
THE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS SUCCESSFULLY TEACHING ENGLISH READING TO RURAL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Executive Summary

The reading abilities of Filipino students have been a challenge for educators and policymakers alike. Despite government efforts to improve literacy rates in the Philippines, many students need help with reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and critical thinking skills. This research in Salaysay Elementary School, Brgy. Salaysay, Marilog District, Davao City, examines the current state of reading abilities among Filipino students and potential areas for improvement. The poor reading abilities can be attributed to several factors, including a lack of resources and socioeconomic factors. The narratives of teachers revealed five important characteristics of teacher success in teaching reading to students: (a) strong relationships among faculty and with students, (b) teacher focus on motivating and engaging students, (c) teachers' development and experiences in understanding privilege and positionality, (d) high expectations, to a more limited degree, and (e) school-wide systems. Highly successful teachers as identified in this study were more likely to be motivated by factors internal to the school and less motivated by external policy. However, there are identified potential areas for improvement, such as promoting early literacy programs, investing in teacher training, and developing reading materials that are culturally relevant and engaging for Filipino students. These findings have important implications for education policies and practices in the Philippines and for educators and researchers seeking to improve reading abilities among Filipino students.

Keywords: Filipino Learners, literacy program, non-reader, poor reading abilities, Philippine education, reading comprehension

1. INTRODUCTION

The reading achievement of learners in elementary school, particularly third and fourth grade, is an indicator used in predicting learner success and high school readiness. The reading achievement gap has been a persistent problem in every school district across this country since the birth of our nation. While much of the research literature focuses on documentation of discrepancies among learners, little research has focused on practices of schools that are effective in promoting equitable levels of achievement of learners. This study is focused on identifying the practices of effective teachers of reading to learners at the elementary level, the role of principal leadership behaviors and professional development in teachers' success in teaching reading to learners. Reading is a predictor of future academic success and can be attributed to economic prosperity and social stratification.

For this study I sought to investigate the experiences of elementary grade teachers who successfully teach reading to learners. As previously noted, "successful" means teachers in schools that have exceeded the average for learner achievement in 2021-2022 and are identified by their principals as excellent teachers of learners.

Specifically, the study is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of teachers successfully teaching English reading to rural learners?
2. What are the approaches used by teachers in teaching reading to rural learners?
3. What professional developments are needed by teachers in teaching reading to rural learners?

Behaviorists have argued the environment inside or outside of the classroom and the conditioning learners from different ethnic groups receive from their teachers in the process of learning impacts learner learning. According to Zhou and Brown (2019), Skinner believed that our development is a result of our unique operant learning experiences (Zhou & Brown, 2019). Therefore, the experiences of our elementary school learners result in the reinforcement of or a manifested behavior that is contributing to the persistence of the reading achievement gap. Skinner may also support the notion that there may be some type of formal or informal conditioning occurring that has contributed to this issue as well.

While behavioral models of learning may be useful in explaining how learners are conditioned to perform, I argue the model is an inadequate explanation outside of observable behavior and does not explain why learners who come from well-to-do backgrounds are more successful in school. A cognitive development psychologist such as Jean Piaget may look at this issue through stages of development and/or the learning capacity present within those stages (Zhou & Brown, 2019). Piaget might say that some learners move more quickly than others through developmental stages. This approach would not explain the differences in scores as the stages of Piaget's Cognitive Development only consider

the age of the pupils as they move through those stages. One of the key primacies of Piaget's work and foundational beliefs of constructivist theory that does lend itself to the problem is that knowledge is constructed and learners are more likely to be engaged in learning when the learning is personally relevant and meaningful (Zhou & Brown, 2019). Another theory of learning used to examine the problem is the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) of learning. SCT emerged primarily as result of Bandura's (1986) work. SCT emphasizes that learning occurs in social context and much of what is learned is gained through observation (Zhou & Brown, 2019). If we apply this theory to our problem of practice, we can attempt to gauge the attention, retention, production and motivation that our elementary school learners are experiencing in the classroom as it relates to learning and reading achievement. These four inter-related processes are fundamental to SCT in understanding observational learning of expected behaviors or skills. Other fundamental elements of SCT that have implications for the problem as it relates to learning are modeling, outcome expectation, perceived self-efficacy, goal setting and self-regulation (Zhou & Brown, 2019). SCT can offer some insight into our problem though it lacks the cultural and racial depth needed to fully gauge the learning aspects of the problem. While there are many theories and approaches to the way we as humans receive, obtain or acquire knowledge, or become educated, there are theories that do consider culture and race and have direct connections to the issue of reading achievement for elementary school learners.

