



Equity and the Science of Reading

Children's Literacy Initiative



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“In America, talent and creativity can come from anywhere, but only if we provide equitable educational opportunities to students everywhere.”

- Miguel Cardona, United States Secretary of Education

Executive Summary

Literacy is the foundation for learning and a pathway to liberation. It empowers children with the tools to understand their world and the agency to achieve their hopes and dreams. CLI recognizes the science of reading as a foundational body of research essential for informing effective literacy instruction, which is crucial for fostering children's literacy success. Understanding this science helps educators implement teaching strategies that enhance reading skills from an early age, thereby setting the stage for lifelong learning and achievement in literacy. We appreciate the important ideas that interdisciplinary fields have contributed to our understanding of how humans learn to read and how reading should be taught. We know that learning to read is a complex process that requires a multifaceted approach.

However, we have concerns about how the current discourse around the science of reading is being translated into practice and application in the classroom. As an organization with a deep commitment to ensuring that Black and Latinx children experience high-quality and identity-affirming literacy instruction, CLI is compelled to put our critical lens to the discourse around the science of reading. We started by questioning some of the claims we have heard about the science of reading. What we learned is that supporting educators in building both their literacy content knowledge and culturally sustaining practices will better serve the unique and diverse needs and experiences of the children in their care.

Our Mission

Children's Literacy Initiative seeks to dismantle structural racism by providing Black and Latinx children with the anti-racist early literacy instruction, support, and advocacy needed to create equity in education.



The table below reframes some common misunderstandings through a more nuanced and equitable lens.

Five Misunderstandings We Hear about the Science of Reading	Five Truths about the Science of Reading
The literacy crisis will be solved when all educators follow the “science of reading.”	The literacy crisis is a multifaceted and historically complicated journey that perpetuates inequitable learning experiences for Black and Latinx learners.
There is a settled “science of reading.”	The field of literacy research is broad, deep, and evolving and must be considered through the lens of diverse and unique children in our classrooms.
Lack of strong decoding instruction is the leading cause of the literacy crisis.	Learning to read is a complex process. Children need consistent instruction in foundational skills but not at the expense of other areas of literacy instruction.
All children experience schooling and instruction the same way regardless of race, language, and culture.	Effective literacy practices sustain and respond to children’s identities, languages, and assets.
Teachers just need to follow the script with fidelity, and all children will learn to read.	Teachers are professionals who want and deserve ongoing professional development in response to the evolving research.

Context

For far too long and in far too many schools, Black and Latinx children have been denied the literacy experiences and opportunities they deserve. It is the responsibility of all educators to continue to re-envision teaching and learning informed by research and evidence-based practices that support all children toward becoming proficient readers, writers, and thinkers. This assessment must include reflecting on our understanding of the science of reading and our expectations about what children can achieve.

It is easy to legislate and create accountability systems; however, the direct outcomes perpetuate the inequities in our educational system.

If we expect different outcomes, we must start by centering Black and Latinx children.



The narrative about literacy achievement outcomes continues to remain unchanged. The most recent statistics from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2022 report revealed that, overall, only 32 percent of fourth-grade students in the nation performed at or above the NAEP level of proficiency. This percentage has remained relatively flat over the past 26 years; for example, in 2019, 34 percent of fourth graders performed at or above proficiency, while the proficiency rate dipped to 28 percent in 1998.¹

The reality is even more stark for our marginalized students. In 2022, 17 percent of Black students scored at or above proficiency, and 21 percent of Hispanic/Latinx students scored at or above proficiency. These alarming performance gaps raise critical questions about the systemic barriers and inequities that continue to hinder the academic success of marginalized students.

In the past four decades, numerous education reform movements have attempted to raise reading proficiency and narrow the performance gap. As a nation, we have promoted rigorous recommendations for what to teach, implemented common standards, and tied funding to achievement goals. Yet none of these efforts and investments have resulted in meaningful change in educational outcomes for Black and Latinx children. Schools in Black communities are more likely to be closed due to poor performance and are more likely to receive inadequate and disproportionate funding². Black and Latinx schools are more likely to have high teacher turnover and a predominance of uncertified teachers³. Additionally, it is not uncommon for the teacher-to-pupil ratio to be larger than average or for resources and physical space to lack quality and inspiration in these under-resourced schools. Examples such as these contribute to fracturing the school and community relationship and trust necessary for children to thrive in their learning.

