

Serving African American Students: Considerations and Concerns

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Caution: Martin is a six-year-old, African American, Reading Recovery student who I had the privilege of observing during his Reading Recovery lessons last spring. While we must all recognize that race is a critical aspect of children's identities, there is no one way of being African American and the insights I share in this presentation do not apply to all African American children. What I hope to reveal is how careful observation and responsive teaching alongside attention to differences in cultural expectations can help us to establish strong relationships with children to support their literacy learning.

Lessons Learned:

- 1.) Teacher strengths (i.e., patience, praise, ignoring undesired behaviors, sense of humor) can be counterproductive if they do not resonate with the child's expectations for interactions with adults.
- 2.) The amount and kind of help provided to young readers is critical especially if independence is valued by the child. Some children need opportunities to be in charge.
- 3.) Anticipate that there may be confusions related to differences in language use. We need to deal with these without frustrating the student.
- 4.) Be careful not to buy into deficit myths about children or their families. If you cannot respect the child's family the child will have difficulty respecting you.
- 5.) Resist having lowered expectations for some children. This pertains to both reading and behavior.
- 6.) Remember that some children need to physically move around. Consider which things in a lesson could be accomplished at the board.
- 7.) Find out about the child's interests and funds of knowledge. His/Her interests may not be the same as yours or the same as you would expect from a child who shares your background. You may need to learn a little about the things that interest the child.

- 8.) If you are of a different ethnicity/race/culture/class/religion than your student, this might matter. If you are White remind yourself of the legacy of privilege you have benefited from and what your being White may mean to a child who is not White.

Resources

Irvine, Jacqueline J. (2003). *Educating teachers for diversity: Seeing with a cultural eye*. New York: Teachers College Press.

This book explores many of the ideas presented in this talk through the voices of African American teachers and scholars. The book is written in a friendly voice and not too long. It presents insightful information in a non-threatening manner.

Craig, Holly & Washington, Julie (2006). *Malik goes to school: Examining the language skills of African American Students from Preschool - 5th Grade*.

Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

This book provides a good overview of common speech patterns of some African American children. They remind us that children's African American English differs from adult African American English.

Jencks, Christopher & Phillips, Meredith (1998) *The Black-White test score gap*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

This is a rather heavy but classic volume of essays that address various explanations for the "gap." It addresses everything from racial bias in testing to teacher perceptions and expectations. It's a good book to peruse as well as a challenging and comprehensive read.