

# Ohio Reading Teacher

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# Research in literacy

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**OCIRA Studies and Research Committee**

Collaboration among linguistically diverse learners... a historical look at the education of twentieth century immigrants... inner-city middle schoolers editing their own publications... acknowledging the literate voices of basic skills college students... this potpourri of literacy topics was discussed before an audience of teachers and researchers at the 1996 Fall Conference of the Ohio Council of the International Reading Association (OCIRA).

"Research in Literacy" is a collaborative session that is held annually at the OCIRA conference and which provides a forum for discussion about the practical aspects of research currently being conducted by literacy practitioners who are graduate students. Organized by the Studies and Research Committee of the OCIRA, the studies presented at the 1996 session discussed how elements of personal and professional endeavor are reflected upon by practitioners and how this reconsideration of practice contributes to the development of shared understandings of

literacy as a multi-faceted human experience. The session provided an arena for discussion of new, meaningful research that describes how literacy practitioners are becoming conscious of how experientially diverse learners attain and perceive accomplishments in literacy.

*This article provides a summary of the papers presented at the session.*

## **A Collaboration Among Linguistically Diverse Learners**

Leslie Baldwin, author of "An Investigation of Collaboration in Literacy Learning Among Two Culturally Diverse Young Children," described her work at the Manney Literacy Center at the University of Cincinnati as an exciting experience that confirmed several key principles of culturally responsive literacy instruction. The Manney Literacy Center provides literacy instruction for children from the low-income urban areas near the University. Culturally diverse children participate in semi-weekly tutoring sessions conducted by graduate students. Baldwin recounted her experience as a tutor working with a pair of children and told how the children's reading abilities were enhanced by exploring both the language of children's

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*Members of the Studies and Research Committee include Penny Freppon, Monica Pershey, Allen Berger, Margot Fadool, Dorothy Leal, Lynda Weston, and Judithann Wheeley*

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literature and the culturally mediated language of response.

Baldwin tutored Ayeesha, a seven-year-old girl of African American heritage who was excited about reading and wanted to read to others often. Ayeesha generally used the dialect of her family and community but code switched to Standard American English (SAE) when Baldwin misunderstood something Ayeesha had said. However, adoption of SAE was not the goal. Ayeesha was encouraged to express her ideas using her own language style and to respond to text using her own cultural schemata. A rhythm that reflected culture and dialect was apparent in Ayeesha's spoken language as well as in the stories she wrote. This rhythm contributed to her own literate voice as a writer and as an oral reader of text passages written by other authors. When reading, she frequently ignored the author's punctuation. Baldwin hypothesized that Ayeesha chunked the language according to the rhythmic patterns of her own speech, governed by her own cultural schemata for language patterns. Ayeesha processed print, constructed meanings, and had self-generated control of her reading.

Ayeesha participated in group tutoring sessions with Daniel, a nine-year-old boy of Appalachian heritage whose literacy skills were slightly weaker than Ayeesha's. Daniel could read individual letters and words. He used picture cues to assist in his reading of simple familiar texts. He read words in one context but could not always read the same words in another context. However, perhaps because of his age, Daniel brought more background and vocabulary knowledge to his reading than Ayeesha did.

The two children read books aloud to one another, repeating readings and assisting each other. They wrote stories to read aloud to one another. Ayeesha realized that Daniel was her audience and improved her revising and editing practices to suit his needs. Together the children generated word lists and wrote charts of interesting graphophonemic elements and patterns. The students and their tutor talked about their discoveries and both children learned about letter-sound

patterns and located them spontaneously when reading different materials at other times.

During literacy collaborations, the children used reading and writing for meaningful communication. They shared favorite stories and entertained and quizzed one another. The children maintained their own voices, based on their respective cultural, community, and dialect backgrounds. The children and their tutor co-constructed a classroom culture that acknowledged and supported the children's language.

The difference in the children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds appeared to be no barrier. Baldwin's successful efforts provide an example of how to co-create a learning environment that reflects the unique cultural and language differences that can be found in diverse communities of learners.

## **A Historical Look at the Education of Twentieth Century Immigrants**

Mary S. Benedetti explained that one of the great social myths is the belief that immigrants arriving in the United States today are fundamentally different from the immigrants of the early twentieth century. Benedetti, coordinator of the Undergraduate English as a Second Language program at the University of Cincinnati, reported on her study in progress, "What Goes Around Comes Around: Immigrant Access to Education, 1890-1996." Benedetti affirmed that in the early part of this century, as now, the United States was experiencing significant social and economic change while also receiving an enormous influx of immigrants.