This is all to say that it is easy to legislate and create accountability systems; however, the direct outcomes perpetuate the inequities in our educational system. If we expect different outcomes, we must start by centering Black and Latinx children.

Culturally relevant and sustaining approaches reflect a robust body of research that can be included in the science of reading to help inform the best ways to support the unique individuals that fill our schools (Gay; Ladson-Billings; Machado; Woodard and Kline). Gloria Ladson-Billings points out three core principles that successful educators of marginalized learners specifically position in their practice:

- 1. Expectations for High Academic Achievement:** Educators provide intellectually stimulating content with the expectation that learners can and will achieve the standards and objectives.
- 2. Cultural Competence:** Educators send the message that learners can “maintain their cultural integrity” while also learning about others.
- 3. Critical Attention to Systems and Structures That Include Some and Exclude Others:** Educators empower learners to develop their voices and question current and historical inequities in their communities and beyond.

If effective literacy instruction begins with these principles in mind, educators can integrate these ideas with the learnings coming out of the science of reading to design instruction in responsive and sustaining ways. Outcomes for children will be transformed because educators will teach, assess, analyze, and implement instruction in ways that support the children in the classroom. This lens will ensure that historically marginalized learners have equitable opportunities to achieve their potential and beyond.

The foundation of CLI's approach to the science of reading is built on a number of understandings about the literacy acquisition process, pedagogy, and the learners themselves.

In this paper, we spotlight *five truths* that anchor our work and that we believe will benefit all literacy initiatives.

- 1. The literacy crisis is a multifaceted and historically complicated journey that perpetuates inequitable learning experiences for Black and Latinx learners.**
- 2. The field of literacy research is broad and deep and must be considered through the lens of diverse and unique children in our classrooms.**
- 3. Learning to read is a complex process.**
- 4. Effective literacy practices affirm and respond to children's identities, languages, and assets.**
- 5. Teachers are professionals who want and deserve ongoing professional development in response to the evolving research.**

Not all children experience schooling and instruction the same way.

Children's identities influence how learning is experienced—both in what they bring to the classroom and how they experience instruction. Effective literacy practices must sustain and respond to children's identities, languages, cultures, and assets. This has been true historically for white children in a way that has been denied to Black and Latinx children in many school settings.

Systemic Racism in US Education

- 1. Anti-Literacy Laws and Education:** Historically, anti-literacy laws in the United States prohibited enslaved and free people of color from learning to read or write based on their race. These laws, enacted between 1740 and 1834 in Southern slave states, aimed to restrict educational opportunities for Black individuals.
- 2. Literacy Education:** Black and Latinx literacy education has been marred by a lack of representation, mischaracterization, and systemic barriers. The history of Black and Latinx literacy in the U.S. has been marked by anti-Black racism and policies that obstructed literacy access for Black and Latinx people.
- 3. Representation in Children's Literature:** Trends in children's literature have historically lacked representation for Black and Latinx children, often depicting them in condescending or racist ways. These harmful representations reflect broader racial inequalities and biases prevalent in society.
- 4. Impact of Racism on Learning:** Research shows that teaching students critical lessons about racism can have positive effects on their engagement, empathy, and understanding of systemic injustices. However, racial disparities in education persist due to historical racism, socio-economic factors, and inadequate educational practices.
- 5. Denied Access to Equitable Learning Opportunities for English Language Learners:** English-only policies were commonly enacted during the 19th and 20th centuries. English learners were segregated and discriminated against in the form of lower-quality classes and denied access to the same educational opportunities.

These are just some examples of how racism in the United States has directly influenced the learning experiences of Black and Latinx children, leading to disparities in access to education, representation in literature, and academic achievement.

The literacy crisis is a multifaceted and historically complicated journey that perpetuates inequitable learning experiences for Black and Latinx learners.

One idea that is commonly heard in the current discourse around literacy instruction is that the literacy crisis will be solved if educators understand the science of reading. Inherent in this idea is that implementing specific teaching methods while avoiding others will ensure all children learn to read. This is an oversimplification that ignores the realities of our racialized education system.

