the reading achievement over time of sixth grade students whose teachers all received year two of three years of CRT staff development in the areas of reading comprehension, text gradient levels, and oral fluency. This research addressed the reading achievement of urban, poor, African American and urban, poor White sixth grade students, when teachers were trained in CRT.

**Research Questions**

To analyze reading achievement, acuity, text gradient levels, and oral fluency results were organized by descriptive (Question 1) and inferential (Questions 2, 3, and 4) measures. These questions were:

*Research Question 1.* Do all sixth grade students, maintain, lose, or improve their (a) reading comprehension; (b) text gradient levels; and (c) oral fluency levels compared to their pre-test levels after their teachers’ participation in year two of a three-year CRT staff development program?
Research Question 2. After sixth grade teachers participated in year two of a three year culturally relevant, responsive, and proficiency teaching (CRT) staff development program (MHC), do their students demonstrate a significant difference based upon ethnic group on the McGraw-Hill CTB Reading Acuity test for reading comprehension?

Research Question 3. After sixth grade teachers participated in year two of a three-year culturally relevant, responsive, and proficiency teaching (CRT) staff development program (MHC), do their students demonstrate a significant difference based upon ethnic group on the criterion referenced test for Fountas and Pinnell text gradient levels?

Research Question 4. After sixth grade teachers participated in year two of a three-year culturally relevant, responsive, and proficiency teaching (CRT) staff development program (MHC) do their students demonstrate a significant difference based upon ethnic group on the Fountas and Pinell Oral Reading Fluency Scale?

Definition of Terms

Achievement Gap. As defined for this study, achievement gap refers to the pattern of predictable failure of certain racial and ethnic groups in the United States of America’s schools. It was directly related to patterns of limited access to learning, limited opportunity, limited and poor quality of services, and instruction. It was also defined for this study as the norm-referenced and criterion referenced achievement differences, patterns, and trends between White and African American students living in poverty (Graham & Randall, 2009).
**African American.** African American designation was defined by the self-selection of race on the student information system of the study school district’s data collection system, Infinite Campus. Parent or guardian and student self-selection of categories Black, African American and non-Hispanic were used for this study.

**Caucasian.** Caucasian students were determined by the self-selection of race on the student information system of the study school district’s data collection system, Infinite Campus. Parent or guardian and student self-selection of Caucasian, Caucasian and non-Hispanic were included. The term White was used in place of Caucasian or Caucasian and non-Hispanic for this study.

**Cultural mismatch.** Cultural mismatch is the difference in cultural language, customs, histories, values, and interactions between urban students and their teachers (Cochran-Smith, 1995).

**Cultural Proficiency.** Cultural Proficiency, for this study, was a teacher’s proficient level of skills necessary in order to work with students from diverse cultures. It also was defined as a teacher’s quality of services in developing, delivering, and understanding cultural differences in curriculum and instruction. Cultural destructiveness, incapacity, blindness, pre-competence, competence, and proficiency were levels on the continuum of cultural proficiency (Lindsey, Robin, & Terrell, 2003).

**Culturally Relevant Teaching. (CRT)** Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) defined CRT as pedagogy of empowerment for students. This research used the term to define teaching that creates a connection between students’ home and school cultures and meets the educational mandates of schools. CRT uses students’ backgrounds, knowledge and experiences to inform their teaching, lessons, and methods (Ladson-Billings, 1994).
**Culturally Responsive Teaching.** Culturally Responsive Teaching is similar to Culturally Relevant Teaching and entailed the teacher’s sensitivity, responses, and awareness of students’ backgrounds.

**Diversity.** Diversity was defined in this study as those characteristics of the student population that included socioeconomic status, poverty levels, and race.

**Free and Reduced Lunch.** Free and reduced lunch status was defined as an eligibility classification based on United States federal government’s poverty guidelines. Students whose family total income falls below the federal guidelines are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

**Fluency Levels.** Fluency levels are the level or rate that a student is able to read with speed, accuracy, and proper expression (Berglund & Johns, 2006).

**Fluency Tests.** Fluency tests assess the speed, accuracy, intonation, and expression of students using the target scores (Johns, & Berglund, 2006). The Fountas & Pinell four-point scoring scale was used as a success indicator.

**Fountas & Pinell Reading Program.** Fountas and Pinell Leveled Literacy Intervention Program offers a systematic approach used to teach students reading at their instructional level in processing strategies, comprehension, and fluency (Fountas, & Pinell, 1996).

**Hegemony.** Hegemony is the imposition of the dominant culture’s views about history, education, and powers over perceived lesser cultures’ perspectives (Freire, 1998). In this study it referred to teachers’ perspectives on curriculum and history, and acceptance of Westernized or Eurocentric views of these as absolute truths.
Job-embedded staff development. Job-embedded staff development describes the on-line, on-site professional development delivery of culturally proficient staff development via the Minnesota Humanities and School’s Partnership.

Minnesota Humanities Center Cultural Proficiency Partnership. Minnesota Humanities Center (MHC) worked in partnership with the African American Achievement Council and the Sherwood Foundation to assist the study school district in their goal to provide all students with the high-quality instruction needed to prepare for life. To help the study school district meet their standard of excellence, MHC coordinated cultural proficiency professional development trainings for 12 schools in the study school district. These trainings focused on the histories, traditions, cultural, and educational experiences of African American students and the cultural experiences of East African, and Sudanese immigrant and refugee students. This type of instruction focused on cross-curricular inclusion of African American and African histories, traditions, cultural, and educational experiences across grade levels. There were three phases to the professional development offered to the participating schools. These phases were (a) Foundational — cultural proficiency and cultural knowledge; (b) Building — increasing content knowledge about African and African American History and Experiences; and (c) Curricular Implications — enhancing current curriculum in order to provide and reinforce accurate, authentic, and positive identity elements (Minnesota Humanities Cultural Proficiency Partnership, 2009).

Non-Free and Reduced Lunch Status. Non-free and reduced lunch status was used to qualify students for free or reduced lunch whose family’s total income falls
within United States federal government’s poverty guidelines noted in the tables in this study.

**Poverty.** Poverty may be defined by the United States federal government’s guidelines, which classified levels of poverty and eligibility for free or reduced lunch status. These guidelines were used by the study school’s district for school choice, Title I classification, and for other federal funding sources (Department of Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines, Federal Register, 2009).

**Reading Acuity CTB/McGraw-Hill.** Reading acuity is a student’s reading skills over time. Acuity testing offers interim and formative integrated assessment solutions. The study school district used the CTB/McGraw-Hill Acuity as an on-line predictive and diagnostic assessment for grades 3-8. Acuity testing was aligned with Nebraska State Standards. The fall and spring scores displayed predictive scores for the Nebraska State Reading Assessment (CTB/McGraw-Hill, 2010).

**Reading Comprehension Levels.** Comprehension was determined by the Fountas & Pinell Leveled Books and corresponding fiction and non-fiction text levels A-Z (Fountas & Pinell, 1996). Comprehension levels within the text and beyond the text measured students’ literal understandings, inferential, synthesis, analytical, predictive, connective, and critical thinking skills.

**Text Gradient Levels.** Fountas & Pinnell Text Gradient, A-Z, was correlated to grade level. This was the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (BAS), which connected assessment and instruction to literacy learning. This system for one-on-one assessment, small-group instruction matched students’ instructional, independent reading abilities and was designed to bring children quickly up to grade-level
competency—in 14 to 18 weeks on average according to Fountas & Pinnell. The systems were leveled by color and grade level: (a) Orange System: Levels A through C Levels (Kindergarten); (b) Green System: Levels A through J (Grade 1); and (c) Blue System: Levels C through N (Grade 2). Selected book titles for each level were included in the text gradient process included comfort level, instructional level fiction and non-fiction book titles (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008).

**Urban.** Metropolitan sections of the city that are in the inner core of the city and were not suburban are considered urban. Urban also refers to areas with high levels of unemployment, a high incidence of poverty, lack of access to facilities such as retail shopping, groceries, and jobs are of lower quality and salary.

**Assumptions**

This study’s strength was evident in the use of available student data to support school improvement plans which provided adaptable strategies for teachers. The study school used this data when decisions for which staff development strategies, interventions, and curricula changes were needed for academically failing subgroups. All sixth grade teachers at the site were included in the program. The central office support for the CRT staff development supported a district-wide diversity initiative. This initiative promoted CRT practice as a job-embedded strategy for addressing urban school’s achievement gap. The district’s educational equity statement and mission provided a framework for working with the groups identified in this research. Cultural proficiency training emphasized expectations from building leadership, teachers, staff development department, curriculum and learning department, and community leaders. Accountability was based on data to support academic achievement, improvement of
educational experiences, and the use of CRT-based research to improve urban students’
achievement. Twelve schools were initially selected to participate in the three year CRT
training supported by foundational funds and district funds. The study site school was
one of the twelve schools and the sixth grade students and teachers from this school were
selected for this study. The training was provided by The Minnesota Humanities Center
(MHC). Summer retreats, scholarly lectures, portal readings, peer-discussion groups,
reflective practices, and interactive forums formed the basis for the CRT training for all
teachers at the study school. MHC staff, university scholars, and district level staff
worked with administrators to sustain and actively engage staff.