Vygotsky's Social Cultural Theory suggests that social interactions (teacher-learner, peer-peer) lead to continuous step by step changes in the development of thought and behavior in children and this can vary greatly from culture to culture (Zhou & Brown, 2019). This would suggest that there is a disconnect between instruction, learning and culture that is happening inside of our classrooms every day for our learners outside of the dominant culture. Gay (2019) asserted, "a growing body of behavioral science research and scholarship suggests that the burden of school failure does not rest on individual learners and teachers but is nested in the lack of "fit" or synchronization between the cultural systems of schools and diverse groups." Developing a closer fit between a learner's culture and the classroom can have a significant impact on a learner's ability to experience academic success (Ladson-Billings, 2019).

In proposing ways of looking at learning related to the reading achievement gap for learners elementary schools, I will draw on a framework that includes a learner's culture in the process of learning. Gay (2019) developed a framework of learning termed Cultural Context Teaching. Cultural Context Teaching draws on the technical and mechanical aspects of teaching but utilizes the "Cultural Frameworks" of various ethnic and social groups (Gay, 2019). According to Gay, this approach requires educators to become "cultural brokers," those who understand cultural systems that differ from their own, is able to interpret cultural symbols from one frame of reference to another, can mediate cultural incompatibilities, and knows how to build bridges or establish linkages across cultures that facilitate the instructional process. Cultural brokers can translate expressive cultural behaviors into pedagogical implications and actions" (Gay, 2019). In considering a learner's culture and the role it plays in learning, we can better meet learners where they are and utilize the cultural strengths that the learner brings with them every day to the classroom.

What to look out for during reading methods: What reading methods are your learners using? Are they methods that you have taught them, or are there any that they have learned at home or elsewhere?

Here are a few to keep an eye out for or to experiment with your pupils:

Phonics focus. This method teaches word recognition by learning grapheme-phoneme (letter-sound) associations. The learner learns vowels, consonants, and either blends or blending. Children learn to sound out the words they are reading by combining sounds into full words. By associating speech sounds with written letters, the learner learns to recognize words they have not come across before.

Linguistic method. This method involves children learning whole words rather than breaking them down into sounds or similar. The words are taught in word families, or in groups based on similar spelling patterns, for example. Children aren't taught the relationship between letters and sounds directly but should learn them through slight word differences. Once common, basic words are learned, then words that do not follow common rules can be taught on an individual basis (or in smaller groups). These are commonly called 'sight words'.

Skim, scan and study. These techniques are designed to aid reading comprehension. Skimming a text allows readers to get the gist of the text. Upon re-reading, children can then try scanning. Scanning involves looking for key information in a text. You can provide specific parameters for this, such as asking that young readers find names, for example. Studying is the final of the three, and involves reading the text in detail. This is much easier after completing the first two 's' activities, as children will already have an understanding of the text and what to expect when reading it. To enhance this reading technique, why not follow up with a cloze activity? Cloze activities eliminate words in the passage and pupils are required to fill them in.

For the purpose of this study, I selected a theoretical framework to analyze the racial achievement gap: Culturally Responsive Teaching Theory. Culturally Responsive Teaching Theory (CRTT) proposes strategies to effectively teach

children of diverse racial and ethnic cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2019; Noguera & Akom, 2020). These strategies include: “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles” (Gay, 2019) Further, the instruction is validating and affirming of the learners’ home cultures, the experiences in home and school are connected, and uses a variety of instructional strategies (Gay, 2019). Gay also indicated CRTT fosters appreciation of one’s own and the cultures of others while incorporating materials that represent the diversity of the learners.