Debates about how to teach reading are not new. Since our country's founding, we have pondered and debated the best ways to teach children how to read. In just the past forty years, children and educators have been impacted by numerous documents and reforms that have added to, changed, and disrupted instructional practices. These efforts include the following:

- A Nation at Risk (1983)
- Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (1998)
- The National Reading Panel Report (2000)
- Reading First (2001)
- No Child Left Behind (2002)
- Race to the Top (2008)
- Common state standards and related testing (2010)
- Standards-based testing sanctions against schools not meeting adequate yearly progress

Children and teachers are held accountable by rewriting and redefining the benchmark through a deficit lens in all of these documents, dollars, and reforms.

Much about how to teach and assess reading has been written, declared, overhauled, and legislated in response to the lagging achievement data. School funding and achievement data are linked. Initiatives and reforms are instituted. Intervention

models are mandated. Scripted curricular programs are put in place and expected to be followed with fidelity. Standards are rewritten. With each new shift, there is a tendency to disregard an entire school of thought rather than closely analyze the aspects of it that have promise or that worked and build upon those for the new foundation. Effects of such sweeping decisions and pendulum swings negatively impact outcomes for Black and Latinx children because we have paid too little attention, at the national level, to the corresponding issues of equity, access to education, and beliefs about our marginalized learners.

Education and literacy have always been political, providing very different experiences to children depending on their race, language, and economic status. The history of racism has had a profound impact on the education and literacy of Black and Latinx children in the United States. Anti-literacy laws, discriminatory practices, and systemic inequalities have historically hindered access to education for these marginalized groups and others. Addressing these historical injustices and systemic inequalities is crucial to ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all students.

At the heart of these inequities are deficit beliefs about historically marginalized children. Research has shown that children from marginalized communities typically have less exposure to high-quality instruction in ways that value the assets and knowledge they bring to the classroom (Hammond 12). Further, Madda et al. write:

Researchers have documented that, when compared with “mainstream” peers, low-income or minority students tend to receive a great deal of instruction in lower-level skills and little instruction in reading comprehension and higher-level thinking about text...One reason for this disparity and conspiracy—lowered expectations for the achievement of students from historically marginalized communities and limited instructional focus areas—is something we can and should change. (43)

We can interrupt the historical cycles of ineffective reforms. Sweeping laws and policies have been

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Phonemic awareness: The ability to notice, think about, and work with the individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words.

Phonics: The knowledge of how spoken sounds (phonemes) can be represented by written letters (graphemes). Phonics instruction helps children see that there are systematic and predictable relationships between sounds and letters.

Fluency: The ability to read words, phrases, sentences, and connected text accurately, at an appropriate pace, and with expression. Fluency is a bridge between word recognition and comprehension.

Vocabulary: The quantity and quality of a child's known words. Vocabulary instruction helps children learn and understand the words and phrases needed to read increasingly challenging text.

Comprehension: The understanding and interpretation of what is read through the processes of extracting and constructing meaning from written text. Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading instruction.

Children need consistent instruction in decoding, yet not at the expense of the other aspects of literacy instruction.

enacted en masse. Yet, there is little follow-through on how to implement reading instruction in ways that scaffold and support children in our marginalized communities so that they can meet the set expectations. Educators should combine their understanding of the science of reading with a repertoire of responsive instructional practices that honor the assets and capabilities of the children in front of them. Doing so sends the message to children that we value them and have high expectations for their learning.

The field of literacy research is broad and deep and must be considered through the lens of diverse and unique children in our classrooms.

The science of reading is our latest national effort to ensure that children receive the instruction they deserve. The current discussion has brought to light a vibrant reflection on what counts as science and a perception that there is one settled science. Yet, the science of reading is being discussed and defined differently in different places and spaces. How we define the science of reading matters because it informs our practice.

The International Literacy Association (ILA) defines the science of reading as “*a corpus of objective investigation and accumulation of reliable evidence about how humans learn to read and how reading should be taught*” (Goodwin and Jimenez S7). It is important to acknowledge that the science of reading is not settled. In fact, it is “*ever-evolving, at times, circuitous, and not without controversy*” (Petscher et al. 2).

When we take a broader view of reading sciences, we can include the reciprocal nature of reading and writing instruction, multilingual literacy acquisition, social and cognitive sciences, developmental psychology, and linguistics. Scientists and researchers in these domains have developed theories, tools, and approaches for collecting and analyzing data, generated replicable findings, and crafted theories to advance teaching

and learning in reading education. Each informs the learning and development of children and educators.

Viewing this research with an added lens of cultural sustainability and criticality is important. Milner questions who builds the knowledge in the field of reading research and who is being studied. He challenges us to ensure that the racial and ethnic identities and perspectives of researchers and subjects are diverse and representative of the impacted communities. This lens broadens our worldviews about how knowledge is collected, evaluated, and constructed.