**Delimitations of the Study**

This study was delimited to sixth grade African American and White students of
one Title I school in an urban, high-poverty area in the school district. All sixth graders
were required by district mandate to receive pretesting and post-testing using
McGraw/Hill CTB Reading Acuity and Fountas and Pinell oral fluency tests. Study
findings were limited to only those sixth graders in attendance for the full school year of
2009-2010. Sixth grade students of Hispanic, Sudanese, and other racial ethnic groups
were not included in this study due to the small sample size. Students entering mid-year
or transferring in after the third quarter were excluded from the population sample.

**Limitations of the Study**

This comparative study was confined to sixth grade students (N = 63) whose
teachers participated in the job-embedded staff development and were in attendance
during the 2009-2010 school year. These limited sample sizes and the job-embedded
staff development partnership for CRT skills could limit the utility and generalizability of the study and findings.

Students were assigned to classrooms equitably based on gender, race, academic ability, and socioeconomic status by the principal of the school. This limited randomization, but allowed for the instructional needs of students.

**Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to research, practice, and pedagogy. It is of significance to teacher educators, school administrators, staff development department chairpersons, teachers who are seeking ways to better educate themselves in order to impact the reading achievement of students in poverty.

The current literature on the academic achievement of students in poverty after their teachers’ long-term staff development in culturally responsive pedagogy is limited. The results of this study may inform practices and strategies for urban schools. Based on the outcomes of this study, the school district could decide if this type of job-embedded staff development benefits both teachers and students and whether it warrants expanding this partnership to all schools in the school district.

Local-level policy may be impacted by this study. Results that indicate that providing teachers with long-term culturally responsive training does positively impact students’ reading achievement and reduces the achievement gap will be of great interest to the school district and state.

**Organization of the Study**

The literature review relevant to this study is presented in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 describes the methodology, participants, race, and the data analysis and procedures
utilized to analyze the data of the study. Chapter 4 reports the research results, and
Chapter 5 provides conclusions, discussion, and suggestions for further research
Chapter Two

Review of Literature

History and Background

Omaha, Nebraska, has a history of urban poverty and a widening achievement gap for students in poverty with a state and federal NCLB mandated adequately yearly progress (AYP) report of having “not met” for the Nebraska State Reading Test (NeSa Reading) for both “black and white subgroups” and for the subgroup of “free and reduced lunch” status (Omaha Public Schools’ 2009-2010 AYP Report). The percentage of children living in poverty in the United States in 2007 was 18% per capita, and in Omaha, 15% per capita. Omaha ranks third in the United States for the percentage of all African American adults living in poverty, and for African American children the situation is even worse.

The National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), which annually reports the reading progress of students in grades 4 and 8, reports that 70% of low socioeconomic students could not read or read below the basic level. NAEP also states that half of these students lived in urban areas and remained at the same level for reading achievement for subsequent grade levels (Cortiella, 2001). Assumptions and presumptions about the relationship between early poverty and poor reading skills are noted in history (Bader, 2009). The ability to read on and above grade level is equivalent to possessing or gaining access to privileges and is associated with the ability later on in life to gaining access to financial, social, and cultural capital (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Some research focuses on the deficits of students in poverty such as their low language skills, low performance on standardized achievement tests, and their ability to learn to
read. Other research acknowledges the need to differentiate instruction for students in poverty (Price, 2010).

The use of traditional views, non-traditional views for teaching, and learning to read are foundational. Historically noted prevention programs, pre- and post-No Child Left Behind perspectives on teaching poor students how to read including intervention programs, commercially successful programs, and recent epistemological studies are reviewed in this chapter. Curricula, teacher education programs, cultural programs, teacher attitudes, and other research are woven together to synthesize the complexity of the poverty cycle as it relates to poor students learning how to read simultaneously with historical and current practices and cultural proficiency pedagogy.

**Relevance**

Strategies for improving urban students’ reading skills include culturally proficient programs, reading programs, approaches, and studies aimed at improving poor students’ reading achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Madden & Slavin, 2000; O’Connor & DeLuca, 2006; Peterson, 2006; & Price, 2010). Head Start, Reading First, and Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction and other early literacy projects highlight these strategies (Barnett & Hustedt, 2003; Currie & Thomas, 1995; & Hernon, 2008). Past researchers have explored High-Achieving High-Poverty Schools, as well as the idea of teachers’ attitudes, competing epistemologies, and the use of culturally proficient programs in closing the achievement gap. The American Excellence Association Program and the Minnesota Humanities Center Cultural Proficiency Partnership are two culturally proficient models for teachers. The Minnesota Humanities Center’s program is
the focus for this study, and its impact on teachers and how they teach reading and sixth grade students’ reading achievement is of special note.

**Reading Intervention and Prevention Programs**

Effective reading intervention programs for high-poverty students are at the center for measuring academic achievement. Early prevention and identification, Level III Response to Intervention (RTI) and Special Educational services are basic organizational approaches used to alleviate deficits, remedy literacy and prevent achievement gaps of students in poverty. Effective literacy programs are based on converging scientific evidence. These programs acknowledge the complexity of teaching reading. Professional development strives to utilize effective instructional interactions and explicit instruction in order to help teachers reach all students (Lyon, 2006).

Head Start, Reading First, RTI, Success for All, Guided Reading by Fountas and Pinnell, Early Literacy Programs, and Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction are reviewed and analyzed in the next section. These programs have longitudinal data collected over 40 years, are deemed commercially successful, and are used frequently in high-poverty school districts as intervention and prevention programs.

**Head Start — Early Prevention and Identification.** Head Start was founded in 1965 and funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and has been described as the most important social and educational investment in children, families, and communities that the United States has ever undertaken (Herndon, 2008).

Head Start is a childhood and health program now serving about 1 million children and their low-income families each year. A comprehensive school readiness program, Head Start is a designed to prevent the achievement gap in the classroom. Head
Start’s Parent Policy Councils and family support services empower low-income White, African American, and Hispanic families to gain skills needed to move families out of poverty by address family literacy. Its basic goals are to increase families’ access to materials, activities, and services; support parents in their role as first teachers; and promote positive adult learning.

Head Start provides significant educational, health, economic and quality-of-life benefits to Head Start students, their families and the communities in which they live. Recent studies show that the benefits of Head Start include the following:

1. The United States received nearly $9 in benefits for every $1 invested in Head Start children, according to the preliminary results of a longitudinal study of more than 600 Head Start graduates in San Bernardino County, California (Meier, 2004). These projected benefits included increased earnings, employment, and family stability, and decreased welfare dependency, crime costs, grade repetition, and special education. In addition, Head Start has been shown to benefit participating children and society at large by reducing crime and its costs to crime victims (Garces, Thomas, & Currie, 2002).

2. Research demonstrates that Head Start children experience an increase in achievement test scores and favorable long-term effects. Fewer students repeat a grade fewer students qualify for special education, and more Head Start students graduate from high school compared to those not in Head Start (Barnett, 2002; Ludwig & Miller, 2007).
3. Recent research suggests that the mortality rates of 5 to 9 year-old children has been reduced for those participating in Head Start by their participation in Head Start when they were 3 and 4 year-olds (Ludwig & Miller, 2007).

4. Children attending Head Start have increased access to dental care and have higher immunizations rates than non-Head Start children do (Currie & Thomas, 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

5. Beginning Head Start children at age 3 had larger vocabularies and a higher level of social-emotional development than their low SES peers in the same age did (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002).

Empirical data for Head Start’s effectiveness includes a Pennsylvania study of three counties of 44 classrooms and a population size of 356 4-year-olds in two research groups. The study was a comparison of the Head Start Research-based Developmentally Informed (REDI) and standard Head Start Program (HS). The REDI program utilized social-emotional competency and school readiness interventions (PATHS) and HS used the language, literacy, and social-emotional curriculum (High Scope/Creative Curriculum). Assessments were given at the beginning and end of the school year in the areas of emergent literacy skills, emotional understandings, social maturity, problem-solving skills, and learning engagement. The findings concluded that students in the REDI group outperformed the HS group on one of three measures in language development and on two measures of emergent literacy skills. REDI students displayed greater understanding of emotions, better social problem-solving skills, and higher levels of learning engagement than students in HS (Bierman, et al. 2008).
**Reading First.** Reading First results for African American students in Nebraska from 2005-2007 results showed that students improved in fluency and comprehension but with a high need for more comprehension skills instruction. Data show that special education students in inclusive classrooms are currently benefitting from Reading First instruction. First grade results for low SES and African American students in Nebraska highlight the need for urban schools and their teachers to focus more on comprehension skills (Nebraska State Profile for Reading First, 2002-2008). This may demonstrate that Reading First has not closed the literacy gap for poor urban students. Several schools in the study school district continue to use this program as their primary approach for improving African American students’ and students’ in high-poverty areas reading achievement.

**RTI - Response to Intervention.** Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multi-tiered approach to helping struggling students. During this approach, all students are assessed at the first tier. Those who need more intervention are referred for monitoring. This monitoring helps the teacher to determine the need for further researched based instruction and interventions whether through regular or if a special education evaluation would be beneficial (Daley, 1999). The conceptual framework is a three-tiered approach. It includes a high-quality learning environment and intentional teaching, group interventions, and individualized interventions (Buysse & Coleman, 2006). The RTI approach supports recommendations such as an intervention hierarchy; screening, assessment, and progress monitoring; researched-based curriculum; instruction; and focused interventions, collaborative problem solving, and providing teachers with the tools and resources for implementation. It further supports the use of professional
development to prepare teachers for knowing when to intervene and which strategies are appropriate for individual students (Burns & Senesac, 2005).