We must adaptively grow in our ability to better serve the learners who are perpetually left behind by our education system and close the persistent gap in reading academic achievement that exists throughout our nation (Ladson-Billings, 2019; Noguera & Akom, 2020). Noguera (2018) asserted that schools and districts have reinforced “assumptions regarding the relationship between academic ability and intelligence.” Scholars also insist that successful teachers of learners provide culturally appropriate equitable learning opportunities in their classrooms to foster and develop meaningful relationships, connection to learning and learner agency (Darling-Hammond, 2020; Gay, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2019; Noguera & Akom, 2020). Gay (2019) suggested CRTT brings emphasis to the fact that it is vital for teachers to know the backgrounds of learners they teach. This is as important as understanding the content teachers intend to teach to the learners. At the heart of this practice is the ability of the teacher to adapt instructional practices and classroom structures to more closely align with the unique cultural characteristics of the learners they serve (Gay, 2019).

Districts are incorporating CRTT into their equity plans. For example, the equity policy plan outlines key strategies to achieve equity along with metrics to evaluate progress. The first of these strategies calls for significant investment and attention in the area Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning. The stated goal being “to provide learners with rigorous, culturally responsive, and engaging learning environments which accelerate their academic achievement and personal growth.” After analyzing the reading achievement results of learners, it is reasonable to conclude that any effort to reduce the reading achievement gap must be addressed in the classroom through Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies and within the reading instruction that occurs within the classroom.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative study that investigated the experiences of elementary grade teachers successfully teaching learners reading. I sought to gain a “deep understanding” of the experiences of teachers successful in teaching reading to learners, which Lunenburg and Irby (2019) noted is the purpose of qualitative research.

Qualitative data emphasizes “people’s lived experience” which is “fundamentally well suited for locating the meaning people place on events, processes, and structures in their lives and connecting these meanings to the social world around them” (Miles et al., 2019). Because the purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences and conditions, including the relationship among professional development trainings, school leadership qualities, and instructional practices successfully used by teachers, a qualitative research design was appropriate.

This study utilized purposive sampling (Maxwell, 2019) to interview teachers who successfully teach reading to learners. To define “successful,” I identified schools that exceed the average for performance of learners in the elementary grades and are thus considered “successful” in achievement within districts that have currently enacted achievement tests. The term “successful” teachers for the purpose of this study are teachers in schools that have exceeded the average for learners’ achievement and are identified by their principals as outstanding teachers of learners. This study is important given the lack of studies examining the experiences of teachers successfully teaching reading to learners and the relationship among professional development trainings, and school leadership characteristics on the reading achievement of learners. Seidman (2019) noted that if “random selection is not an option, the most commonly agreed upon answer is purposive sampling.” Lunenburg and Irby (2018) stated that “purposive sampling involves selecting a sample based on a researcher’s experience or knowledge of the group to be sampled. Clear criteria provide a basis for describing and defending purposive sampling.”

For this study, I purposively identified participants by first identifying learners whose reading scores among learners were higher than average reading scores. For the purposes of this study, successful teachers were purposively selected from whose achievement scores on the achievement test are higher than the average in reading in learners. The study identified “successful” teachers of learners by drawing on existing student performance data. Ten (10) teachers in the elementary grades were interviewed.

The data collection method for this study is semi-structured interviews with 10 participants (Creswell, 2019; Saldaña, 2019; Seidman, 2019). Semi-structured interviews are one of the best ways to collect data when a researcher will not have multiple opportunities to interview participants (Creswell, 2019).

The use of open-ended questions was employed in order to give participants wider breath in answering so I could more fully capture their perspectives without leading them to desired responses. Participants were given the leeway to

answer specific questions in either English or the dialect, or in any dialect comfortable to them. Follow-up questions were utilized in order to gain clarity and greater insight into participant responses. I used active note taking and audio recorded all interviews for transcribing purposes to ensure the expressed perspectives of the participants were accurately captured.

In analyzing the collected data, I sought to find themes through a cycle of coding rounds interwoven with on-going data collection and careful reflection. Saldaña (2019) referred to this process as analytic memo writing. Memo writing and meaningful deliberation about the data sets and memos guided my interpretation of the data.