With all the debates and perspectives, there is much research that the education community does agree on. The enduring report of the National Reading Panel (NRP) identifies five foundational skills necessary for reading instruction: phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

The NRP's report also brought to light the importance of systematic and explicit instruction. **Systematic** instruction has a scope and sequence that goes from known to new learning and easy to more complex skills in a way that makes the new learning easier for children to grasp. Systematic instruction includes a review and repetition cycle to achieve mastery. In **explicit** instruction, the teacher models new skills and provides scaffolds and supports toward children's independence. Explicit instruction makes learning more accessible and increases children's confidence in tackling challenging tasks.

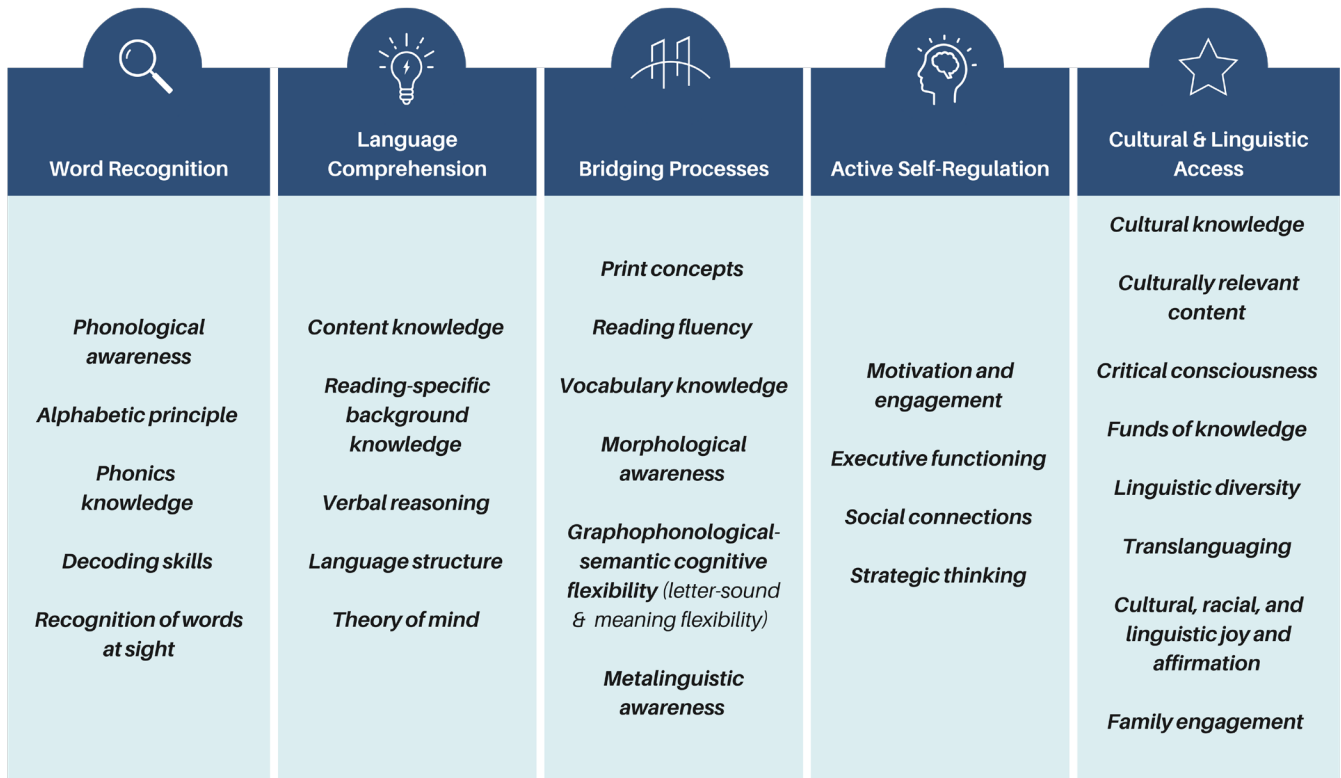
The Panel acknowledged that the five essential areas of reading are not the only topics of importance in learning to read and that "[t]he Panel's silence on other topics should not be interpreted as indicating that other topics have no importance..." (1-3). Taking a culturally sustaining lens provides insight into important topics left out by the report, including the impact of motivation, research on second language acquisition, how background knowledge impacts the reading acquisition process, and how writing informs and supports learning to read.