Longitudinal and empirical research also supports the use of the layered approach (O’Connor, 2006). Professional development over the course of three years related to the learning to read process and direct intervention provided data and findings. O’Connor and DeLuca’s (2006) findings from multisite studies may support instructional grouping, flexible grouping, small groups, and reading aloud. These measures for RTI caught the majority of the students prior to reading failure. Students were from low SES in an industrial northeast urban setting. In 1999, 8% were eligible for special education. The study measured reading development across three years and covered fluency and comprehension (O’Connor, 2006). RTI is an approach which is being used in many schools to determine the level of intervention for students with reading gaps and for prevention of future reading problems.

**Success for All (SFA).** Success for All is an achievement-oriented program for underachieving students in grades Pre-K through grade 5. It grew out of research about cooperative learning from creators Nancy Madden and Robert Slavin in 1987. It is designed to intervene and prevent learning problems through peer learning. Rural schools and some large urban school districts have used SFA as a RTI and as their reading program. The reading program entails 90-minute reading blocks. Instructional materials and approaches include basal readers, trade books, partner reading, and identification of story elements, as well as problem solving, summarizing, writing, comprehension, and the use of a cooperative learning approach. One-to-one tutoring, eight-week assessments, and a family support team are other components of the program.
Teacher training is three days for year one and extensive follow-up training for year two with SFA trained consultants.

Some success has been noted by critics of SFA. Program data from 1991 indicates that 40% of the third graders in the program remain a month to a year below grade level. Success for All results indicate that there are positive effects for certain subgroups. English Language Learners in a six-year study for fourth and fifth grade were on average 2.9 years ahead of the control group (median ES = +1.49) (Madden & Slavin, 2000).

In Arizona, Mexican-American English Language Learners in two urban SFA schools with SES of 81% and one with 53% poverty students scored higher than both control groups in special education and non-special education. SFA outcomes produced a large effect size in students in the lowest 25th percentiles. Effect sizes ranged from gains of +1.00 to +1.50 percentiles across the grades. A reduction in special education placement in Baltimore and Ft. Wayne with a 12.1% reduction over a two-year period was reported in findings. SFA’s critic, Jonathan Kozol, (2005) calls Success for All “the brand name of a scripted program.” He further criticizes the “drill and kill” curricula of schools serving low-income students of color and shameful re-segregation of our public schools in his book. Herbert J. Walberg criticizes SFA for its favorable self-evaluation and coercive tactics in Title I schools (Viadero, 2005). SFA’s success in predominantly poor communities in 17 Midwestern and Southern states showed first graders scoring two months ahead of their non-SFA peers in the area of decoding but were evenly matched on other reading skills, such as fluency and comprehension. Decoding is a skill necessary for emerging readers with 1.3 month gains in the area of understanding written passages.
The study site school used SFA previously and abandoned its use due to funding, six years previous to this study.

**Guided Reading by Fountas and Pinnell.** This approach to teaching reading to struggling students is based on research by Fountas & Pinnell (1996). They assert that guided reading is based on an instructional setting and methodology which enables the teacher to work with a small group of students to help them learn effective strategies for processing text with understanding and fluency. Guided reading may be a segment of an effective literacy program. It may supplement reading instruction and is a process more than a program. The use of leveled readers, diagnostic assessment tools, and small-group instruction drives this approach. Critic, Cheryl Sigmon (2002) criticizes the continuation of ability grouping as a deficit of guided reading. Teachers note its effectiveness as a supplement to other programs. Additional teacher advantages may include reading resources and support, teacher coaching; ongoing professional development, and a leveled book room. Sigmon (2002) also criticizes guided reading as very time-consuming for teachers. The study site school presently uses the guided reading approach and guided leveled readers. This approach seeks to improve students’ comprehension, text gradient, and oral fluency levels utilizing small groups and differentiation of instruction.

**Early Literacy Programs and Reading Achievement.** The tremendous growth in early childhood programs may be a result of research for early intervention to realize academic achievement and the lowering of special education referrals (Barnett & Hutstedt, 2003). Research has demonstrated that students in poverty had increased cognitive ability, achievement, and self-awareness, as well as a reduction in repeating a
grade and a decline in special education placements, due to early childhood programs (Beswick, Sloat, & Willms, 2007). The arguments against preschool include the unstable sustainability of achievement gains over time (Barnett & Hustedt, 2003). Arguments for preschool are based on early literacy skills and later literacy success correlations (Adams, 1990). The highlighted effects of universal pre-kindergarten for students with low SES were sustained through third grade (Gormley et al., 2005). Significant reading gains in first grade for the study group who completed full day universal pre-kindergarten with exemplary literacy instruction support the practice of full-day pre-kindergarten. The curriculum included knowledge, skills, and application for cognitive, language, social-emotional, and physical domains. Students who attend preschool maintain cognitive skills overtime. Implementing universal pre-kindergarten in urban settings may be a great investment (Valenti & Tracey, 2009). The study site school district has implemented universal pre-kindergarten.

Concept Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI). The multidimensional aspects of learning to read and write are not readily addressed by one program or approach as evident in the review of results from Head Start, Reading First, RTI, SFA, Guided Reading, and early literacy pre-kindergarten studies. Low-achieving readers may lack comprehension strategies, domain knowledge, word recognition skills, fluency, and motivation to read. Reading instruction may be most effective when there is support for use of leveled texts and continuing motivational support. Comparative studies of CORI and the traditional approach for reading instruction, demonstrated that low-achieving fifth graders scored higher on post-test measures of word recognition speed, reading comprehension on the Gates McGinitie Reading Test, and on ecological knowledge.
CORI was equally effective for low and high achievers. The explicit support of the use of multiple aspects of reading simultaneously appeared to benefit diverse learners on a range of reading outcomes (Barbosa, Coddington, Guthrie, Klauda, & Wigfield, 2009). The debate over whether to begin with teachers who teach reading in urban public schools or students who are learning to read as a focus is found in literature (Ravitch, 2009). Arguably, pre-service teaching programs’ reading methods course work don’t address all of the mechanics of learning how to teach reading such as whole language, phonics, phonemic awareness, comprehension, and fluency. The opposing view of improving reading achievement addresses pedagogy and teachers’ ways of learning, knowing, and understanding how to teach reading using knowledge rich curriculum. A half century of research on learning styles, grouping, tracking, remediation, retention, and other deficit approaches to teaching children how to read has not improved the achievement gap. Other arguments address the fact that poverty does not impair school achievement when certain other practices are in place (Bakari, 1997; Banks, 1993; Cox, Sproles, & Sproles, 1988; Haycock, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Marzano, 2003; Tarp, 1989). Diversity training, multiculturalism, and other educational reform movements have proposed curricula and instructional changes. Beyond prevention and intervention on behalf of students, lay the organizational, systemic, pedagogical, and socio-cultural changes addressed in this study.

These changes address the school culture and teacher as learner, and they question teachers’ understandings, values, and level of knowledge about the students that they teach. Deficits in teachers’ preparation to teach reading include the complexity of synthesizing their knowledge base, values, and cultural proficiency pedagogical approach
in order to teach urban students. Urban students’ reading achievement as a whole has not been addressed in this manner in current literature (Finn & Ravitch, 1994).

Programs, Partnerships, Research, and Practices for Improving Reading Skills

Deficits in the reading achievement of urban poor students have been addressed through prescriptive and diagnostic measures institutionalized in research and pedagogy. This is evident in the previously reviewed programs. Institutional policies and practices of successful school districts have high degrees of accountability and have the expectation that teachers will make the curriculum relevant to the students that they are teaching (Broad & Broad, 2010). Relevancy is a key aspect of school culture and is an aspect of engaging students. Urban poor students learn differently and bring assets to the learning setting (Cox, Sproles, & Sproles, 1988). These assets include a collective consciousness, spirituality, communalism, cooperation, ethics, symbolic imagery, and strong interpersonal relationships (Bakari, 1997). School cultures that recognize bias in research and epistemologies embedded in the curricula; recognize cultural mismatch found in urban schools among teachers’ attitudes; urban students’ ways of learning; and also provide culturally proficiency training for teachers may improve the academic and reading achievement of urban poor students. This section explores these practices and programs.

Research Bias. Research epistemologies may be racially biased and may render supporting theories to be null when addressing education and political inequities within schools and specifically for African Americans in urban schools. The origin of mainstream research epistemology may be viewed as racist, in that mainstream social, educational, and dominant histories arose from the ancestral context of slavery, bondage,
and colonialism (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Racial bias is entangled in the institutional, individual, and civilization levels of learning. Teachers may bring their epistemological perspectives to the classroom from their own schooling, families, and racial groups. Teachers’ attitudes about learners and the subsequent impact on student achievement may be reflected in how they teach. In many urban classrooms some teachers display the attitude that “… not all students can learn nor is it their job to teach all students” (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). This is manifested in actions such as high levels of discipline referrals, low expectations for academic success, and special education referrals. Teachers’ beliefs about teaching struggling readers arise from teachers’ professional and personal experiences (Richardson, 1996; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). The attitudes and beliefs of teachers may perpetuate educational inequities in classrooms when cultural biases are intentionally or unintentionally practiced (Blanchett & Harry, 2007). Teachers’ biased epistemologies and their effects on students warrant further investigation (Adams, 1990).