For this study, I collected data from teachers identified among other criteria by their principals as being successful in teaching Learners reading. I coded the data individually after each interview. By coding the data initially it allowed me to categorize what was said and flag any potential word or phrases directly related to the primary or related research questions. After initial coding of interviews, I reflected with my adviser through dialogue and analytic memo writing. This technique allowed me to more acutely analyze the participant responses and be strategic throughout the coding process about code choices. Furthermore, it produced transparency and reliability of how the process of inquiry took shape, the emerging patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in the data are built (Saldaña, 2019).

All data were coded in an iterative process to ensure categories and themes that emerged were trustworthy within the findings (Creswell, 2019). This iterative process looked for new information that emerged throughout the course of study. Data were presented in relation to professional development trainings and school leadership qualities, as well as other emerging themes and categories of those who are successfully teaching reading to rural learners.

Phenomenological analysis is an approach to psychological qualitative research with an idiographic focus, which means that it aims to offer insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon. Usually these phenomena relate to experiences of some personal significance, such as a major life event, or the development of an important relationship. It has its theoretical origins in phenomenology and hermeneutics, and key ideas from Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are often cited. Smith (2019) said that PA is one of several approaches to qualitative, phenomenological psychology. It is distinct from other approaches, in part, because of its combination of psychological, interpretative, and idiographic components (Gill, 2019).

3. RESULT

The study identified “successful” teachers of learners by drawing on existing student performance data. Ten (10) teachers in the elementary grades were interviewed.

Experiences of teachers successfully teaching English reading to rural learners.

Several themes for the experiences of teachers came up: strong relationships; motivating and engaging students; development, privilege and positionality; high expectations; and school-wide systems. These themes are supported by direct responses of teachers quoted in their narratives. Approaches used by teachers in teaching reading to learners While there are many instructional strategies for teaching reading, teachers shared ten (10) of the most trusted amongst educators and reading specialists: assess student ability first; choral reading; using visual aids; assign reading buddies across ages & grades; implement audiobooks; teach academic English vocabulary; have students summarize what they read; expose students to different discourse patterns; let students choose the books they read; and have the students read the same content multiple times. Professional developments needed by teachers in teaching reading to learners. The current study shows that effective professional learning in reading experiences typically incorporate most or all of these elements. Each of these elements was part of the professional development addressed in at least 3 or 4 seminars or trainings attended by teachers. These elements are: content focus, active learning, collaboration, use of models and modeling, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration.

Analysis

Professional development that focuses on teaching strategies associated with specific curriculum content supports teacher learning within their classroom contexts. The training seeks to strengthen teachers’ understanding of how to teach reading productively. Its first goal is to deepen teacher understanding of students’ reading thinking, which helps teachers anticipate and respond to students’ ideas and misunderstandings in productive ways. Its second goal is to help teachers learn to sequence science ideas to help students construct a coherent “story” that makes sense to them.

Over the course of more than 100 hours, teachers studied and discussed video cases of teaching, including student work and teacher interviews. They also taught model lessons themselves and analyzed their teaching with their colleagues, evaluating the experience and student work to revise the lessons for colleagues to then teach in a form of lesson study. These teachers’ students achieved significantly greater learning gains on reading pre- and post-tests than

comparison students whose teachers received content training only (Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob, 2019), a finding further confirmed by a second randomized study of the program several years later (TNTP, 2019).

Active Learning. Active learning provides teachers with opportunities to get hands-on experience designing and practicing new teaching strategies. In PD models featuring active learning, teachers often participate in the same style of learning they are designing for their students, using real examples of curriculum, student work, and instruction. For example, Reading Apprenticeship is an inquiry-based PD model designed to help high school biology teachers integrate literacy and biology instruction in their classrooms. Each of the program's 10 full-day sessions is designed to immerse the teachers in the types of learning activities and environments they will then be creating for their students. Working together, teachers study student work, videotape classroom lessons for analysis, and scrutinize texts to identify potential literacy challenges to learners.

Teachers in the program practice classroom routines that will help to build student engagement and student collaboration, such as "think-pair-share," jigsaw groups, and text annotation. Reflection and other metacognitive routines such as think-alouds and reading logs for science investigations are also used in PD sessions. In a randomized control study in a set of high-poverty schools, this active learning PD model resulted in student reading achievement gains equivalent to a year's additional growth compared with control group students, as well as significantly higher achievement on state assessments in English language arts and biology (Easton, 2019).