Adopting a broad definition of the science of reading allows us to take advantage of the latest evolving ideas, new and established research, proven instructional practices, and a rich array of knowledge available to educators. Accessing the entire "corpus of objective investigation and accumulation of reliable evidence," as ILA suggests, will increase educators' ability to make informed and holistic decisions that address the diverse and unique needs of the children in front of them.

Learning to Read is a Complex Process

A common perception in the current conversation is that the leading cause of the literacy crisis is a lack of strong decoding instruction. If only teachers taught decoding, the literacy crisis would be solved. While it is absolutely true that there must be explicit and systematic phonics instruction in our classrooms, this is not a simple fix! The truth is that learning to read is complex. It is a cognitive process in the brain and is socially constructed through interactions and experiences. Teachers need to understand and attend to all the complexities to ensure children's literacy growth. This includes the full range of literacy skills and knowledge and the social and cultural aspects of learning to read.

The simple view of reading (Gough and Tunmer) and Scarborough's reading rope (Scarborough et al.) are enduring models for illustrating how word recognition and language comprehension work in concert to achieve reading comprehension. While the components of the reading rope are important and necessary, they do not represent the full range of skills and dispositions that children need to become successful readers. The active view of reading (Duke and Cartwright) expands on the reading rope by adding bridging processes and self-regulation skills into the model. We can go one step further and consider the cultural and linguistic resources children need access to as they become proficient readers (Hammond; Ladson-Billings; Moll et al. 71-87).



Adapted from Duke and Cartwright's Active View of Reading

The model above shows the complexities of *what* children need to learn. There are also complexities in *how* children learn. Learning is social, and each child brings their unique and brilliant take on their world into the classroom. Children's approaches to learning are crafted and inspired by their culture, languages, peers, teachers, and beliefs about self and the value they determine about the learning they are doing.

Teachers must be prepared to respond to individual children in ways that invite them to take on new learning, build their cognitive capacity, and increase their confidence. **Strong teaching:**

- **Combines explicit, direct instruction with opportunities for children to explore, talk, and apply new learning in meaningful ways** (Dell-Smith; Lambert). Children greatly benefit from opportunities to talk and learn collaboratively. In this way, children own their learning. Teacher-centered approaches place children in the role of passive receivers of information and can reinforce deficit mindsets.
- **Provides opportunities for productive struggle.** Children learn by engaging with challenging concepts and high-quality texts independently, with their peers, and with appropriate scaffolds from their teacher. The teacher's role is to monitor, evaluate, and responsively create opportunities for children to see their errors as information for learning.
- **Develops higher-order thinking skills.** Supporting children's abilities to engage in higher-order and critical thinking must be systematically incorporated into instruction beginning in kindergarten and extending through the grades.

- **Creates independent learners.** Independent learners develop agency and joy in learning. They know how to flexibly apply cognitive strategies and persevere through challenging tasks (Hammond).
- **Responds to the individual needs of each child.** “Teaching to the middle” means that children outside of the middle are not getting what they need. Strong teaching is tailored and personalized so each child can achieve their potential.

Zaretta Hammond speaks to the dangers of creating dependent learners, which is especially common for marginalized communities of learners where expectations are low. Dependent learners, Hammond says, cannot complete a task without scaffolds, rely on the teacher to carry most of the cognitive load, and are typically exposed to lectures, low-level questions, and rote memorization. Alternatively, the aim is to foster independent learners who develop agency and joy in taking on new, challenging tasks without scaffolds and can flexibly apply cognitive strategies to get unstuck.

Children need consistent instruction in decoding, yet not at the expense of the other aspects of literacy instruction. Children need ample time to read and listen to high-quality literature, participate in shared reading experiences and collaborative text discussions, and write for different purposes and audiences. It is worth noting that readers’ listening comprehension is typically two to three years above their actual grade levels. Research suggests that this trajectory remains the course through middle school (Biemiller; Sticht and James). This fact reminds us that even our youngest learners can and want to think about complex ideas. We want to ensure that we feed their curiosity through rich talk, writing, and rich vocabulary. Collectively, this lays the foundation for building background knowledge, which grows exponentially over time.