Children’s learning intersects with the emotional, affective, cognitive, and linguistic contexts which they share with peers and teachers and aid in how they see themselves or their absence in the curriculum and school culture (vanKleek, 1994). Research about schools, pedagogy, and student achievement are basic to how we view public schools’ role in our society. Public schools in the United States have a racial, social, and political history and were not always accessible to all children as a means of social mobility (Haller, Portes, & Sewell, 1996).

Poverty may not result in low achievement or low learning potential. Research about high-achieving and high-poverty schools has laid this assumption to rest (DeLuca
& O’Connor, 2006). This assumption over emphasizes poverty’s role and minimizes school cultures and organizational roles in assigning poor students as academically deficient. Beliefs about the inferiority of African American students may be embedded in IQ tests designed by Eurocentric test designers and validated on students who are not similar to the ones being tested. Other sorting tools such as entrance exams, high rates of referrals for special education and low rate of referrals for gifted programs may have been institutionalized. Current eligibility for special education and giftedness may utilize biased research in order to identify and sort children (Hilliard, 1994). The use of standardized test scores, minimal and poor data collection, and teacher referrals for inclusion or exclusion in programs are examples of bias.

**Epistemologies.** Teachers’ ways of knowing and learning impact the achievement of their students. Epistemological racism describes the lack of understanding of researchers and constructivists as they relate to the issue of understanding the lack of achievement of poor and minority students. Epistemologies reside at the individual, social, and civilization levels. These levels are important in understanding how learning and teaching are connected. Teachers learn from institutions grounded in an epistemological framework of power and privilege. This power and privilege is manifested by seeking “good” grades, valuing individual accomplishments over group accomplishments, defining success as being financially superior, and having more access to wealth and resources. These epistemologies are valued in our schools. Epistemological reflection may occur subconsciously in institutions and in all aspects of life in schools, government, and social services. The competing epistemologies that occur in schools between teachers, school leaders, urban poor students, pre-service
teacher programs, and the poor may be at the core of the growing disparity in the achievement gap. The unintentional, non-malicious decisions about schooling within our nation’s schools may be void of urban poor epistemologies (Schuerich & Young, 1997). This invisible force may view competing epistemologies as inferior, unscholarly, or non-defining.

Achievement for poor and minority students is defined by those in power. Achievement is constructed by others and designed by an epistemological privileged subset of their environment (Stanfield, 1985). Those in power in schools and in government are the constructors of achievement. This includes teachers, universities, publishing companies, and governing organizations which define policies and set standards. Histories and societal perspectives of others form their knowledge, products, and self-perpetuation of their civilizations (Banks, 1993). Relegation, marginalization, and legitimatization of a people are social practices embedded in epistemologies. Acceptance of other epistemologies arriving from different racial, cultural, and financial histories may be applied in school settings. Epistemological studies may be central to understanding the conscious and unconscious concepts learned, embedded, and perpetuated in epistemological perspectives found in the American public school systems. A review of how one acquires knowledge warrants further study. Knowledge conception studies are categorized into epistemological assessments such as The Scale of Intellectual Development (SID), Psycho-Epistemological Profile (PEP), Attitudes About Reality (AAR), and Feeling and Thinking (Royce & Mos, 1980a). These assessments portray knowledge in a narrow and traditional manner (Royce & Mos, 1980b). Educational based epistemological developmental dimensions may aid in understanding
the variance in conceptions about ability among teachers and learners (Hofer, 2002). Four dimensions about knowledge acquisition explain personal beliefs teachers may hold about learning:

1. The simplicity of knowledge
2. The stability of knowledge
3. The speed of knowledge acquisition
4. The justification of knowledge

The variance in degrees within each dimension explains levels of knowing and being.

Educational terms such as meta-cognition, constructivism, multiple intelligences, giftedness, and sorting terms find their origins in epistemological studies (Hofer, 2002). Therefore, epistemological perspectives about each of the knowledge dimensions influence pedagogy, beliefs, attitudes, and actions of teachers.

Afro-centric epistemology is surfacing as an outcome of studies of African culture. It is the use of historical observations of African people and their collective conscious, spirituality, communalism, cooperation, ethics, symbolic imagery, and strong interpersonal relationships with others (Bakari, 1997). It is a perspective that may enhance African American students’ consciousness and their ways of knowing along with the freedom to challenge Eurocentric epistemologies.

**Teachers’ Attitudes.** Culturally competent teachers assert that the school environment must acknowledge the home cultures of the students they teach. The developmental competency in a child’s home environment may not transfer to a school environment and students may not succeed at the academic skills valued by middle class teachers. Some researchers call this inability to transfer competency from home to school
a “social mismatch” (Kagan, 1990; Meisels, 1992) and others label it as cultural mismatch (Lemke, 1990). Comparing children across cultural and economic barriers may cause educators to become focused on the wrong measurement tools. The misunderstood cultural competency of poor and ethnically different students has caused schools to have disproportionally high incidences of special education and discipline placements (National Alliance of Black School Educators NABSE, 2002). Teachers have epistemologies and social constructs which conflict with students who do not share the same meaning making or cultural histories. This can lead to a failure to appreciate similarities and differences of their urban students (Bowman, 1989). Historically, bilingual, multicultural, and Afro-centric curricula have been used in schools to infuse home cultures into the school (Tarp, 1989).

Comprehensive and systemic efforts have gained widespread implementation. Cultural and linguistically appropriate prevention programs, such as high-quality pre-kindergarten, may aid readiness and provide a gateway to success (Howes, 1992; Kagan, 1991). The use of multiple longitudinal studies and varied assessment methods will help teachers focus on students’ needs (Bowman, 1994).

**High-Achieving High-Poverty Schools.** High Achieving and High Poverty schools or the term “90/90/90 Schools” was created by Douglas B. Reeves in 1995. He based this on observations he made in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where schools had been identified with 90% or more of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch, 90% of more of the students were members of ethnic minority groups, and 90% or more of these students met the district or state academic standards in reading or another area (Reeves, 2000). Poverty, ethnic minority, and low student achievement are not
indefinitely linked as evident in some research studies (Reeves, 2000). Students’ ethnicity, SES, and academic achievements are mitigated by effective teaching practices. Common practices in high-achieving low socioeconomic schools include (a) a focus on academic achievement; (b) clear curriculum choices; (c) frequent assessment of student progress; (d) multiple opportunities for improvement; (e) an emphasis on nonfiction writing; and (f) collaborative scoring of student work. Schools that focus on (a) student achievement; (b) focus on improvement; and (c) use school improvement plan data to drive what they do may have more students succeeding academically. Prevention programs also include narrowing curricula priorities and focusing on core subjects of reading, writing, language arts, and math. Persistent techniques, replicable practices, consistency in using writing assessments, and performance assessments, along with collaboration, and keeping a focus on core curriculum are methods employed by high-poverty high-performing schools (Reeves, 2000).

The most important variable in high-performing schools in poverty is teacher quality (Haycock, 2001). Teachers who conduct action research, use cohort data to drive instruction, and align their epistemologies with those of their students may be key components found in successful schools. Marzano (2003) supports the practice of embedding knowledge of poverty and ethnic identity into the teacher curriculum and within leaders who work in urban schools.

**Culturally Proficient, Relevant, and Responsive Teaching.** African American students’ quest for learning how to read in this country is one riddled with contradictions. Jim Crow laws prohibiting the freedom to attend school, segregation, and minimal access to an equitable education have caused these contradictions. The spread of literacy for
African Americans has been dangerous for many African American’s ancestors. African Americans’ human value and struggle to achieve equal rights as citizens is connected to their acquisition of an equal and equitable right to an education. Historian James D. Anderson (1995) has noted that “the standard story of literacy does not reflect the experiences of African Americans (pp.174).” Holt (1990) noted that the federal government, through neglect or silence on behalf of African American children, either directly or implicitly supported discrimination. African Americans citizenship status and opportunities to learn were affected by this discrimination and neglect.

Educational diversity may help to change policy, practices, bring about academic achievement, and foster cross-cultural skills. Meeting the academic goals in a diverse and pluralistic society may be essential to national economic success. James Banks’ (1999) essential principles of multiculturalism include (a) teacher learning, student learning; (b) extra- and co-curricular activities; (c) intergroup relationships; (d) school governance and organizational equity; (e) and assessment. These multicultural goals seek to bring about unity through diversity and democracy. Banks’ ideal of working toward a common democracy is prescriptive. Banks does not address policy makers and their epistemologies.

Most of the cultural mismatch in schools may be viewed as miscommunication between children of color, families, and school leaders within United States’ schools. The culture and values of the mainstream middle-class American society is found in schools along with power that may be manifested in various ways: (a) the power of the teacher over the student; (b) the power of publishers of textbooks and developers of curriculum to determine the view of the world; (c) and the power of an individual or a
group to define another’s intelligence, or “normalcy.” This power may manifest itself in linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self. A student’s academic success depends on their acquisition and access to such power or “cultural capital” (Delpit, 1992).

The qualities of a great teacher may be viewed through the lenses of a teacher educator. Teachers should, according to Darling-Hammond, (1999a) know how to teach content, know how to make it comprehensible to others, set up active learning scenarios, have a variety of teaching strategies, pay close attention to students’ needs, have certification in the field that they are teaching, and use students’ strengths to help them learn. Darling-Hammond’s research studies of teacher preparation and certification don’t question the sociopolitical context of teaching. But, instead addresses the “highly qualified” teacher challenge from No Child Left Behind mandates (Darling-Hammond, 2002).