Collaboration. High-quality professional development creates space for teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning, often in job-embedded contexts that relate new instructional strategies to teachers' students and classrooms. By working collaboratively, teachers can create communities that positively change the culture and instruction of their entire grade level, department, school, and/or district. "Collaboration" can span a host of configurations—from one-on-one or small group collaboration to school wide collaboration to collaboration with other professionals beyond the school.

In one program, teachers engaged in on-site, small-group professional development to promote inquiry-based, literacy-integrated instruction to improve English language learners' reading achievement. Through the initiative, teachers and paraprofessionals participated in collaborative biweekly workshops in which they jointly reviewed upcoming lessons, discussed science concepts with peers, engaged in reflections on their students' learning, and participated as learners in the types of inquiry-based science activities they would be implementing for their students. They also received instruction in strategies for teaching English language learners. Students who received enhanced instructional activities and whose teachers received PD demonstrated significantly higher science and reading achievement than students who were engaged in business-as-usual instruction (Fullan, 2019). By focusing on improving the practice of teachers of English language learners, this kind of collaborative, districtwide PD can have important implications for improving the equity of whole systems.

Use of Models and Modeling. Curricular models and modeling of instruction provide teachers with a clear vision of what best practices look like. Teachers may view models that include lesson plans, unit plans, sample student work, observations of peer teachers, and video or written cases of accomplished teaching.

For example, in a program used across a number of regions, PD focused on the types of pedagogical content knowledge teachers need to effectively teach elementary reading. Curricular and instructional models were used in multiple ways to support teacher learning. For example, one group of teachers analyzed teaching cases drawn from actual classrooms and written by teachers. Another set of teachers worked in carefully structured, collaborative groups to analyze examples of student work from a shared unit taught in their own classrooms. A third group used metacognitive strategies to reflect on their instruction and its outcomes. Teachers also had access to a "task bank" of formative assessment model items they could use with their students during the program.

These types of models support teachers' ability to "see" what good practices look like and implement new strategies in their classrooms. In a randomized experimental study, students of teachers who participated in any of these PD opportunities had significantly greater learning gains on science tests than students whose teachers did not participate, and these effects were maintained a year later (Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2019).

Coaching and Expert Support. Coaching and expert support involve the sharing of expertise about content and practice focused directly on teachers' individual needs. Experts may share their specialized knowledge as one-on-one coaches in the classroom, as facilitators of group workshops, or as remote mentors using technology to communicate with educators. They may include master teachers or coaches based in universities or professional development organizations.

In one coaching initiative designed to enhance early literacy instruction among teachers, educators participated in biweekly sessions with a university-based literacy coach following a two-day orientation that introduced them to the

literacy concepts. Prior to each session (which could be conducted in person or remotely), coaches and teachers collaboratively chose a specific instructional practice on which to focus their time together. Coaches then observed teachers in their classrooms and provided both supportive and constructive oral and written feedback on their teaching, facilitating the implementation of desired instructional practices.

For remote coaching, educators shared 15-minute video clips and coaches provided detailed written feedback, supported by links to video exemplars and other materials available through the program. The school year-long program included 16 hours of workshops and seven coaching sessions. A two-year randomized controlled trial found that classrooms led by these teachers demonstrated larger gains and higher performance on a widely used early childhood classroom quality assessment, and their students experienced larger gains on a number of early language and literacy skills than did those in the control group (Buczynski, & Hansen, 2020).

Feedback and Reflection. High-quality professional learning frequently provides built-in time for teachers to think about, receive input on, and make changes to their practice by facilitating reflection and soliciting feedback. Feedback may be offered as teachers analyze lesson plans, demonstration lessons, or videos of teacher instruction, which also provide opportunities for reflection about what might be refined or retained and reinforced. These activities are frequently undertaken in the context of a coaching session or workshop, but may also occur among peers.

For example, in a program targeting early childhood educators' ability to promote children's language and literacy development, educators enrolled in a facilitated course. The course included videos of model lessons, coursework and knowledge assessments, and opportunities to plan lessons and practice skills in small groups and in teachers' own classrooms. The course also offered interactive message boards that were moderated by expert facilitators. Teachers participated in four hours of this coursework per month throughout the school year. They received a supplemental curriculum on preschool language and literacy skills and were encouraged to monitor children's language and literacy progress using a common tool.

