

Invited Column
Reading Between the Lines: Embracing the Science of Reading Through a Culturally Relevant Lens

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The passage of HB 1558 in Indiana marked a pivotal moment in my career as a literacy educator. For years, I advocated for teaching methods that embraced my students' cultural, linguistic, and personal identities. Literacy, to me, holds the power to heal and liberate—it should be a holistic process that nurtures the whole child and acknowledges their unique background. Therefore, when the state passed a law focusing on the "science of reading" as primarily phonics instruction, I felt an immediate conflict. The law's emphasis on a technical, evidence-based approach contradicted the inclusive, student-centered pedagogy I valued so deeply.

At first, I viewed HB 1558 as a challenge to my teaching philosophy—a move that would narrow my methods and stifle creativity. Would my courses become sterile learning spaces focused only on rote skills? I feared this policy would reduce literacy instruction's rich, dynamic process to mere technicalities devoid of cultural relevance, which I believed was essential for student success. I immediately reflected on my experiences as a student, sitting quietly in the back of my classroom without any advocate or representation of myself in the literacy curriculum. Yet, as I reflected on the potential impact of this law, I began to see it not as a barrier but as an opportunity for growth.

As a Clinical Professor of Literacy Education at Indiana University Indianapolis, I teach future teachers and facilitate spaces to explore literacy lineages, the development of a love for literacy, and its intersection with equity. Most of my students are white and middle-class, and will soon teach in urban classrooms with diverse, culturally and linguistically rich populations. I've always felt a profound responsibility to prepare my students for the complex realities they will face in these classrooms, as the toggle between academic success and cultural competence. However, I also recognized a gap in their preparation—many were eager to serve urban communities but lacked direct exposure to this setting. This mismatch made me question how best to equip them with the cultural awareness, empathy, and pedagogical tools they would need to succeed. I realized that culturally relevant pedagogy and the science of reading need not be in opposition; when combined thoughtfully, they can enhance literacy instruction for all students.

Shifting My Focus: Merging Science of Reading with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

As I began to embrace this new perspective, I realized that the science of reading—particularly its emphasis on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—was not inherently incompatible with the culturally relevant, student-centered teaching I had always valued. I understood that these approaches could complement one another when integrated thoughtfully. The science of reading offers evidence-based practices that have proven effective in improving literacy outcomes for all students, including those who struggle with reading. However, I now believe that for literacy instruction to be truly effective, it must go beyond teaching isolated technical skills. It must also address students' cultural, linguistic, and socio-emotional needs.

A classroom that recognizes and values students' diverse backgrounds is essential for academic success and the collective liberation of marginalized communities (Gay, 2010). When we combine the science of reading with culturally relevant teaching, we can help students decode words and engage with reading on a deeper level, seeing it as a tool for personal expression and cultural connection. By embracing both approaches, we create an environment that respects and celebrates the whole student.

This shift in perspective was critical for my students—future teachers preparing to enter classrooms where policies like HB 1558 are in place. Many of them are eager to serve, but they are also stepping into settings where the diversity of their students may be very different from their backgrounds. While they bring passion and good intentions, they may lack the cultural knowledge or lived experiences needed to understand the intersectional inequalities their students may face fully. By focusing on the intersection of the science of reading and culturally relevant pedagogy, I can help them bridge that gap. Literacy is not just about mastering technical skills; it's about understanding the cultural and social contexts in which those skills are used. When my students understand this, they will be better equipped to teach reading practically and meaningfully to their diverse learners.

Creating a Culturally Responsive Literacy Environment

Before engaging in methodological instruction, my class of future educators first engaged in critical reflection to explore how they received literacy instruction throughout their educational experiences. This reflective process allowed them to identify positive teaching practices that inspired them and oppressive methods they wished to disrupt. By examining their histories as learners, they could better understand how power and privilege shaped their education and, in turn, lay the foundation for a more inclusive and equitable pedagogical practice. As Tyrone Howard (2003) suggests, such self-reflection is essential for educators to disrupt harmful educational systems and create spaces where all students can thrive. Beyond critical reflection, I introduce my students to how integrating the science of reading with culturally relevant pedagogy might look. I emphasize a few key principles that I believe are essential for effective literacy instruction:

1. **Honor students' lived experiences:** Effective literacy instruction must integrate foundational skills like phonemic awareness and phonics into lessons that reflect students' backgrounds and communities. Phonics should not be taught in isolation but within a broader context that connects reading to real-life experiences, making it meaningful and relevant (Guthrie, 2004). Cultural responsiveness goes beyond offering diverse texts; it involves creating an environment where students feel seen and valued. This can be seen in how we question, assess, and physically organize the classroom space.
2. **Gradual release model for explicit, systematic instruction:** The gradual release of responsibility model involves students first receiving direct teaching and then gradually taking on more responsibility for their learning. This ensures that foundational skills are taught explicitly while also allowing for application in meaningful contexts. Incorporating culturally relevant texts, questions, and assessments encourages students to make personal connections, boosting motivation and engagement (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

3. **Recognize the value of bilingualism and linguistic diversity:** In classrooms with English Learners (ELs), I stress the importance of using students' native languages as bridges to literacy. Teaching Spanish-English cognates can help students build vocabulary and phonemic awareness. Research shows that leveraging students' home languages in literacy instruction improves academic performance and phonological awareness (August & Shanahan, 2006).
4. **Literacy instruction should be multisensory, especially when teaching phonics and word decoding:** One effective strategy is using tactile materials like letter tiles or sandpaper letters to reinforce letter-sound connections. Research has shown that engaging multiple senses during instruction can significantly improve literacy outcomes (Moats, 2020). This approach is particularly important for students who struggle with decoding or fluency, as it offers multiple pathways for engaging with the material.

Things Done in Action

Two practical examples of how I've integrated the science of reading with culturally relevant pedagogy in my teaching include the interactive digital alphabet book project and the use of Spanish-English cognates in literacy instruction. In the digital alphabet book project, students engaged in phonemic awareness and letter-sound correlation by typing letters, recording their sounds, and incorporating personal, culturally relevant images. This process reinforced phonics skills and allowed reading and writing to become dynamic and meaningful forms of self-expression. Similarly, in classrooms with a high population of English language learners, I use Spanish-English cognates to help bridge students' home languages with academic English. This approach strengthens vocabulary acquisition and phonological awareness while honoring students' linguistic backgrounds and fostering a deeper connection to both languages (Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010).

These initial steps demonstrate the potential of merging evidence-based methods focusing on students' unique backgrounds. However, there is still work to integrate reading science with culturally responsive pedagogy fully. For this integration to be truly impactful, ongoing refinement is needed in how we connect literacy instruction to our students' diverse lived experiences. This effort is crucial to ensuring that every student feels valued, seen, and empowered to succeed in their literacy development.

The Impact of Culturally Relevant Literacy on Students, Families, and Communities

Integrating culturally relevant literacy practices into the science of reading has far-reaching implications for students, families, and communities. For students, it means feeling seen and valued in their literacy learning, which leads to increased engagement and motivation. When students see their cultures reflected in the classroom, they feel more connected to the learning process, which results in greater academic success.

This approach builds bridges between home and school for families. It creates a space where families' cultural practices and languages are respected, empowering parents and caregivers to participate in their children's education actively. This connection between home and school helps strengthen the relationship between teachers and families, which research shows improves student outcomes (Epstein, 2001).

Culturally relevant literacy practices contribute to a more inclusive and equitable educational environment at the community level. When schools embrace their students' linguistic and cultural diversity, they create spaces where all students can succeed. Students who develop strong literacy skills are better equipped to engage with and contribute to their communities. This, in turn, helps break down systemic barriers and promotes greater social justice.

A Vision for the Future

Reflecting on my journey, I now realize that integrating the science of reading with culturally relevant pedagogy was more achievable than I initially believed. By integrating these approaches, I have found a way to honor both the science of reading's evidence-based practices and the cultural relevance that I feel is crucial for student success. This process has not only strengthened my teaching but also deepened my commitment to preparing future educators who can teach in ways that are both scientifically grounded and culturally responsive.

Looking ahead, I am filled with optimism. The challenges posed by HB 1558 are real, but they present an opportunity to reimagine literacy instruction in ways that honor both the technical and the human aspects of teaching. By empowering my students to integrate the science of reading with culturally sustaining pedagogy, I believe we can create classrooms where every student has the tools they need to succeed—not just academically but personally and culturally.

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