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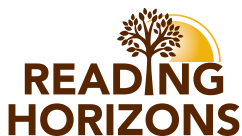


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Community-Based Literacy Learning Spaces as Counterhegemonic Figured Worlds for African American Readers

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Abstract

Community-based literacy learning spaces are crucial to the enduring African American pursuit of literacy. This article reports findings from a study exploring the impact of a community-based literacy tutoring program for African American readers in grades 3-5. Findings also report on ways the community literacy site was similar to historic African American figured communities. Mixed methods analysis revealed significant improvements in decoding, and counternarratives that existed with the figured community cultivated by community volunteers. Taken together, both highlight the powerful role communities' can play in promoting African American student success. Recommendations for community organizations, teacher educators, and literacy researchers are included.

Keywords: early reading intervention, African American students, community literacies, community-based partnerships

Few would dispute the fact that what we know about how to develop proficient reading ability among young children has grown exponentially over the years. Scores of reading researchers have investigated the cognitive, linguistic, and behavioral aspects of reading development in an attempt to distill and operationalize teacher and learner factors that are crucial to skilled reading (Pressley, 2002; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). However, explanations of how to meet the literacy needs of African American children are less explicitly addressed in ways that deviate from theories of cultural deficit and depravation (Edwards, Thompson McMillon, & Turner, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Lazar, Edwards, & Thompson McMillon, 2012). Such pathological research has resulted in instructional programming that has had marginal success in supporting the development of African American readers (Compton-Lilly, 2004; Edwards et al., 2010).

As a critical departure from deficit-based compensatory literacy initiatives, some researchers have investigated the potential of community-based literacy learning spaces to bolster African American student reading achievement. Edwards (2004) argues that

creating community-based learning spaces is a critical approach for improving the literacy education of African American students. She describes community organizations such as African American churches, African American Greek-letter fraternities and sororities, African American social organizations, and neighborhood organizations as example sites for supporting African American young readers. Community-based programs can serve a multitude of functions. They are able to provide more personalized remedial instruction. They can provide cultural, recreational, and fine art programs for children who would otherwise be unable to participate in such experiences. Furthermore, community-based programs can engage children in activities that promote positive social interactions between adults and children as well as between peers. Ball (1995) argues that community-centric approaches to supporting the language and literacy needs of young African American learners should be considered a form of educational reform given the positive outcomes that can result for children in these spaces.

Purpose and Research Questions

In this article, we invite readers to envision with us the possibilities that emerge from community-based literacy learning spaces that foreground the confluence of culture-centered pedagogy and effective literacy teaching strategies. We ask, “What are the outcomes on African American student reading development in a community-based literacy learning space focused on promoting early reading success through the intentional weaving together of culturally relevant pedagogy and principles of effective early reading instruction?” We also ask, “How does the literacy geography (space and place) of the program reflect historic African American figured communities?” We share findings from one initiative established to offer reading support to African American children experiencing reading difficulty and attending elementary schools listed as underperforming. Reading instruction consisted of small-group and one-on-one tutoring in explicit and systematic phonics instruction. The first cohort received the intervention at an after-school program located at a local church and the second cohort received the intervention at school during school hours. Findings point to the need to provide effective instructional strategies not in isolation, but to draw on the specialized resources within African American communities to support student reading growth and positive literate identity.

Researcher Positionality and Subjectivity

As two female literacy researchers, one African American and one Jamaican of African descent, we approached this study from a critical, sociocultural perspective guided by the confluence of our experiences as classroom teachers of African American children, our scholarship focused on culturally relevant literacy instruction, and our professional and personal commitments to ensuring the academic, social, and spiritual well-being of African American children and communities. The first author has extensive experiences in African American community-based literacy learning spaces, as a child participant and as a teacher and researcher of these spaces. The second author designs and facilitates professional development in the areas of literacy and instructional coaching for teachers, particularly in high-poverty schools.