In addition, some educators participated in biweekly on-site mentoring sessions with the expert facilitators, who observed the teacher's practice, then facilitated reflective follow-up and provided positive and constructive feedback. In a randomized controlled study of the program, researchers found that students of teachers who received expert mentoring and feedback experienced the greatest gains on a variety of language and literacy outcomes (Johnson, & Fargo, 2020).

Sustained Duration. Effective professional development in reading provides teachers with adequate time to learn, practice, implement, and reflect upon new strategies that facilitate changes in their practice. As a result, strong PD initiatives typically engage teachers in learning over weeks, months, or even academic years, rather than in short, one-off workshops (Santagata, Kersting, Givvin, & Stigler, 2020).

For example, a program is a two-year PD model to enhance reading instruction for Cebuano-speaking elementary school students. The program begins with a two-week summer workshop that includes graduate-level coursework on teaching elementary reading. Teachers' learning from this intensive workshop is reinforced through occasional release days and monthly grade-level workshops with professional learning communities. These additional sessions support teachers in deepening their learning and provided space for ongoing support in implementing the new curriculum.

This model not only offers teachers the opportunity to return repeatedly to the PD material over the course of a school year, but also to apply their learning within the context of their classroom between workshops. This cycle is repeated in the second year, with an additional summer workshop and continued release days. In a comparison group study, students whose teachers participated in the program demonstrated significantly larger improvements in reading achievement over time than students whose teachers experienced business-as-usual PD (Santagata, Kersting, Givvin, & Stigler, 2020). By promoting learning over time, both within and between sessions, PD that is sustained may lead to many more hours of learning than is indicated by seat time alone.

4. DISCUSSION

The narratives of teachers revealed five important characteristics of teacher success in teaching reading to students: (a) strong relationships among faculty and with students, (b) teacher focus on motivating and engaging students, (c) teachers' development and experiences in understanding privilege and positionality, (d) high expectations, to a more limited degree, and (e) school-wide systems. Highly successful teachers as identified in this study were more likely to be motivated by factors internal to the school and less motivated by external policy. I now propose implications for further research and actions in the field.

The importance of teachers developing culturally-responsive relationships with students, their teaching team and principal cannot be understated. The degree to which this is reinforced in teacher preparation programs should be examined. Teachers need to be exposed to cultures outside of their own to gain perspective and understanding of their

cultural biases to examine their privilege and positionality. This will only be accomplished through being intentional about the experiences teacher preparation programs provide and the way we develop our preservice teachers within the province. Next, continuing education for teachers must similarly focus on providing meaningful experiences that ensure they are successful working with students from their own background as well as backgrounds different from their own. A workforce of teachers, whose culture and lived experience is different than that of students of color, cannot be successful in closing racial achievement gaps if they are not adequately prepared to do so. We must intentionally provide the experiences for our educators so they have an in-depth understanding of the cultural strengths that students of color possess and bring with them into the classroom every day. Investment in the development of both the current workforce and preservice teachers is the only way to ensure our state's majority White teacher workforce develops understanding of its privilege and experiences exposure to and understanding of cultures outside of their own. Teacher reflection and action on these facets are key in personal and professional growth.

Successful teaching as demonstrated by the teacher participants in this study point to the empowerment of teachers at the individual site as opposed to larger external drivers such as policy and law. Teachers' experience in examining their own privilege and positionality related to their success in teaching reading to Students is an important finding of this study. Many of these teachers intentionally sought out professional development or volunteered for the experiences that gave them the ability to examine these factors in their role as educators. Principals and school districts should set aside funds for teachers to have more opportunities to self-identify from a menu of development exploration opportunities focused on examining privilege and positionality as it relates to student success which they would like to participate in. How to identify which opportunities would be most beneficial for teachers and students will require further study.

This study suggests that teacher development programs at colleges, universities as well as school districts should seek to provide preservice and practicing teachers with ways to expand their ability to meaningfully connect with students of color and students outside of their own race and culture. Ensuring curriculum is inclusive of popular culture and student interest is also crucial area of development for teachers, providing preservice experiences that focus on working with students and families whose racial background reflects the diversity of students they serve might be a more helpful strategy in both teacher and administrator preparation as opposed to focusing on individual skill preparation.