Between 1890 and 1920, over 20 million immigrants settled across the nation. Since the 1980s, over 15 million legal immigrants have entered the country, with over 85% of this group coming from Latin America and Asia. Because of high birth rates, Latinos and Asians will account for more than half of the growth in the US population in every year of the next century.

By 2050, the white majority will slip from the current 73% to 52%. Benedetti clarified that diversity is a social construct that is subject to change. Clearly, social cognitions

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pertaining to acceptance of diversity will be a part of the coming agenda for America.

Rising numbers of limited English proficient (LEP) children are entering educational institutions. In contrast to the earlier part of this century, when assimilation and Americanization of immigrants were the goals of schools, today many educators and institutions are acknowledging that students draw strength from cultural identification and that schooling must acknowledge the diversity of languages, values, customs, child rearing practices, and other culturally based ideals present in all communities.

While access to public education is legally mandated for immigrant children, access to postsecondary education for immigrant adults is a topic about which there is a dearth of research.

Throughout the century it has been documented that many immigrants are committed to achieving upward social mobility through education, if not for themselves then for their children. As was true in the early part of the century, approximately one quarter of students presently enrolled in postsecondary institutions are children of immigrants.

However, access to higher education is difficult for limited English proficient adult immigrants. Selective or competitive admissions policies may be held by postsecondary educational institutions as long as the policies do not violate equal opportunity laws. Although these laws provide many protections, they do not prohibit discrimination against persons who are of limited English proficiency. For these prospective students, tests such as the SAT are more accurate reflections of English proficiency than of academic background.

Lack of English proficiency, then, is one of the greatest barriers to access to higher education among immigrants. Programs in English as a Second Language (ESL) that are available to international students may be too costly or may deliver curricula that are geared toward international students and are inappropriate for immigrants. Immigrants may not qualify for in-state tuition rates or for certain financial aid programs.

Most government sponsored adult ESL programs are geared toward entry into the workforce rather than into postsecondary education. And while immigrant access to community colleges is often likely owing to open admissions, low costs, and aid programs, Benedetti reasoned that encouraging immigrants to attend the generally vocationally oriented two-year degree programs represents a form of tracking. Immigrants are afforded less access to the academically oriented university programs.

Benedetti concluded that language policies determine who may gain access to educational resources and in turn access to social mobility and political and economic power. English proficiency, even in a diverse society, is considered to be a basic requirement for success. Benedetti is continuing to study this perceived inequality by embarking on a national survey of postsecondary institutions' admissions policies and procedures for immigrant students.

### **Inner-City Middle Schoolers Edit Their Own Publications**

*Violence affects me because I never know what's going to happen. If I'm walking around somewhere, I could get jumped, shot, or hurt in some way.*

*Violence can also lead to suicide if it made someone crazy enough. And if someone does that, it influences others. At one time, a friend almost tried suicide, and that influenced me. She was my best friend, and I needed her for telling her all my secrets.*

This moving statement was written by a student of Rosalind R. Gann, a middle school teacher who recounted her experiences publishing literary magazines and teaching writing at several urban schools. Gann encourages her students to write in order to share their own ideas.

In reflecting upon her practice, Gann has determined that students and teachers need to be involved in shared decision making about what students write and how to publish a literary magazine. Her reflections upon her

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professional growth toward more student-controlled writing and publishing are described in her paper, "Student Publication in the Inner-City School: One Teacher's Evolution."

In 1990, Gann was teaching in a tracked program. Her students considered writing as something to be done in order to get a grade. They were rarely given the opportunity to view publication as a purpose for writing and the school had no tradition of student publication. Gann organized and produced a literary publication of student writing but, in retrospect, acknowledged that while successful it was teacher-controlled and featured only the best writings. Gann critiqued her own approach as a somewhat elitist enterprise.

Moving the following year to a class of students with specific learning disabilities, Gann observed that when her students were given more opportunities to produce personally meaningful writing they expressed a greater sense of accomplishment. The class produced a literary publication that featured writings by every class member. However, Gann looked back on this as a wonderful experience but noted that it was an effort that was also teacher-controlled.

For the next three years, Gann taught in an urban middle school where she altered her approach to include more student responsibility. Students joined her after school to work voluntarily on their publications. Students worked on artwork and layout although Gann was the final editor of the publications.

In 1994, when Gann went to work at an alternative public middle school that had strong traditions of publication, she began to incorporate student-editing and consensus decision-making. Participation and energy levels were high. Students worked after school and at lunch time and assembled their publications as team efforts.