Review of the Literature: African American Literacy Learning in Community-Based Spaces

Historical Research on African American Community Literacy Learning Efforts

In 1960, African American educator Septima P. Clark wrote an essay extolling the work of the citizenship education schools that flourished in the American South amid

a publicly contested battle for racial equality. In her essay, “Literacy and Liberation,” Clark proclaimed, “Literacy means liberation!” as she recounted the successful initiatives of the citizenship schools. Such a pronouncement is indicative of an enduring African American perspective inextricably linking literacy with freedom, citizenship, and equity (Anderson, 1988; Anderson & Kharem, 2009; Perry, 2003; Richards & Lemelle, 2005). Moreover, it was this critical, justice-oriented understanding of the power of literacy that fueled the efforts of enslaved and newly emancipated African Americans to acquire literacy regardless of the consequence (Perry, 2003). Anderson (2010) found that historically, many African American communities viewed literacy and formal education as a means to liberation and as resistance to racial oppression and political and social subordination. As a result, by 1900 approximately half of the southern African American population reported to be literate, a stark contrast from the 1800s, when more than 90% of African Americans were illiterate (Anderson, 2010). In short, there is a long history of excellence in literacy growth and development indigenous to African Americans that can inform current efforts to improve African American readers’ achievement both in school and in community-based settings. Thus, in order to make sense of African American community-based literacy learning efforts, we situated this study within the historical literature on African American community literacy initiatives.

As Muhammad (2012) and Lathan (2015) point out, part of the trajectory of literacy excellence came from African American community initiatives such as literary collaborative societies of the 19th century and Citizenship Freedom Schools in the 20th century. Reading and discussing text in collaborative spaces called literary societies was a primary way early African Americans exhibited their self-determination to eradicate racial oppression and master literacy skills. In other words, African Americans intentionally developed community-based institutions that used reading and writing to institutionalize and symbolize the counterhegemonic message affirming African American freedom and humanity.

African American literary societies were community spaces with larger social goals, which included political power, economic autonomy, racial uplift, and citizenship. Muhammad (2012) writes,

They [African Americans] knew that if they could work towards cultivating their minds and morals through acts of literacy, they would be equipped to face the nation’s harshest realities and countless attacks of terror placed upon African American people. . . . [R]eading and writing were pathways to define their lives and advocate for civil rights. (p. 74)

Developing reading, writing, and speaking skills were core functions of these community-based spaces, leading to the stimulation of reading motivation and engagement. Such motives and literacy activities could also be found within the African American Freedom Schools developed during the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Lathan, 2015).

Contemporary Research on Literacy-Focused Community-Based Learning Spaces

Community-based literacy learning spaces continue to have the potential to advance the literacy development of African American children in many ways. Termed broadly as after-school programs or out-of-school programs, community-based literacy learning spaces provide African American youth with the opportunity to engage in literacy learning activities they may not have access to otherwise. As such, we found it important to consider the literature on literacy-focused supplemental education programs.

A review on literacy in after-school programs found that programs that included opportunities for reading aloud, dramatization, book discussions, hands-on activities, and real-world connections demonstrated the most gains in students' overall reading and writing abilities (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005). Moreover, extant literature determined that literacy activities in community-based programs that feature one-on-one tutoring in reading offered the greatest amount of support toward improving student reading skills (Morris, 2006; Shanahan, 1998; Wasik, 1998). In addition, reviews of research on literacy tutoring in community-based after-school programs found that the most successful programs offered a structured tutoring component rather than help with homework (Lauer et al., 2006; Richards, 2009; Ritter, Barnett, Denny, & Albin, 2009). These structured tutoring sessions were assessment driven and tailored to the particular needs of each student. While the tutoring sessions were structured, recent reviews found no substantial difference in outcomes on student reading development in programs that used a scripted curriculum versus those that were created by the program (Ritter et al., 2009). Finally, research demonstrated that the one-on-one tutoring programs with the most significant gains in student reading skills development were those that had a reading specialist or coordinator on staff to provide coaching and feedback for the tutors and help develop assessment and instructional plans (Morris, 2006; Slavin, Lake, Davis, & Madden, 2010).

Indeed, researchers have documented the impact of a variety of configurations of community-based reading tutoring on student reading outcomes, yet in recent years much of the research in this area has focused on struggling readers or children in poverty, not on African American children specifically (Jacobs, Armstrong, Brooks, & Pan, 2016; Jung, Molfese, & Larson, 2011; MacGillivray & Goode, 2016; Nelson, Sanders, & Gonzalez, 2016). Thus, it is useful to look at the opportunities for literacy skills development for African American children and to consider ways that community-based organizations serve as a vital catalyst for enabling the development of reading proficiency in the early years. Our research adds to the existing body of research by reporting findings from a pilot study of one such community literacy program that took place after school hours and during school serving African American children in third grade through fifth grade using the Winning Reading Boost (WRB) program. Qualitative findings document the existence of a figured community similar to those constructed by African Americans within African American communities during the Jim Crow era. Quantitative findings highlight significant growth in students' phonics ability after the intervention period.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical premises that guided our analysis and interpretations in this pilot study draw from Perry's (2003) conceptualization of figured worlds, or counterhegemonic spaces to assert African American intelligence and humanity. We also draw from Ball's (1995) conceptualization of community-based spaces as a site of the "extracurriculum."