The reality is that learning to read is complex. Teachers need both content and pedagogical knowledge to help children on their literacy journeys. We agree with Louisa Moats that, indeed, teaching reading *is* rocket science!

Even our youngest learners can and want to think about complex ideas. We want to ensure that we feed their curiosity through rich talk, writing, and vocabulary.



Effective literacy practices sustain and respond to children's identities, languages, and assets.

Not all children experience schooling and instruction the same way. Children's identities influence how learning is experienced—both in what they bring to the classroom and how they experience instruction. Effective literacy practices must sustain and respond to children's identities, languages, cultures, and assets. This has been true historically for white children in a way that has been denied to Black and Latinx children in many school settings.

Children thrive when educators know and see children as individuals with rich and innovative literacy, linguistic, and cultural practices. Culturally sustaining teaching is not an “add-on.” It is the starting point for conveying a safe and welcoming environment and messages to children that they are seen and heard. Zaretta Hammond defines culture as “the way that every brain makes sense of the world” (22). In other words, it is the lens through which we see ourselves and others, informed by our lives prior to and outside of our school experience. Our individual cultures come with us into the classroom each day and are the place from which we process our interactions and experiences.

Assuming that all children experience schooling the same way ignores the important ways that identity impacts learning. When children do not see themselves in the content or see the relevance of the learning to their worlds, they are more likely to disengage. When educators disregard the role children's cultures and languages play in the classroom, it impacts their ability to form positive relationships with children and families. These assumptions can lead to deficit mindsets and dismissal of children's lived experiences. Children are more likely to experience micro-aggressions, and it diminishes their self-esteem. Alternatively, classroom environments where children are safe to bring their whole selves, see their cultures and languages reflected in the content, and are

encouraged to leverage and extend their heritage and community practices foster engagement, motivation, and, ultimately, high achievement.

Culturally responsive and sustaining instruction builds on the identities, languages, and assets children bring to the classroom. Here are some ways to ensure instruction is not “one-size-fits-all”:

- **Adopt asset-based mindsets.** Reject the pedagogy of poverty that perpetuates low expectations. Message to children a belief in their capabilities and strengths. Provide opportunities for children to demonstrate their understanding, contribute to their learning, and engage in higher-order thinking.
- **Explore culturally relevant content.** Share and interact with texts that accurately represent and celebrate children's identities in our classrooms. Provide texts that also explore identities and perspectives to help children learn about others' experiences and views. Interrogate materials and instructional methods for explicit and implicit bias.
- **Support critical consciousness.** Engender criticality by teaching children to “read, write, and think in ways that...see, name, and interrogate the world” (Muhammad 12) in order to make sense of injustice and ultimately build a better world for all. Support children in reading with a critical lens, including recognizing implicit bias, analyzing the historical accuracy and portrayal of groups and events, and identifying the potential of text to affect social justice.
- **Honor linguistic diversity.** Provide children the opportunity to leverage their diverse language practices as part of their learning. Invite children to use their entire linguistic repertoire to communicate ideas, convey emotions, build relationships, and demonstrate their learning.
- **Foster meaningful and positive relations.** Spend ample and continuous time getting to know children and families—their histories, heritages, interests, cultures, and community practices. Build caring and respectful school and classroom communities where children can show up with their full selves.



- **Celebrate funds of knowledge.** Recognize that what children share about their interests, languages, communities, and families reflect valuable skills and understandings. Howard et al. suggest we “help them see that those skills and understandings are an asset, a kind of wealth, that overlaps and intertwines with their school learning in meaningful ways” (52).
- **Reflect on our own biases.** Reflect on how our own identities and biases show up in our relationships with children, families, and colleagues. Interrogate our own perspectives as educators by thinking outside ourselves. Examine the cultural identities and values that we have come to know and believe.

Teachers are professionals who want and deserve ongoing professional development in response to the evolving research.

One concerning trend in schools is an insistence on teachers following scripted programs with fidelity, leaving them little room to use their professional knowledge and judgment to best serve the children in their classrooms. Teachers should be seen as trusted professionals capable of implementing curriculum with integrity. This means ensuring that teachers have both high-quality instructional materials to draw from and have the content and pedagogical knowledge to respond flexibly and adapt instruction to help children achieve grade-level expectations.

Staying current with evidence-based research and practices is an ongoing endeavor. This is a common expectation built into many professions. For example, we expect medical research to change, evolve, and improve over time. Staying current with these changes is critical for doctors and the profession as a whole to ensure the best care for patients. Similarly, we expect the science of reading to change, evolve, and improve over time. Teachers deserve continuous professional development and support to make sense of the research, build and deepen their content knowledge, and apply it to the children in their care.

