

## Loving the Questions: Encouraging Critical Practitioner Inquiry Into Reading Instruction

Joy Dangora Erickson, Endicott College  
Julie Kenny Calzini, Endicott College

Cara E. Furman, University of Maine  
Alessandra E. Ward, Wheaton College

### Abstract

*In this commentary the authors advocate for practitioner examinations of one-size-fits-all approaches to reading instruction. They argue that one-size-fits-all approaches fail to appreciate and make use of children's multifaceted identities, and, in doing so, can perpetuate patterns of domination and oppression. The authors encourage educators to embrace their questions, and they offer Descriptive Inquiry as a feasible method for conducting rigorous and systematic explorations of practice- explorations capable of sparking changes that better support children's holistic development.*

"To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around.

What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules...The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it – at no matter what risk...This is the only way societies change." — James Baldwin

As a reading specialist, Joy can remember participating in a week-long summer curriculum development retreat where professional development consultants dismissed faculty members' questions and concerns about how reading materials and pedagogy might impact culturally and linguistically diverse students; the curious faculty members were accused of "not trusting the process." As a secondary English teacher in an urban environment, Julie recalls being written up for questioning the validity of relying upon the "classic" canon in courses largely made up of Cambodian students. In today's fraught educational contexts, it is not uncommon for educators to find themselves in similar situations-professional "learning" communities where certain materials and pedagogical approaches are endorsed, others are opposed, and critical questions are discouraged or ignored. As an elementary teacher, Cara operated in a work environment committed to trusting the process. However, contrasting with the examples above, a very different process was endorsed. Namely, one which valued critical teacher inquiry. Encouraged in this context by an expert in Descriptive Inquiry, Cecelia Traugh, to "love the questions" (Furman & Traugh, 2021, p. 45, quoting Rilke, 1987), Cara found herself inducted into an environment where norms were regularly challenged to do better by students.

We focus here on the repeated refrain to trust the process – a process which, in the former examples, silenced the questioning Baldwin demands– and we argue that the method in which a practice is shared, the process, is crucial and must center on questioning. Though we endorse and strive for the democratic environment Cara experienced, we recognize that some educators find themselves in more restrictive settings where it is difficult to ask questions. Baldwin acknowledged these challenges; however, he maintained that the critical examination of all practices is essential for societal progress. Here we interrogate the nature of the process educators are asked to trust, arguing that liberatory pedagogy demands, as Baldwin suggests, learning to live with and even love the questions.

### **Inquiring about Approaches to Reading Instruction**

In our current roles (e.g., assistant professors, associate professors, dean), we encourage this vision of collaborative inquiry when working beside teachers. However, even in these more powerful positions, we find ourselves pushed to blindly trust another's process; state departments of education use their bully pulpits and accreditation power to entice (e.g., offer grant funding), pressure (e.g., align teacher certification tests to state-endorsed techniques and approaches), and in some instances mandate (e.g., require the use of specific classroom observation protocols) teacher preparation programs and K-12 schools to employ a narrow view of reading instruction.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that it is problematic for governments to promote findings from a wide range of well-designed empirical studies (quantitative and qualitative)—we recognize their important responsibility to keep abreast of scientific advancements. However, we take issue with a pervasively false underlying assumption—namely that adopting certain approaches, programming, and/or materials will holistically support most students' reading development and thriving. The concept of intersectional identity posits that one's identity is neither fixed nor singular; various forces (e.g., cultural, social, and political) influence and alter whom we are at any given time (Pugach et al., 2019). Curricular approaches designed for the "generic" (read: White, English monolingual, middle-class) student often do not appreciate intersectional identity. Students, learning environments, and the interplay between the two are complex and dynamic. Questions keep us accountable to that interplay – holding space for how particular people challenge and disrupt rules.

To illustrate this tension between one-size-fits-all curricular approaches and intersectional identity, we offer examples from teaching reading. Cognitive scientist, Daniel Willingham, acknowledges in the introduction to *The Reading Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Understanding How the Mind Reads* (2017) that applying findings from reading science to transform "people who cannot read into readers" is "not straightforward" (p.9). Put plainly, and it can be difficult to interpret and convert empirical results into effective instruction for students. We do not take this to suggest that we should not try; informed intentional instructional decisions are crucial for

supporting students' reading development. However, we cannot uncritically accept that by embracing the latest attempts to translate science into practice, we will be successful in "curing" all or even most students of their reading "deficits."