Culturally responsive teaching is described as a means for releasing the potential of ethnically diverse students by exploring both the academic and psychosocial abilities of the students (Gay, 2000a). Research has displayed a need for more culturally proficient instruction at the pre-service level so that teachers are able to teach diverse students. In order to achieve this goal, teacher educators may contextualize teacher candidates’ increased knowledge of content and pedagogy while engaging teachers in critical reflection (Feiman-Nemser, 1996; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

Instruction for teacher training must include the fundamental element of critical cultural self-reflection that takes place in a context of guided practice in realistic
situations and with authentic examples of support for teachers (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Explicit knowledge about cultural diversity is important in meeting the educational needs of ethnically diverse students.

Part of this knowledge includes understanding the cultural characteristics and contributions of different ethnic groups. Culture encompasses many things, some of which are more important for teachers to know than others because they have direct implications for teaching and learning. Among these are (a) ethnic groups’ cultural values; (b) traditions; (c) communication and learning styles; (d) contributions; and (e) relational patterns. For example, teachers need to know (a) which ethnic groups give priority to communal living and cooperative problem solving and how these preferences affect educational motivation, aspiration, and task performance; (b) how different ethnic groups’ protocols of appropriate ways for children to interact with adults are exhibited in instructional settings; and (c) the implications of gender role socialization in different ethnic groups for implementing equity initiatives in classroom instruction. This information constitutes the first essential component of the knowledge base of culturally responsive teaching. Some of the cultural characteristics and contributions of ethnic groups that teachers need to know are explained in greater detail by Banks & Banks (1993).

**Cultural Models for Changing Epistemologies and Closing the Achievement Gap**

The recent use of culturally relevant programs as a method for closing the achievement gap may lend support to the intersection of race, poverty, and achievement. Cultural and social justice explanations for the achievement gap are often viewed either through the lenses of educators or social and political reformists but rarely
simultaneously as they relate to student achievement. This may be due to differences in the disciplines of educators, sociologists, and political scientists. School purposes intersect with critical consciousness as an aspect of culturally relevant teaching (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

The critical context of opposing epistemologies, social justice, and cultural proficiency may warrant candid discussion with representation from the voices of the “oppressed” (Freire, 1974). Deficit based interventions, culturally relevant pedagogy, and culturally embedded curricula changes are often performed and measured within the context of the existing power structure. Systemic approaches to culturally relevant programs in schools and the greater community may require programs to go beyond school-based initiatives.

**The American Excellence Association.** The American Excellence Association (AEA) is a culturally relevant program focused on the strengths of students versus their deficits. It began as a Raleigh, North Carolina academic achievement program (Decuir-Gunby & Taliaferro, 2007). The AEA’s culturally relevant pedagogy examines race, racial identity, and teacher support in a culturally relevant framework. It refutes dominant views about the achievement gap (Carter, 2005). The AEA utilizes recognition of achievement as a precept and promotes academic excellence. It is a program cognizant of the variances in opportunity, social networking, and economic status. The Whitney M. Young AEA affiliate in Dallas Independent Public School district promotes community engagement, increasing the number of students in higher-level course work, healthy social development, and parental involvement. It is focused on middle and high school students’ achievement. A study of school administrators in Dallas who utilized
this program in 2005 revealed that a culturally relevant framework yielded themes of promotion of achievement, creating a climate of feeling and belonging, culturally competent teaching, and the development of critical consciousness through community service (Bamaca & Umana-Taylor, 2004). A vision of reframing the achievement gap discussion to include opposing epistemologies, voices of the students, opportunity gaps, and global implications may be necessary (Ainsworth-Barnell, & Downey, 1998).

**The Minnesota Humanities Cultural Proficiency Partnership.** The Minnesota Humanities Culturally Proficiency Partnership (MHC) with the study school district is another program that has a goal of providing the study school district with cultural proficient training for teachers. Their focus is on the historical, traditional, cultural, and educational experiences of non-dominant culture students. A final goal of promoting cross curricula studies and interactions between marginalized and dominant cultures into educational experiences is promoted in this partnership. This is realized through on-line readings, on-site trainings, lectures and conversations with identified scholars in the fields of history, race, and social justice who are known nationally and locally and professional learning teams engaging in reflective and courageous conversations about histories, traditions, and culture. Initial training involves the deconstruction of teacher’s epistemological perspectives and examining culture, race, power, and privilege as it relates to student achievement and cultural competency (Minnesota Humanities Cultural Proficiency Partnership, 2009).

The process involves district identified pilot schools with varying levels of poverty, racial, and ethnic student demographics. The three-year-long process involves, off-site retreats, viewing video-taped reactions of minority parents, viewing video of
scholars, in-person lectures, reflective journaling by teachers, and finally demonstrating how to infuse learned knowledge into all areas of the school environment and curriculum. The cultural proficiency of teachers and changing their epistemological frameworks are supposed to impact student achievement.

Strategies for improving urban students’ reading skills are listed in current literature. Reading programs are categorized as identification, prevention, or intervention in this study. Reading programs and reading approaches are aspects of literacy programs designed to improve the reading achievement of students. Head Start, Reading First, and Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction are highlighted in this chapter. Other studies and practices for improving urban poor students’ reading skills outlined in this study include (a) High-Achieving High-Poverty Schools, (b) exploring the idea of teachers’ attitudes as a variable in school culture and instructional approach, (c) competing epistemologies found within school cultures and in research about improving poor students’ reading skills, and (d) the use of culturally proficient and relevant programs in closing the achievement gap. The American Excellence Association Program and the Minnesota Humanities Center Cultural Proficiency Partnership are two culturally proficiency programs explored in this chapter. The Minnesota Humanities Center’s program is a focus for this study.

Improving the reading achievement of poor urban students is found in the literature review and relates to identification, prevention, and intervention programs. Included in this literature are strategies, programs, practices, and evidence-based studies. The process for identifying, preventing and intervening were explored through analysis of the following programs noted (Head Start, Reading First, Response to Intervention,
Success for All, Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading Approach, Early Literacy Programs, and Concept Oriented Reading Instruction) in this review. Extending the analysis beyond programs and exploring teacher attitudes and the cultural mismatch theory provided a perspective beyond students’ deficits. Literature about the practices of high-achieving schools in poor communities, culturally proficient training for teachers, American Excellence Association practices, and the Minnesota Humanities Center’s cultural proficiency training in the study school district are perspectives for addressing the reading achievement gap which exists for poor urban students.

School districts, teacher education programs, and school administrators can utilize this research as a comprehensive, but not exhaustive resource when planning for school improvement for urban schools (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002). Reading and literacy teachers may use this as a reference for planning for reading instruction, choosing appropriate strategies and commercial programs, and learning how to teach reading to urban poor students. The cultural proficiency aspects may be beneficial to teachers and students who teach and learn in urban schools (Allington, 1995; Beswick, 2007; Carter, 2005; Delpit & Duffy, 2005). The data, tables, and research may be of use for teacher education programs in urban cities as they learn how to reconstruct curriculum to fit the needs of a diverse population of students and future teachers.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter outlined the independent variables, dependent variables, measures, research design, questions, and data analysis that were used in the completion of this research study.

Research Design

This comparative efficacy study used a two group pretest/post-test study design of urban sixth grade students’ reading comprehension acuity, text gradient, and oral fluency levels, completed in May of 2009-2010. Teachers of these students were participating in year two of a three-year cultural proficiency training.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to analyze sixth grade students’ growth measuring criterion-referenced reading acuity, guided reading level, text gradient level, and oral fluency levels over time, whose teachers participated in a Culturally Responsive/Proficiency Teaching (CRT) staff development program from the Minnesota Humanities Center (MHC).

Research Question #1. Did all sixth grade students, maintain, lose, or improve their (a) reading comprehension, (b) text gradient levels, and (c) oral fluency levels compared to their pretest levels after their teachers’ participation in year two of a three-year CRT staff development program?

Research Question #2. After sixth grade teachers participated in year two of a three year culturally relevant teaching (CRT) staff development program (MHC), did
their students demonstrate a significant difference based upon ethnic group on the McGraw-Hill CTB Reading Acuity test for reading comprehension?

*Research Question #3.* After sixth grade teachers participated in year two of a three year culturally relevant teaching (CRT) staff development program (MHC), did their students demonstrate a significant difference based upon ethnic group on the criterion referenced test for Fountas and Pinnell’s text gradient levels?

*Research Question #4.* After sixth grade teachers participated in year two of a three year culturally relevant teaching (CRT) staff development program (MHC), did their students demonstrate a significant difference based upon ethnic group on the Fountas and Pinell Oral Reading Fluency Scale?

The purpose of this study was to compare the reading achievement over time of the subjects of this study—sixth graders who attended the urban high-poverty school during the 2009-2010 school year. Sixth graders were assessed by their classroom teachers, instructional facilitator, and resource teachers. Each of the teachers of the students participated in the Minnesota Humanities Cultural Proficiency Training Partnership (CRT) during the 2009-2010 school year. The three year partnership began in 2008-2009 and continued through 2010-2011. The researcher’s role as a school administrator and collector and analyzer of the assessment data and joint participant in the CRT training over three years was noted in this study.