Teachers should be seen as trusted professionals capable of implementing curriculum with integrity.

Teachers deserve professional development that strengthens their understanding of both high-impact instructional practices and literacy content knowledge. Professional development will ensure that instruction

- Is tied to evidence of what children need and are ready to learn next, as demonstrated by meaningful, effective formative assessments
- Connects and combines activities, skills, and concepts so that children see the significance and value of learning the skill beyond the classroom setting
- Provides children with multiple joyful ways to develop and demonstrate their learning

As has already been established, learning to read is complex. Children are dynamic, as is teaching and learning. Access to high-quality instructional materials is important but not sufficient.

Following a set script won't necessarily produce the outcomes we are hoping for. High-impact instruction reflects a teacher's ability to bring content knowledge and the materials to life.

Teachers have the desire to be trusted professionals and reflective practitioners who understand the science and the art of teaching and learning. As John Hattie states:

The remarkable feature of the evidence is that the biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers. When students become their own teachers they exhibit the self-regulatory attributes that seem most desirable for learners (self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-assessment, self-teaching). (22)

If we want to lead children to become their own teachers and develop habits of independent learners, we must foster that same empowering environment for their teachers.

Conclusion

Ultimately, children will be successful when educators have the beliefs, knowledge, and tools to respond to their needs. We can stay rooted

in the broad and deep field of literacy research while keeping Gloria Ladson-Billing's three core principles in mind: expectations for high academic achievement, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness. By carefully selecting and adapting evidence-based practices to fit their children's specific cultural, linguistic, and learning needs, educators can create literacy experiences that are engaging, affirming, and effective for all children.

When we combine the sciences of reading with culturally sustaining approaches, we understand these five truths about literacy learning:

1. The literacy crisis is a multifaceted and historically complicated journey that perpetuates inequitable learning experiences for Black and Latinx learners.
2. The field of literacy research is broad and deep and must be considered through the lens of diverse and unique children in our classrooms.
3. Learning to read is a complex process.
4. Effective literacy practices affirm and respond to children's identities, languages, and assets.
5. Teachers are professionals who want and deserve ongoing professional development in response to the evolving research.

It is our responsibility to support these truths and shift practices to bring about real change in schools and equitable learning experiences for Black and Latinx children by

- **Acknowledging the complex, historical roots of the literacy crisis.** Work to understand the role that systemic racism has played in shaping educational outcomes for marginalized children. Learn the history of anti-literacy laws, discriminatory practices, and unequal access that have hindered literacy achievement for Black and Latinx children over centuries. Learn from history to interrogate current and new policies through an anti-racist lens. Evaluate data with an equity lens, disaggregating literacy achievement by race, language proficiency,

disability status, and other factors to identify gaps and inequities.

- **Ensuring systematic and explicit literacy instruction.** Build children's word recognition and language comprehension skills through systematic instruction in phonology, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Provide opportunities for both mastery of skills and higher-order thinking.
- **Maintaining high expectations.** Take an asset-based approach to children's learning. Make sure all children, regardless of race or background, are held to high expectations and given access to challenging grade-level content. Provide children with access to grade-level, culturally relevant content and curricula that promote critical thinking. Reflect on how our own identities and biases show up in our expectations, practices, and relationships with children.
- **Examining instructional materials.** Review materials and instructional practices through an equity lens to ensure texts and resources are diverse, affirming of different identities and cultures, and free of harmful stereotypes and bias. Evaluate the quality of the materials to ensure content and practices are aligned with current research.
- **Leveraging children's funds of knowledge.** Partner with families and caregivers as true partners in their children's education. Communicate in families' home languages, invite them to share their expertise, and demonstrate respect for their cultures and funds of knowledge. Engage community organizations as valuable allies in providing wrap-around supports and enrichment opportunities that nurture children's literacy development.
- **Engaging in professional learning.** Seek professional learning opportunities to strengthen high-impact instruction and literacy content knowledge through a culturally sustaining lens. Empower teachers to implement the curriculum with integrity so they can respond flexibly and adapt

instruction to help children achieve grade-level expectations.