Relatedly, reading expert Timothy Shanahan (2022) underscores in a synthesis of research on the long-term ineffectiveness of Reading Recovery (May, Blakeney, Shrestha, Mazal, & Kennedy, 2022) that "There are no magic beans when it comes to early literacy. The trick is to catch kids up early and continue striving to keep them caught up." Not long ago, Reading Recovery was considered the "gold standard" of literacy intervention (Allington, 2005); we now know that a generous interpretation of the effectiveness of Reading Recovery indicates that the gains children made were short-lived at best.

Many will claim that gains were nonexistent, minimal, and/or short-lasting because the approach needed to be firmly rooted in specific implications of reading science. Though these claims are certainly not baseless, we must recognize culture's role in learning. Historically culturally and linguistically diverse students have been forced to assimilate into "mainstream" English-dominant classrooms, reading programs, and interventions—many of which fail to acknowledge, let alone harness, the power of their individual identities.

Similar to the way Reading First legislation and funding were used to coax districts and educators into essentialist "back to basics" approaches to literacy instruction, federal Covid relief funding is being used in many states to push "science of reading" approaches and programs that "systematize literacy acquisition" in public schools (Lehrer-Small, 2022); these approaches and programs often focus heavily on scripted and/or highly prescriptive phonological awareness and phonics instruction, at times to the exclusion of other important aspects of reading (e.g., motivation).

Educators are told what to teach and how best to teach it. They are directly and/or indirectly told to trust that the process will result in most students transforming into competent readers, which, in turn, can contribute to the liberation of those students in a variety of ways (e.g., financial power, social power). And they are pushed to accept this conclusion and enact instructional approaches and programs immediately and uncritically. hooks (1994) argued that when people claim to be liberatory and use authoritarian delivery modes, we cannot trust the process—because the process itself is oppressive.

As we discuss in the sections below, we believe that students' multifaceted identities should be sincerely and carefully appreciated when translating reading science into effective instruction. Therefore, any mandated approach to reading instruction and/or curricula (or any other kind of instruction for that matter) that does not invite sincere and thoughtful consideration for and integration of students' individual identities should not be blindly trusted.

## **Context and Culture Matter**

As Milner (2017, 2020) and others have emphasized, all education stakeholders must "counter context-neutral mind-sets"; one-size-fits-all instructional approaches "fail to consider the social contexts of teaching and learning, such as the state, the city, the local community surrounding the school, or the sociology of the school itself (Milner, 2020, p.26)". Despite loving his English Language Arts lessons, Milner (2017) recalls assimilating into "oppressive" school contexts—environments that did not recognize the facet of his identity that was hip-hop culture. In not recognizing and appreciating him fully, Milner maintains that he was forced to check "the most important dimensions" of his personhood at the schoolhouse door (p.75).

Culture has been described as "a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our own lives" (Gay, 2018, p.8). It influences how students think and act. Failing to recognize, appreciate, and make use of students' identities—their cultural funds of knowledge, ways of knowing, and ways of being— not only forces diverse students to assimilate, but it also works against important goals of enhancing their learning and future prospects (Gay, 2018; Heineke & Papola-Ellis, 2022).

However, culturally responsive and sustaining teaching rooted in students' lived experiences and evolving identities promotes learning by connecting new information to existing understandings and ways of knowing and sparking and maintaining interest and engagement (Gay, 2018). Students can process and store new information more efficiently when their culture is employed as an instructional scaffold (Hammond, 2014). Contemporary findings from cultural neuroscience support this claim and the recommendation that students' cultures be leveraged when making instructional decisions (for a review, see Lin & Telzer, 2018). Additionally, students learn best when they can see themselves in curricula and instruction; they should be afforded opportunities to offer feedback on curricula and pedagogy (Muhammad, 2020).

Therefore, educators' instincts to ask and investigate critical questions related to one-size-fits-all approaches to reading instruction are justifiable and necessary. They have the opportunity to act against the institutional and ideological underpinnings that reproduce domination and oppression. They can appreciate and use students' identities within products and approaches (for example, see Lawson, 2021). The keys to this integration are 1) close observation of and listening to students and 2) careful examination of content, pedagogy, and materials.