Gann's fifth experience was at another urban middle school with no tradition of publishing a literary magazine. Although Gann recognized that teacher guidance would be necessary at the start, her goal was to move toward having her classes work through the writing process and grow into publication teams led by students.

Gann's evolution from teacher as publication editor to teacher as facilitator, learner, researcher and writer affirms Murray's (1990, p. v) statement that "[w]riting is how we explore our world and discover its meaning. We write to learn."

### **Acknowledging the Literate Voices of Basic Skills College Students**

Missy Laine reported on her study in progress, "Students' Voices: A Missing Piece in the Teaching/Learning Process," which 10 documents the achievement of her basic skills college students in a strategic reading and writing course. Student achievement is being examined in several areas, including interpretive and analytical reading skills; vocabulary used in listening, speaking, reading, and writing; skill in writing fundamentals, such as sentence structure, verb usage, and spelling; summary writing; expository writing, including responses to readings that are produced using the writing process; and narrative writing, also created using the writing process.

Laine described how she has designed her study to include ecological and ideational pattern data. To examine the ecological components of this teaching setting and the ideational patterns of the instructors, she is acting as a participant-observer in reading and writing classes and is keeping a researcher's journal. Documents of various forms are being collected. These include field notes at departmental and faculty meetings that chronicle the creation of the structure of the course (syllabi, reading list, schedule, etc.) and that record faculty interchanges throughout the quarter.

To explore the ideational patterns of student participants she is collecting documents produced by students during the course including multiple-draft papers, free-written journals, and summary writing examples. Audio-taped, open-ended interviews with students are also being conducted.

To supplement the ecological and ideational information being gathered, student achievement is being measured three ways. The *Nelson-Denny Reading Test* is being administered as a pre- and post testing mea-

sure. Secondly, each student is preparing a written self-assessment of himself or herself as a reader and writer prior to beginning the course and at the end of the course. Additionally, a pre-course and post-course writing sample from each student is being scored holistically for content and use of writing fundamentals.

This presentation was an up-close view of Laine's process of structuring a research study that explores questions that are meaningful in her teaching environment. Analysis of students' progress through an intensive program of reading and writing opportunities may lead to implications for designing courses that encourage the validation of students' own voices. The results may also inform other teachers who are exploring methodologies for researching their own teaching environments.

### **Additional Reading on the Topics Discussed at the 1996 "Research in Literacy" Session**

#### **Additional Reading on Collaboration Among Linguistically Diverse Learners**

Au, K. (1993). *Literacy Instruction in Multicultural Settings*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.

Diamond, B. & Moore, M. (1995). Sociocultural issues in multicultural literacy. In *Multicultural Literacy: Mirroring the Reality of the Classroom*. (22-40). White Plains, NY: Longman.

Headings, L. & Freppon, P. (1994). Taking the Risk out of Writing: Designing and Implementing a Program for Low SES Children in a Whole Language First Grade. *Ohio Reading Teacher*, 28(3), 6-14.

Neuman, S. & Roskos, K. (1994). Bridging Home and School with a Culturally Responsive Approach. *Childhood Education*, 70(4), 210-214.

#### **Additional Reading on**

#### **A Historical Look at the Education of Twentieth Century Immigrants**

Aronowitz, S. & Giroux, H.A. (1991). *Postmodern education: Politics, culture, and social criticism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Fass, P. (1989). *Outside in: Minorities and the Transformation of American Education*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gray, M.J., Rolph, E. & Melamid, E. (1994). *Factors affecting access to U.S. postsecondary education among immigrants*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Institutional Research, New Orleans, LA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 373 642).

Tollefson, J.W. (1991). *Planning language, planning inequality: Language policy in the community*. London: Longman.

#### **Additional Reading on**

#### **Inner-City Middle Schoolers Editing Their Own Publications**

Atwell, N. (1987). *In the Middle*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other People's Children*. New York: The New Press.

Murray, D.M. (1990). *Write to Learn*. Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

#### **Additional Reading on**

#### **Acknowledging the Literate Voices of Basic Skills College Students**

Cole, S. & Lindemann, J. (1990). *Reading and Responding to Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers.

Fulwiler, T. (1988). *College Writing*. Boston: Scott, Foresman and Company.

Millett, N.C. (1986). *Teaching the Writing Process*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Spack, R. (1990). *Guidelines: A Cross-Cultural Reading/writing Text*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

### **Future "Research in Literacy" Sessions**

For more information on the Studies and Research Committee of the Ohio Council of the International Reading Association, contact Penny Freppon, University of Cincinnati, at 513-556-3574 or by email at Penny.Freppon@UC.Edu.