Counterhegemonic Figured-Communities

Historically, African American community-based institutions were crucial to the education of African American children because they institutionalized, ritualized, and symbolized the African American educational ideology through the creation of counterhegemonic figured communities. The philosophy of education cultivated by African Americans emerged out of oppression, out of the struggle for education, and out of the lived experiences of African Americans, and was intricately connected to freedom, citizenship, and literacy. These cultural, political, and social undertones make the African

American philosophy of achievement a formidable force in transforming the trajectory of African American student achievement.

As Perry (2003) summarizes, “What the Black community did was to organize intentional educational communities, collectively constituted, ‘as-if’ communities, imaginary communities that were capable of modeling possibilities...one can call ‘figured universes’ or more precisely counterhegemonic figured communities” (p. 91). The creation of a counterhegemonic figured community intentionally designed to “forge the collective identity of African Americans as literate and achieving people” was critical in constructing educational conditions that promoted educational excellence for African Americans (p. 88). The undergirding objective of the figured community was to consistently affirm Black humanity, African American intelligence, and African American achievement in culturally sustaining ways. One important way was through the transmission of powerful counternarratives from adult community workers to youth, which were based on personal experiences, critical analysis of literary works, and oral storytelling of historical events. Counternarratives attested to the resilience, ingenuity, and determination of African Americans as a collective group. Counterstories also transmitted messages affirming the individual and collective capabilities of African Americans. Moreover, adult community workers passed down counternarratives that offered Black youth strategies for navigating and negotiating an often racially hostile world.

In sum, African American communities played a major role in supporting educational achievement through the cultivation of these spaces. It was here that identities for African American children could be created that were aligned with academic and cultural excellence and to oppose dominant theories of intellectual and cultural inferiority.

Community-Based Literacy Learning and the Extracurriculum

Drawing on extensive anthropological research, Ball (1995) presents the community as a promising site for academic, cultural, and social support for African American students. She calls this the extracurriculum and highlights how community-based discourses and literacy practices of African American readers evolve through student engagement in the community-based settings. From Ball’s analysis emerged a useful framework for considering the ways in which communities mobilize to meet the academic, social, and cultural literacy needs of African American readers. First, community-based programs serving African American children frequently engaged children in opportunities to read and write in ways that reflected the literacy practices in their local communities. These reading and writing experiences were multisensory and drew on a range of literacies including drama, dance, music, singing, and poetry. Second, community-based literacy programs positioned community resources (including volunteers and the students themselves) as valuable assets. This community-centric focus enhanced the relevance of the curriculum and enabled volunteer teachers and mentors to develop literacy lessons that improved student reading skills in the context of imparting crucial experiential wisdom to aid in character development. Third, community-based literacy learning spaces were primed to support African American students in the development of a positive literate identity that did not jeopardize their cultural integrity. Ball affirms the benefit that community-based spaces provide related to African American reader self-definition in her statement that African American readers can “define themselves, name themselves, create for themselves, and speak for themselves” more readily when participating in community-sponsored literacy learning programs (p. 130). She concludes that community-based spaces are prime avenues to provide innovative pedagogical approaches because of the affordances given to African American readers in these spaces.

Both frameworks were appropriate for this study because they encouraged researchers to explore the space and place of supporting literacy learning and growth for elementary-level African American readers. Perry (2003) provides the philosophical undercurrents that function as the cultural ethos of these spaces, while Ball (1995) offers a description of the potential outcomes for African American children in some community-based literacy learning spaces. Considering the human geographic aspects of literacy learning and teaching spaces for African American children is refreshing and timely because it rejects the idea that classroom geographies are mere containers in which the important work of literacy teaching and learning are situated. Additionally, geographic considerations of effective literacy learning privilege the way space is imagined, produced, and organized to support (or not) literacy learning in African American communities.

Methodology

A Rationale for Mixed Methods

We decided to implement a mixed method approach in order to ascertain a more comprehensive picture of the impact and influence of WRB on African American students' literacy learning in the space of a collaborative community partnership. Mixed methods research provides "multiple ways of seeing and hearing, multiple ways of making sense of the social world, and multiple standpoints on what is important and to be valued and cherished" (Greene, 2007, p. 20). Furthermore, mixed method research allowed for triangulation of data, so findings from quantitative student performance data can be considered alongside qualitative data from volunteer interviews (Creswell & Plano, 2011).