In order for principals to be better prepared to offer experiences like these to their educators their preparation will also need to be tailored to meet the needs of historically underserved students. The preservice development of our building principals is vitally important to the success of our students. Cultivating and crafting the ownership of personal mission and vision in a school leader who is supportive is vital to ensuring our teachers have the transformational leadership present in their building to achieve their goals (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2020). The literature on Transformational leadership was synthesized by Peterson (2021) and includes: solves problems with teachers together, communicates school norms values and culture while sharing power with teachers, develops goals/mission with teachers to impact teacher behaviors and leader has a moral focus on equity.

Examining privilege, how principals select and develop teachers, how they provide PD and on what topics, and the types of interview questions asked are areas of principal preparation worth of examination. Lastly, the importance of the relationship at the school and within the process of providing educational opportunities as a whole cannot be understated. The degree to which this is focused on by our higher learning institutions in the preparation of our preservice principals should be examined.

Professional Development. Teachers who have the ability to create and craft strong relationships with their students, colleagues and principals are more likely to be successful in their ability to teach reading to students. As many teachers in this study noted, they leveraged this connection to motivate and engage their students academically. Developing the ability of preservice and practicing teachers to create strong professional relationships among themselves and supportive relationships with their students is one approach to helping close racial achievement gaps among students. Only by instilling this as a high value in their educators and creating and crafting professional development targeted to this development can we shape our teachers' approach to student learning. With achievement gaps persisting across this nation's school districts, teacher preparation programs and states should take steps to learn from educators who are having success in their classroom teaching reading to students and to create professional development specifically geared toward Black student success to be implemented at every school in the state.

District Hiring Practices. The findings of the current study suggest that through intentionally focusing the development in educators of an ethic of service (Sergiovanni, 2019) to our historically underserved student groups, districts may be able to close pernicious racial achievement gaps. Successful teachers in this study appear to be

strongly motivated by a desire to alter the traditional outcomes of school for students of color. The deliberate recruiting of such teachers and placing a high priority on these characteristics is important. Likewise, the recruitment of principals who are interested in this type of school climate and are committed to collegial work with teachers would be very important.

Further research is needed to examine the most beneficial way to provide educators with these experiences, rather than relying on them to occur by chance. This study could be expanded to a larger group of educators in more diverse geographic parts of the nation. Also, ensuring respondents include people of color, principals and students would be another way this research could be expanded.

Every person, of every race, gender, language of origin, mental or physical ability or social class, deserves an equal educational opportunity. Schools should be places where children from every walk of life thrive and grow and ultimately become productive, healthy contributors to our society. In order for us to reach that which continues to evade us, students need educators everywhere to grow in their ability to serve students of color. This study has given me the opportunity to examine the experiences of successful teachers of students.

I propose that the findings of this study be used in the continuous development of our preservice and current teacher workforce by providing them with these strong foundations. When we as a nation work to ensure that every student has access to and experiences success in the education system, students of color benefit, as does every child, family, and business in our state. With more students experiencing success in the education system, the economic advantage to our society will accrue through tax revenue and saving expenditures in crime, health care and a variety of programs (Levin, 2019). Racial wealth gaps will begin to close and society will become more socially just as a result. Given the racial tension in current times experienced in towns small and large across this nation, social justice must be our goal. I raise my voice in favor of a stronger system where our policies are not just words on paper but have the resources needed to allow every child to reach their fullest potential. Overall, the literature here suggests that policy can play a role in addressing inequality, but the extent to which equity policy plays a role in closing racial reading achievement gaps remains to be seen.

Classrooms are becoming increasingly more diverse and with that comes an amazing opportunity for us to change the way our education system serves our students. These demographic shifts in our classrooms are not temporary events but a reflection of our future as a nation. We must adaptively grow as educators to meet the needs of our diverse student population and develop ourselves to be culturally competent, culturally responsive, culturally sustaining curators of learning experiences for our nation's youth. I close by quoting, "If not us then who and if not now, then when?"

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