**Subjects**

Grade six students in attendance for 2009-2010 from August 2009 through May 2010 were selected from the large urban elementary school of 521 students. The total population was initially for 2009 (\(N = 63\)) and ended with (\(N = 62\)) for May 2010. This
grade level was selected as representative of students whose duration of elementary
school attendance was at the selected school and whose teachers were in year two of the
staff development partnership in cultural proficiency. All students’ demographics were
listed in the tables section. Students were relatively comparative and representative of
the school and school district’s urban demographics (Omaha Public School
Demographics, 2009). The large number of students at this grade level (95%) who
received free and reduced lunch was indicative of poverty. The focus of this study was to
explore strategies and factors for alleviating the effects of poverty and support for student
achievement specifically in reading.

Selection of this grade was based on the almost even distribution of gender as a
variable collectively among the sixth grade classrooms with 51% males ($N = 32$) and
49% female ($N = 31$). The race of students was also representative of district racial
demographics. Of the total final population of sixth grade students completing the school
year 2009-2010 at the study site ($N = 62$), 60% were African American ($N = 35$), 32%
were White ($N = 20$), and 8% were Hispanic ($N = 3$). District demographics displayed
over 30% ($n = 14,969$) of the total district’s population as African American and 39% ($n$
$= 18,724$) as White. These factors were important, as the researcher’s goal was to
demonstrate comparative analysis of variables and examine relationships for this
population sampling.

Sixth grade students at the study site included free lunch status representing 69%
($N = 44$) and reduced lunch status of 26% ($N = 13$). Free lunch status and reduced were
combined to represent a collective level of poverty and represented 95% of the student
subjects’ socioeconomic status. Full-paying lunch students or students who were “not
free or reduced” represented 5% ($N = 6$) of the student subjects. The study school’s district had a 67.14% free/reduced lunch status for the entire school district’s population in 2009-2010. The study school’s free/reduced lunch status was 82.95%. Students’ racial and ethnic diversity as it relates to poverty was listed in the chart section of this study.

Teachers in the study were all White ($N = 3$). One teacher had taught in a suburban setting for one year. The other two had only urban school teaching experience at the study school. Of these two, one had four years of teaching and the other had one year of teaching experience at this school. The average years taught for the three teachers were two years. Teachers did not hold a Masters degree at the time of this study.

**Instruments**

Each fall and spring of the three year study, students received benchmark and formative assessments from classroom teachers, instructional facilitator and if placed as a special education setting, then the student with Individualized Educational Plan accommodations received assessments from the resource teacher.

CTB/McGraw Hill- Reading Acuity Test is a researched-based diagnostic and prescriptive assessment used for state accountability reporting for NCLB. The fall version of the acuity test had 25% on-grade level items and 75% previous grade level items. The spring version of the acuity test had 100% on grade level items (Zahm, personal communication, July 14, 2010). Targeted instructional practices, resources, and varying administering modalities were available to school districts. The CTB/McGraw Hill Acuity Test could be used as a Response to Intervention (RTI), as it could have been customized for students. Teachers did not implement any customization of the test. Data
collected for this study displayed baseline fall acuity percentages and comparative spring percentages. Class Assessment Reports from CTB/McGraw-Hill presented tiered data that correlated and aligned with the Nebraska Department of Education’s State Reading Standards (Zahm, J. personal communication, July 14, 2010). This study utilized the average of the fall and spring percentages, and they were reported as means for each student and were compared to guided reading levels and oral fluency levels. The on-line data was available to teachers in the fall and spring to assist with prescriptive instructional strategies.

The instruments for this study include students’ CTB/McGraw-Hill on-line administered Reading Acuity Test acuity levels, teacher administered Fountas and Pinnell Text Gradient Levels for Guided Reading A-Z, and teacher administered and scored Oral Fluency Levels from the Multidimensional Fluency Scale (Berglund & Johns, 2006). Prior to school year 2009-2010 formative assessments in the study school’s district did not use CTB/McGrawHill on-line acuity assessment. Prior to school year 2007-2008 the study school’s district did not use Fountas and Pinnell formative assessments text gradient reading levels for diagnostic and prescriptive purposes. Oral fluency assessment has been administered all three years of the study using the Multidimensional Fluency Scale.

Fountas and Pinnell’s Text Gradient Reading Levels A-Z are instructional resources used by the study school’s district and school as a literacy instruction approach. The A-Z leveled readers were used to determine students’ independent reading and instructional levels and helped diagnose areas of concern and facilitated necessary interventions. The leveled texts were used as a growth monitoring tool. The guided
reading levels Benchmark Assessment System 2 Grades 3 through 8, Levels L-Z are the focus of this study (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008). Gains, losses, and maintenance of guided reading levels provided the researcher with comparison to acuity and oral fluency levels to form a broader view of reading achievement.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The researcher is a non-instructional school administrator and serves as a reviewer and analyzer of school achievement data from the study school. Students’ and teachers’ names, gender, race, socioeconomic status, and corresponding reading scores were not revealed in a manner where students’ or teachers’ identities were compromised or revealed to others other than the researcher. Teachers’ names were coded with random letters and numbers. Students were identified by gender, race, and lunch status and names were not used in this study. All data was protected and secured as per district practice and available to designated staff. Administratively formed groups with equal distributions of gender, race, lunch status, and ability groups of sixth grade students with a total population of $N = 63$ with a final population of $N = 62$ included their reading acuity, Fountas & Pinell levels, and oral fluency levels for fall and spring of 2009-2010 achievement data.

While students must meet the standard for each assessment, the district assessments were measured by percentage of mastery, text gradient levels identified by letter ranges, and oral fluency levels of two through four.

**Data Analysis**

This study analyzes student data from teachers and students’ reading assessments prior to completion of the CRT training and after year two of completion of the CRT
training. The pre-post-test reading results were used to determine whether teachers’ involvement in the second year of CRT training showed a difference between students within gender, race, and socioeconomic levels.

The two-group comparative efficacy research study utilized sixth grade teachers’ participation in the three-year CRT training for year two completed in May 2010. All student achievement measures were collected upon availability of specified data, which was routinely collected school information.

The study constant included sixth grade teachers’ participation in the training from MHC for CRT over the three-year period of time, specifically year two of the program. Students’ race and socioeconomic status SES were evaluated for this study. Students’ individually self-administered CTB/McGraw-Hill on-line Reading Acuity Test, teacher-administered Fountas and Pinnell Text Gradient Level, and the teacher-administered Oral Fluency Levels from the Multidimensional Fluency Scale scores were the independent variables for this study.

All student data was routinely collected during fall, mid-year, and spring assessment periods and administered by the teaching and instructional staff. Results were reported to the school administrators by classroom teachers for progress monitoring. It was archived and stored in computers as spread sheets for teachers and as hardcopy with designated staff. The fall and spring assessments (2009-2010) were utilized in this study. An Analysis of Variance ANOVA was computed for each demographic. Significance for the average with degrees of freedom \((df = 62)\) within and between demographic groups of race and lunch status were determined with a .05 alpha level.

Objectives
Schools’ comprehensive self-evaluations were important, as they collected data relative to school climate, teacher and principal appraisals, and assessment data. School climate, organizational management, teacher and principal capacity, culturally responsive training, and data-driven school improvement efforts may be factors which impact students who live in poverty and their achievement (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1990).

Significant objectives were aligned with student achievement data:

1. Alignment of teacher training addressing teacher expectations and beliefs were important objectives related to closing the achievement gap.

2. Theoretical underpinnings to closing the reading achievement gap using long-term CRT staff development, pretesting and post-testing to monitor progress, and comparing race and socioeconomics disclosed important data for teachers and researchers.

3. This data explored if race and poverty were mitigating factors related to the achievement gap. The effect of sixth grade teachers’ cultural proficiency training on the reading achievement of students adds insight into the achievement gap between socioeconomic status and the race of urban poor students.
Chapter Four

Results

This research addressed the overall achievement of urban, poor, African American and White sixth grade students, explored if teacher experience with CRT was a factor in reading outcomes, and study if race and poverty are mitigating factors related to the achievement gap. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to compare the reading achievement over time of sixth grade students whose teachers all received year two of three years of CRT staff development in the areas of reading comprehension, text gradient levels, and oral fluency.

Student Reading Achievement Levels

Participating students were grouped into three reading achievement levels based on race and their fall pretest and spring posttest test results for reading acuity, text gradient levels, and oral fluency levels. While students must meet the standard for reading acuity as a predictor for the Nebraska State Reading Test administered in the spring, this assessment is also used with text gradient levels and oral fluency to demonstrate growth. For the purpose of this study, reading achievement levels are compared within and between the three tests and race of the students. Acuity levels ranged from 15-100, oral fluency levels from 2-4 (see Table 1), and text gradient levels for guided reading books A-Z were coded numerically (see Table 2). The majority of the students were low in SES as noted on Table 3. 95 % of the students were in poverty as designated by U. S. Poverty Guidelines as free and reduced eligible (2007). The African American group contained 37 and the White group contained 21 students.
Table 1

*Oral Fluency Ratings and the Dimensions of Fluency - Volume, Phrasing, Smoothness, and Pacing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 2      | Beginning to sound natural, more focus on decoding, reads quietly  
     | Two-three word phrases, choppiness, improper stress and intonation  
     | Some rough spots, hesitations, pauses  
     | Moderately slow |
| 3      | Sounds natural, voice volume is generally appropriate,  
     | Mixture of run-ons, pauses, some choppiness, reasonable intonation  
     | Occasional breaks in smoothness due to specific word difficulties  
     | Uneven mixture of fast and slow |
| 4      | Reads with good expression and enthusiasm, varies expression and volume  
     | Well phrased, adequate attention to expression  
     | Consistently conversational |

Table 2

*Fountas & Pinnell Text Gradient Levels & Grade Level Correlation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Level</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-C</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-I</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H-M</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L-P</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O-T</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S-W</td>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V-Y</td>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y-Z</td>
<td>7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; – 8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

Socioeconomic Status Grade 6 2009-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>$n = 57$</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-free or Reduced/Full Pay</td>
<td>$n = 6$</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>$n = 63$</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 1

Do all sixth grade students, maintain, lose, or improve their (a) reading comprehension; (b) text gradient levels; and (c) oral fluency levels compared to their pre-test levels after their teachers’ participation in year two of a three-year CRT staff development program?