## **The Promise of Teacher Inquiry**

Educators can reinforce norms or serve as change agents (hooks, 1994). They are essential to working towards just and equitable outcomes in the classroom (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ward & Erickson, 2021). Heineke and Papola-Ellis (2022) maintain that in order to "shift the nature of schooling away from the firm grasp of dominant ideologies that center on Whiteness"

we must understand our own cultural identities and those of our students, recognizing that culture is not static but dynamic (p. 12). We must continuously question ourselves, our students, our curriculum, and our pedagogy. Freire (1970) calls for culture circles – a process by which a community selects and explores relevant topics together. Yet, while this openness to methods is inclusive, it can confuse novices.

We offer Descriptive Inquiry (DI) as a more accessible frame for asking and exploring questions of practice (for another approach, see Ward & Erickson, 2021); DI provides a worked-through process developed in accordance with liberatory philosophy (Furman & Traugh, 2021). It is a method for gathering collaboratively around a shared question of practice. Participants speak in rounds– zooming in on the particular to sit with a question. A set of practices and guidelines facilitate engagement with the highly flexible process. DI can support educators in examining questions related to curricula and pedagogy.

For example, faced with kindergarten children repeatedly running out of their classrooms, Cara and her colleagues questioned what it meant to be part of their classroom communities. They looked particularly closely and holistically at one particular child who regularly fled. They described the child across physical presence and gesture, connections with others, disposition and temperament, interests and preferences, and modes of thinking and being. The group pondered what might be changed to bring this child and others more consistently and comfortably into the community–this included reconsidering curricula, materials, and pedagogy. The team of educators challenged assumptions about what it meant to be part of the group. It made changes to reflect their children's multifaceted identities better and, in turn, support their well-being.

In closing, we underscore that educators are right to be critical of one-size-fits-all approaches to reading instruction. We offer DI as potential support for conducting rigorous and systematic practice examinations. Embracing questions is in the best interest of students and can further our collective understanding of the interplay between individual students and specific reading contexts. Educators who regularly pose and examine questions of practice are acting on important responsibilities to students, the profession, and educational equity.

## References

- Allington, R. (2005). How much evidence is enough evidence? *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 4(2), 8-11.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S.L. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. Practitioner Inquiry Series. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum,
- Furman, C. E., & Traugh, C. (2021). *Descriptive inquiry in teacher practice: Cultivating practical wisdom to create democratic schools*. Teachers College Press.
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. (3rd edition) Teachers College Press.
- Hammond, Z. L. (2014). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin.
- Heineke, A. J. & Papola-Ellis, A. (2022). *Inclusive texts in elementary classrooms: Developing literacies, identities, and understandings*. Teachers College Press.
- hooks, bell. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Lawson, A. (2021). Building bridges: Culturally relevant teaching with literature circles and multicultural literature. *Michigan Reading Journal*, 54 (1). Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol54/iss1/10>
- Lehrer-Small, A. (2022, February 9). Maryland unveils 'ambitious' slate of learning recovery programs using covid relief funds. *The 74*. Retrieved May 27, 2022.
- Lin, L. C., & Telzer, E. H. (2018). An introduction to cultural neuroscience. In J. M. Causadias, E. H. Telzer, & N. A. Gonzales (Eds.), *The handbook of culture and biology* (pp. 399–420). John Wiley & Sons, Inc..
- May, H., Blakeney, A., Shrestha, P., Mazal, M., & Kennedy, N. (2022, April 23). Long-term impacts of Reading Recovery through third and fourth grade: A regression discontinuity

study from 2011-12 through 2016-17. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.

- Milner, H.R. (2017). Race, Talk, Opportunity Gaps, and Curriculum Shifts in (Teacher) Education. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 66, 73 - 94.
- Milner, H. R. (2020). Start where you are, but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Muhammad, G., & Love, B. L. (2020a). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Pugach, M. C., Gomez-Najarro, J., & Matewos, A. M. (2019). A review of identity in research on social justice in teacher education: What role for intersectionality? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(3), 206-218. doi:10.1177/0022487118760567
- Shanahan, T. (2022, May 14). Me and reading recovery. Shanahan on Literacy. Retrieved May 31, 2022.
- Ward, A. E. & Erickson, J. D. (2021). Sharing what works: Building knowledge through practitioner case study. *Reading Teacher*, 75 (2), 157-167.
- Willingham, D. T. (2017). *The reading mind: A cognitive approach to understanding how the mind reads*. Jossey-Bass.