Program Description and Context

Designed to complement rather than replace the classroom reading curriculum, Winning Reading Boost is a 36-step, 90-day multifaceted program, built around carefully sequenced, systematic, and explicit phonics instruction. The curriculum is designed for students who have not acquired basic reading skills in the early grades. It has a carefully designed sequence of lessons that use a multisensory approach with songs and interactive games to teach students to decode words in order to promote reading comprehension.

WRB incorporates parent engagement, community outreach, life skills, attention to racial equity, a positive behavioral support system, and technology. Each session is 1 hour long and includes a team-building activity, songs that teach literacy concepts, games that review concepts learned, targeted literacy instruction for students provided by trained instructors and volunteers, embedded quizzes, and celebrations of students' accomplishments. One trained instructor with experience in education is assigned a group of four to six students, and the use of trained volunteers allows for an even smaller adult-student ratio. Many students receive one-on-one instruction based on their needs. Each cohort begins with a parent kickoff celebration, where parents are invited to learn more about the program and how they can participate. Additionally, the program includes multiple opportunities for students to be recognized. Instructors send parents and caregivers daily notes and often sent text messages about their child engaged in literacy learning. Parents and family members are invited to the graduation celebration at the conclusion of the program.

The WRB program was created around the conceptual tenants of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Ladson-Billing (2009) found the teaching factor most significant in fostering educational excellence for African American youth was the teachers' ability to "assist students in their development of a relevant Black

identity which allowed them to choose academic excellence and still identify with African American culture” (p. 476). Her observations and interviews documented that teachers were able to do this by attending to students’ academic, cultural, political, and social needs. Teachers worked dialectically between the dominant European American ideology and one consistent with many Black cultures by validating student knowledge and making the standard academic content accessible to students. Furthermore, the educators realized that teaching African American students was not for individual success only, but for “survival of the person, the family, the community, and the people” (Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1990, p. 82). Table 1 highlights the way each tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy was translated into practices embedded in the WRB program.

Table 1 Translating Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Into Community-Based Literacy Learning

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy	Integration in Winning Reading Boost (WRB)
Students must experience academic success.	Students in WRB have opportunities to experience academic success because the curriculum is designed for students to master concepts one step at a time with support. Instructors have high expectations of all students, and students are consistently reminded that they are capable of achieving. Student effort, accomplishment, progress, and cooperation are celebrated often. For example, instructors send positive notes home and verbally recognize success and teamwork.
Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence.	Instructors in WRB activate and build on students’ prior knowledge and cultural experiences during the intervention. Additionally, parents and community volunteers are invited to become involved. One African American instructor in particular connected with the group by sharing daily “mama says.” This was a way for him to connect with students and share cultural values while giving students a chance to share their experiences and relate.
Students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order.	Students in WRB are encouraged to think critically while reading. Instructors actively engage students in reading and thinking. Instructors used the text <i>African American Achievers in Science, Medicine, and Technology: A Resource Book for Young Learners, Parents, Teachers, and Librarians</i> as a way for students to become exposed to a variety of accomplished African American and discuss diversity of fields.

Participants

From fall 2015 to spring 2016, schools identified by the school district as low achieving and that served a high percentage of African American children were purposely sampled to participate. Personnel from participating schools recommended students who had difficulty in reading and would benefit from intensive instruction in phonics for participation in the intervention. Cohort 1 received the intervention at an after-school program located at a local church. After seeing the success with the first cohort, community members wanted to provide WRB to more students. A local elementary school agreed to host the program for the second cohort. Cohort 2 received the intervention during school hours. Table 2 presents demographic information about participating schools.

Table 2 Demographics of Participating Schools

p	Poverty rate (CEP)	Demographics race	Attendance rate	Reading/ ELA percent proficient 2013	Reading/ ELA percent proficient 2014	*Reading/ ELA percent proficient 2015
School A	86.9	Total Enrollment 606 Black: 85.3% White: 7.4% Hispanic: 3.5% Multi: 3.1% Asian: 0.7% Other: 0.0%	87.2	23%	24%	19%
School B	90.5	Total Enrollment 405 Black: 87.9% White: 6.4% Hispanic: 3.5% Multi: 2.2% Asian: 0.0% Other: 0.0%	94.0	25%	13%	10%

Data Collection

Quantitative measures. After obtaining informed consent, we gave students a battery of assessments at pretest and posttest to assess the effects of the WRB program.