With a relentless focus on the success of Black and Latinx children, schools can begin to dismantle the inequities that have persisted for far too long. It will take time, commitment, and a willingness to confront hard truths, but the payoff for improved literacy outcomes and life trajectories for marginalized children is immeasurable.

Literacy is both a gift and a right. When we build capable readers and writers, we give children a powerful tool to understand their world, contribute to it, and change it. Unlike any other profession, educators have the amazing and unique honor of contributing to and watching children grow physically, emotionally, and intellectually. We know that culture and literacy learning are intertwined. Children need equitable, inclusive, and safe learning environments to try out new skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They need caring communities where everyone feels a sense of belonging that promotes cooperation, independence, and joyful learning. They also deserve teachers who facilitate instruction informed by the vast depth of evidence-based literacy practices. ■



How CLI Supports Equitable Learning Experiences

Acknowledging the complex historical roots of the literacy crisis

CLI guides partners in interrogating disaggregated literacy data through an anti-racist lens, providing historical context on the discriminatory policies and unequal access that have perpetuated achievement gaps for marginalized children. This critical analysis equips educators to disrupt systemic injustices by evaluating current practices, selecting culturally sustaining curricula and texts, and implementing identity-affirming literacy instruction responsive to children's brilliance.

Ensuring systematic and explicit literacy instruction

CLI guides school leaders in assessing the current state of instruction across all literacy components (phonology, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). This audit evaluates the extent to which practices are systematic, explicit, culturally sustaining, and aligned with the science of reading. CLI then supports leaders in crafting a strategic literacy plan tailored to their school/district's unique strengths and areas for growth. The plan outlines a vision for identity-affirming literacy instruction, measurable goals, and a roadmap for professional learning. CLI's professional development and coaching equip educators with both strong literacy content knowledge and culturally relevant pedagogical skills. Sessions model explicit instruction while making meaningful connections to students' cultural assets and linguistic repertoires.

Maintaining high expectations

CLI guides partners in interrogating their own identities, implicit biases, and mindsets that can lead to lowered expectations for marginalized children. This critical self-reflection is crucial for disrupting deficit narratives and rejecting pedagogy rooted in racist ideologies. CLI fosters an asset-based approach that views children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds as strengths to build upon, not deficits to overcome. Partners learn to leverage children's funds of knowledge, affirm their brilliance, and create learning experiences that sustain their identities and lived experiences. Instructionally, CLI emphasizes maintaining a rigorous yet affirmative stance, blending explicit modeling and scaffolding with ample opportunities for productive struggle. The goal is to foster independent learners with agency over challenging tasks, not creating overdependence..

Examining curriculum through an equity lens

CLI supports partners in analyzing texts and materials for authentic representation, countering stereotypes, and cultivating critical consciousness around social issues. CLI provides guidance on adapting and enhancing curriculum to integrate evidence-based elements in culturally sustaining ways, using examples from children's linguistic repertoires, designing lessons that tap into their funds of knowledge, and creating spaces for interrogating social issues through a critical lens. The goal is a comprehensive literacy program where instructional materials not only provide positive representation but also facilitate rigorous, identity-affirming instruction that unlocks the brilliance of Black and Latinx students as readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers.

Leveraging children's funds of knowledge

CLI supports partners in creating welcoming spaces and structures for families to share their expertise, experiences, hopes, and insights to co-construct affirming classroom cultures and learning experiences. For example, families may collaborate on developing classroom norms, behavior expectations, and academic goals that resonate with their cultural values and practices. Their funds of knowledge can directly inform curriculum development, text selection, and designing culturally sustaining literacy lessons that tap into students' lived experiences.

Engaging in professional learning

CLI provides research-based professional development to all educators that extends beyond one-time workshops. CLI embeds instructional coaching as a critical component. Coaches work side-by-side with teachers and leaders, providing feedback, modeling lessons, co-planning, and supporting the implementation of culturally sustaining literacy practices.

End Notes

- [1] For data, see Table 221.20 of the National Center for Education Statistics.
- [2] During the 2020-21 school year, 457 elementary and middle schools were closed (National Center for Education Statistics). Between 2000 and 2018, majority Black schools were closed at a rate three times as likely as schools with a smaller enrollment of Black students (Blad and Najjarro; Pearman II et al.).
- [3] Approximately 522,400 students, or 1% of total student enrollment, attended public schools where fewer than half of the teachers met all state certification requirements. Of the students attending those schools, a majority (66%) were Black and Latino students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights).

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