African American and White students improved from fall pretest to spring posttest in for all tests during their teachers’ second year of CRT staff development. African American and White students’ results overall indicated steady growth in reading acuity, guided, reading, and oral fluency. Results are displayed on Tables 4, 5, and 6.

Research Question 2

After sixth grade teachers participated in year two of a three year culturally relevant, responsive, and proficiency teaching (CRT) staff development program, do their students demonstrate a significant difference based upon ethnic group on the McGraw-Hill CTB Reading Acuity test for reading comprehension?

There was no significant main effect for ethnic group, $F(1, 28) = 3.513, p = .071$; and there was no significant main effect for time from pretest to posttest, $F(1, 28) = 3.479, p = .073$. There was no significant interaction between ethnic group and time $F(1, 28) = 0.056, p = .815$. Table 7 summarizes the results for acuity.
Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for CTB/McGraw-Hill Acuity Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pretest Fall</th>
<th></th>
<th>Posttest Spring</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American ($n = 37$)</td>
<td>37.43</td>
<td>13.589</td>
<td>47.23</td>
<td>19.120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White ($n = 21$)</td>
<td>40.93</td>
<td>14.063</td>
<td>58.13</td>
<td>16.265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38.98</td>
<td>13.516</td>
<td>51.02</td>
<td>19.307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Race and Fountas and Pinnell Text Gradient Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pretest Fall</th>
<th>Posttest Spring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American ($n = 37$)</td>
<td>18.41</td>
<td>4.827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White ($n = 21$)</td>
<td>19.95</td>
<td>3.801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18.97</td>
<td>4.511</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6

*Descriptive Statistics for Oral Fluency*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pretest Fall</th>
<th>Posttest Spring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American ($n =37$)</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>.850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White ($n =21$)</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>.811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>.854</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for CTB/McGraw-Hill Acuity and Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variation</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Between Subjects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1420.280</td>
<td>3.513</td>
<td>.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>404.346</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Within Subjects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acuity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>382.614</td>
<td>3.479</td>
<td>.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acuity*ethnic group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.139</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>.815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>109.974</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 3

After sixth grade teachers participated in year two of a three year culturally relevant, responsive, and proficiency teaching (CRT) staff development program, do their students demonstrate a significant difference based upon ethnic group on the Fountas and Pinnell text gradient levels?

There was no significant main effect for ethnic group, \(F(1, 28) = 2.944, p = .092\); and there was significant main effect for time from pretest to posttest, \(F(1, 28) = 47.697, p < .0005\). There was no significant interaction between ethnic group and time \(F(1, 28) = 0.761, p = .387\).

Collapsed across ethnic groups, posttest results \((M = 21.41, SD = 4.009)\) were significantly higher than pretest results \((M = 18.97, SD = 4.511)\). Table 8 summarizes the results for text gradient levels.

Research Question 4

After sixth grade teachers participated in year two of a three year culturally relevant, responsive, and proficiency teaching (CRT) staff development program, do their students demonstrate a significant difference based upon ethnic group on the Fountas and Pinnell Oral Reading Fluency Scale?

There was a significant main effect for ethnic group, \(F(1, 28) = 756.963, p < .0005\); and there was no significant main effect for time from pretest to posttest, \(F(1, 28) = 2.294, p = .136\). There was no significant interaction between ethnic group and time \(F(1, 28) = 3.677, p = .060\).
Table 8

*Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Difference between student subjects and Fountas & Pinnell Text Gradient Levels and Race*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variation</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Between Subjects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>93.436</td>
<td>2.944</td>
<td>.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31.739</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Within Subjects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text Gradient Levels</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>172.407</td>
<td>47.697</td>
<td>&lt; .005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levels*ethnic group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.752</td>
<td>0.761</td>
<td>.387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3.615</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Collapsed across time, African American students ($M = 2.00$, $SD = .850$) were significantly lower than White students ($M = 2.43$, $SD = .811$). Table 9 summarizes the results for oral reading fluency.
Table 9

*Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Oral Fluency and Race*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variation</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Between Subjects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>568.784</td>
<td>756.963</td>
<td>&lt;.0005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>.751</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Within Subjects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.857</td>
<td>2.294</td>
<td>.136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency*ethnic group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.375</td>
<td>3.677</td>
<td>.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>.374</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Five

Conclusions and Discussions

The intent of this study was to compare the reading achievement over time of urban sixth grade students whose teachers all received year two of three years of CRT staff development in the areas of reading comprehension, text gradient levels, and oral fluency by ethnic group.

Conclusions

Research Question 1. Overall, African American and White students improved from fall pretest to spring posttest for all tests during their teachers second year of CRT staff development. African American and White students’ growth indicates that they are maintaining steady growth in reading acuity, guided, reading, and oral fluency. Students’ average scores continue to display a slight achievement gap between groups for all assessments.

Research Question 2. There was no significant difference in acuity between the ethnic groups. Acuity levels for fall and spring demonstrated significant growth for African American students \( (M = 47.23, SD = 19.120) \). Acuity levels for fall and spring indicated significant growth for White students \( (M = 58.13, SD = 16.265) \). The CTB/McGraw-Hill acuity test may be limited as a predictor for the state reading test, as the achievement gap demonstrated on the state test was not shown in this study.

In this study, it was interesting to note that the very small group of higher SES students made growth in acuity, but those students from poverty made greater gains. The achievement gap has not been bridged at this point. However, after two years of culturally proficient training, the results are moving in a positive direction.
Research Question 3. There was no statistically significant difference in the fall pretest for African American and White students in poverty for text gradient levels \(M = 18.41, SD = 4.827\) and spring posttest \(M = 20.62, SD = 4.245\). On grade level range is equivalent to text gradient levels S – Z. These results align with State Reading Test assessment data for the study school for 2009-2010. Of the students below standard for reading proficiency, students in poverty were 53.10% and 82.05% were African American students (Nebraska Department of Education, 2009-2010).

Research Question 4. Oral fluency is rated on a four point scale, with four as highest. The sixth graders averaged a 2.57 level for oral fluency. This indicates that they are moderate to slow oral readers, who are beginning to sound natural, require more focus on decoding, read quietly with two-three word phrases, with some choppiness, improper stress and intonation and have some rough spots, hesitations, and pauses (Pinnell, 1995). There was a significant difference between the groups in oral fluency. The oral fluency level average for African American students for the pretest \(M = 2.00, SD = .850\) and posttest \(M = 2.41, SD = .644\) indicated insignificant gains in oral fluency level for African American students. The oral fluency levels for White students’ pretest \(M = 2.43, SD = .811\) and posttest \(M = 2.38, SD = .669\) indicated that although poor White students’ oral fluency decreased slightly from the fall to the spring, they maintained significantly higher oral fluency than poor African American students.

These results suggest adopting culturally proficient language instruction for longer than the two years of this study. Students’ home language and their cultural linguistic experiences impact their academic vocabulary, learning, and ability to conceptualize knowledge. Teachers need to be aware of the complexity of oral language
acquisition and the power of students’ home language in the areas of self-identity, family bonds, and bonding with peers. Urban teachers who teach a Standard English epistemology must be made aware of this complexity. The academic success of their urban students is dependent upon teachers who make connections between home language and school language acquisition and understand social dialects. Oral fluency and oral language skills are gatekeepers for reading and academic success (Cole, 1983).

Discussion

The results of this study supported that African American and White students in poverty maintained and improved in the areas of reading acuity, text gradient levels, and oral fluency during their teachers’ second year of cultural proficiency training. The rate of improvement within and between the subgroups during fall and spring pretests and posttests demonstrates continued monitoring of successful strategies for improving the rate of achievement among African American and White students. The continued use of culturally proficient staff development aligned with student reading achievement data and teacher quality is important and supported by this research.

The reading achievement gap is persistent even when there is growth. A gap persists as to the rate of growth among students in poverty based on their race and collapsed overtime (Ladson-Billings, Feb. 2011).

This was the second year of the CRT by MHC for the teachers at the study site. A third year of training may produce different or similar results for this cohort of teachers and their students. The pretest results show a narrower gap than during the posttest between African American and White students. Research shows that as African
American students in poverty progress in their schooling the achievement gap becomes wider and wider (Haycock, 2009).

Besides the quantitative data, some of the anecdotal changes at the study site included a reduction in office referrals for this grade level, improved teacher capacity, more student assistance team meetings to address learning concerns, and quarterly reviews of acuity, text-gradient, and fluency levels. The building leadership engaged staff in team meetings to discuss important aspects of teaching reading and requested strategies for engaging students in urban settings in lessons. Staff members were held accountable for demonstrating use of intervention strategies which met the needs of the students prior to any special education recommendations. One teacher stated, “I would like to continue our meetings so I can continue to learn and grow as a professional. I still have a lot of knowledge gaps I would like filled. The more I know, the more I will be able to teach my students.”

**Cultural Proficiency and Reading Achievement.** Teaching students how to read in urban settings is important in closing the overall achievement gap for urban African American and White students. Research from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) and this study asks the question about the persistence of the reading achievement gap (Cortiella, 2001).

Poverty and poor reading skills are connected through other research (Bader, 2009). Ladson-Billings (2010) shares that the causes of the achievement and opportunity gaps are not simplistic and include school, community, home, social, and historical causes. Racism in schools, whether intentional or not, impacts how students in poverty are taught. Data from successful teachers demonstrates that building on students’
strengths, knowing their interests, having highly engaging and culturally proficient lessons, and understanding students’ developmental and cultural differences leads to improvement and elimination of the achievement gap (Reeves, 2000). Culturally proficient teaching entails a teacher’s ability to create within students, the ability to perceive that their experiences, the customs of their community, what they know, where they come from, and how they speak are of value to the teacher, school, and school district.

Culturally proficient teachers focus on developing their ability to learn to read the culture of their students and know where they are within their own culture. Crossing cultures and continuous cultural self-assessment are aspects of learning while teaching. One participant in the Minnesota Humanities CRT program stated, “My participation thus far in the culturally proficient model classroom project has tremendously impacted not only the way I teach, but, also the way I view the world. I quickly discovered so many misconceptions and gaps of knowledge I had. The major change in me is the way I see whiteness. I used to think that being White was not a privilege. I believed that everyone could have great success in their life by working hard, and pulling up their bootstraps. I still do believe in the correlation between hard work and success. However, I now see the neutrality of White privilege and that I, as a White woman, have a set of privileges not afforded to all others. I can turn on the television and see people I can easily identify with. Growing up, school was taught in a way that worked for me. I saw leaders who looked like me.” Cultural training workshops or programs for teachers are necessary.

The importance of making cultural proficiency training explicit in teacher training, value-added studies, and daily administrative observations are also factors in
students’ success. Collaboration with postsecondary teacher education departments in an effort to align teacher preparation courses with the needs of urban school students is a pathway for improving student achievement and teachers’ cultural proficiency levels.

Value-added models of studying teachers’ effectiveness and accountability are important in assessing which teacher effects impact urban students’ growth and achievement. Value-added models or VAM are not currently in place in the study site school district. Current research notes that VAM research from RAND Education is insufficient to support its use in the current high stakes testing environment. Errors in teacher effects was cited as the reason (McCaffrey, 2003). It is important to note the VAM is now being discussed in neighboring states’ school districts as a tool for school improvement plans (Bruckner, personal conversation, June, 2010).

Daily walk-abouts, informal observations, and formal summative appraisals from administrators who understand what the culturally proficient classroom, lesson, and practice looks like will provide feedback and support for teachers on the cultural proficiency continuum. Administrators themselves must also receive CRT training and utilize customized appraisals to support modifications, use of resources, and staff development for classroom teachers.

**Pedagogy and Poverty.** Building a bridge between who we are as teachers and who we are as learners is fundamental to considering race, social justice, and the American educational system. The study of becoming a teacher, the process of becoming a teacher, the ways we teach, how we teach, and what we teach are embedded in our epistemologies. Educational theorists, historians, and pioneers are taught in foundational teacher education courses. The absence of cultural perspectives and the absence of
narratives in the United States’ history and in these foundational courses have compounded the achievement and opportunity gaps in urban classrooms. This study showed African American and White students improved from fall pretest to spring posttest for all tests during their teachers’ second year of CRT staff development. African American and White students’ results overall indicated steady growth in reading acuity, guided, reading, and oral fluency.

Poverty is not always synonymous to low achievement. The definition of student achievement is embedded in the practices of the oppressor and the oppressed (Freire, 1974). Teachers’ understanding and awareness of oppression is evident when they make absent narratives visible in the curriculum and in the school culture. This helps teachers when they are writing and teaching culturally proficient lessons. Teachers who model high expectations and provide role models from students’ cultures are able to help students reach academic success (Marzano, 2007). Students and teachers can also be taught that poverty is often situational, temporary, and not exclusive to any race.

**Further Research**

The implications for further research using CRT as a strategy for narrowing the achievement gap among African American and White students are promising. The changing demographics in rural, urban, and suburban schools warrant schools and communities to first assess their cross-cultural competency and deficit-thinking practices. This includes analyzing data from SES, racial, special education, gifted education, and discipline referral for subgroups and examining systemic practices that contribute to the achievement gap (Lindsey, et al., 1999). The initial discomfort and frustration is indicative of connecting theory and practice and could be met with universities, schools,
and communities collaborating through service-learning. This along with embedded cross-cultural practices could form a stronger bond and improve cultural respect for varying cultures (Kozlowski, 2005).

The improvement of teacher quality and narrowing of the achievement gap involves changes at the individual and institutional levels and is a process and not a program. The moral compass involves directing new visions and inclusive missions beyond lip-service from school leaders. The goals of cultural proficiency for teachers are best summarized in the quote from a participant in the training partnership: “Truly understanding the privilege I have and the neutrality of whiteness has made me so much more compassionate as a human and a much more committed and dedicated teacher. For example, in my classroom, I do not want to perpetuate White neutrality by making white the norm and the rest “other.” The stories, perspectives, and viewpoints of everybody, not just white people, are now told in my classroom. I have taken a critical look at my lesson plans to see what has been committed. I used to dance around uncomfortable subjects while teaching. I cannot choose to leave things out. By omitting a topic, I now see that it sends the message that it is not important. My students’ personal experiences are now more important to me than ever. I, now do my best to show all students that who they are, their history, their stories, etc. are significant aspects in our classroom.”

Research designed to provide frequent self assessment, identification of culturally proficient schools, longitudinal studies of CRT skills, and their effectiveness is recommended for further study. The use of surveys, the use of portfolios by CRT trained teachers, reflections of video-audio recordings of interactions with families and students, interviews, CRT supported practicum experiences, and autobiographical
reflections are sustainable practices for analysis. Longitudinal studies and long-term monitoring of student achievement of students whose teachers engaged in CRT are necessary to assess value-added growth. Ethically, all students deserve culturally proficient teachers who are skilled in reading pedagogy, prescriptive interventions, and are able to adapt their instructional practices to move students along the learning continuum.

**Recommendations and Next Steps**

The growth of all students in the study is evident. Further research may involve looking at case studies involving school districts’ process of choosing reading programs or initiatives, the effectiveness of district wide staff development initiatives, local university teacher preparation programs, and the effectiveness of the Minnesota Humanities Center’s culturally proficient deconstruction and reconstruction curriculum project. This researcher is committed to monitoring those practices in school districts and teacher education programs for interventions, staff development, teacher education, and culturally proficient programs. The following important next steps are a part of the monitoring process for the committed researcher:

The decisions about which RTI to use with students, the process, and matching programs to school demographics are important when responding to urban students’ needs. An example of fragmented decision making for using level III RTI is using the Read Right program in demographically similar schools and Reading First in others.

Staff development choices by school officials must be aligned with staff’s and students’ needs, school demographics, and proven effectiveness based on research.
Examples of ala carte staff development results in multiple initiatives and minimal effectiveness.

The content of teacher education programs and whether or not the content contains sufficient cultural proficient experiences is relevant to the skills needed in order to teach in urban schools. Adequate preparation includes making connections between pedagogy and epistemological perspectives. Knowledge of the social and cultural history of the city is a foundation for preparing culturally proficient teachers. Other changes in the teacher preparation curriculum are necessary in order to prepare culturally proficient teachers. These were previously mentioned in this study.

A pilot program, The Minnesota Humanities Cultural Proficient Model Classroom Project with four classroom teachers, a school administrator, and a Black Studies Department professor is underway in the study school. It began October, 2010 and has provided over twenty hours of training and lesson reconstruction skills. The reconstruction is reflected in the design, engagement, and inclusion of the students’ cultures into the lessons. Video tapes, a training manual, and reflective conversations are used to train the participants. Additional studies measuring changes in their practice, monitoring their students’ achievement, and documenting their impact on their school’s culture may be helpful in bridging the achievement gap. District-wide implementation of culturally proficient training could be implemented to gauge its effectiveness in similar settings.

These recommendations and next steps for future work with this cohort of teachers and monitoring the areas noted above are very promising for closing and bridging the achievement gap.
References


Bakari, R.S. (1997). Epistemology from an Afro-centric Perspective: Enhancing black students’ consciousness through an Afro-centric way of knowing. This paper is posted at Digital Commons @ University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/pocpwi2/20.


Barbosa, P., Coddington, C., Guthrie, J., Klauda, S.L., McRae, A., & Wigfield, A. (2009). Impacts of comprehensive reading instruction on diverse outcomes of low- and high-


Broad, E., & Broad, E. (2010, December). *The Broad Prize: 30 urban school districts show better academic performance than their states for African-American, Hispanic, or low-


Haskell, R.E. (1997). Academic freedom, tenure, and student evaluation of faculty:


http://www.hks.harvard.edu/urbanpoverty/Urban


vanKleek, A. (1994). Potential cultural bias in training parents as conversational partners with their children who have delays in language development. *American Journal of Speech and Language Pathology, 3*(1), 67-78.


Appendix A

Copies of the study site approval letter are available upon request from the author of this study.
Appendix B

Copies of the school district and Institutional Review Board approval letters are available upon request from the author of this study.