CORE Phonics Survey. The Consortium on Reading Excellence (CORE) Phonics Survey is a measure of decoding-related skills that have a high rate of application for beginning reading and is a strong predictor of students' fluency and decoding abilities (Park, Benedict, & Brownell, 2014). This assessment begins by asking students letter names and letter sounds and progresses to reading and decoding short consonant-vowel-consonant words to multisyllabic words.

Test of Word Reading Efficiency. The Test of Word Reading Efficiency (TOWRE) assesses students' proficiency in reading real words (Sight Word Efficiency subtest) and pseudo words (Phonemic Decoding Efficiency subtest). Pseudo words are fake words; the string of letters resembles a real word but does not actually exist in the language. Pseudo word reading is a particularly useful measure of decoding skill because students cannot rely on their previous experience with or knowledge of the words. Research supports assessing pseudo word decoding as the best predictor of word identification (Curtis, 1980). On this test, items get progressively more difficult. Students are timed for 45 seconds and asked

to read each list. The TOWRE is used to identify children in the early elementary years who require more intensive and explicit instruction in word reading skills in order to make adequate progress in learning to read (Torgesen, Rashotte, & Wagner, 1999).

Oral Reading Fluency. The oral reading fluency measure assesses students' ability to read a passage of connected text accurately and automatically. Oral reading fluency is the combination of reading rate and accuracy and is a good predictor of future reading performance (Honig, Diamond, Cole, & Gutlohn, 2008). Students are timed for 1 minute as they read each of three graded passages.

Qualitative measures. Interviews were conducted to understand the ways in which the space may have been produced and organized similarly to a historic understanding of an African American figured community.

Interviews. Semistructured interviews were done with 10 instructor and volunteer participants. We asked participants to reflect on their experience as tutors and the impact of WRB on students. Interviews were audio and video recorded. Table 3 presents demographic information of instructor and volunteer participants.

Table 3 Volunteer Demographics

Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Position
Charles	Black	Male	Volunteer
Joseph	Black	Male	Volunteer
Keturah	Black	Female	Volunteer
Rachael	White	Female	Volunteer
Don	White	Male	Volunteer
Ellen	White	Female	Instructor
Jane	White	Female	Instructor
Carlos	Black	Male	Volunteer
Monique	Black	Female	Instructor
Reginald	Black	Male	Instructor/community coordinator

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis. We examined the change in pre- and posttest scores for each measure by each individual and aggregated the results for each cohort.

Qualitative data analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which included multiple careful readings of the data to derive broad themes (Miles & Huberman 1994). We first created broad thematic categories for the data, such as "belief in student's abilities," and assigned chunks of data to relevant categories. Specific codes were then developed to analyze text within each broad theme. Codes were named in ways that reflected connections between the theoretical framework, data, research questions, and literature review. This coding process was supported by memoing (Charmaz 2000). Through the coding process, some codes were collapsed and others discarded as ongoing reading of the data either continued to provide, or failed to provide, additional evidence. Identically coded data were then assembled into separate documents that were read and memoed about.

Limitations

Even though we included reading measures that are reliable and valid, there was a threat to external validity since random sampling was not used in this study. However, the purpose of the intervention was to provide support in reading to a target population of struggling students who would benefit from intensive phonics instruction. The sample of students identified may not be representative of all struggling students in third through fifth grades. Additionally, there was a threat to internal validity since the design was pre-experimental with no random assignment and no control group. Consequently, the descriptive statistics provided below shed light on the impact of the WRB program for the students who were selected to participate.

Findings

Quantitative

Quantitative findings are reported for each cohort of students in the pilot. Overall, all students had a positive gain score across all three measures.

Cohort 1.

CORE Phonics Survey. We determined a threshold score of 150 for this measure, which demonstrates the level of decoding skill necessary for reading most text. Before the intervention, 40% of participating students met this threshold. After the intervention, 80% met the threshold. From pre- to posttest the number of students meeting the threshold doubled.

Test of Word Reading Efficiency. On this measure, students showed a 75% improvement in decoding from pre- to posttest.

Oral Reading Fluency. From the first passage, before the intervention, students' words correct per minute more than doubled (from 35.89 to 75.00).

Cohort 2.

CORE Phonics Survey. Before the intervention, 48% of participating students met the threshold of 150. After the intervention, 96% met the threshold. As with the first cohort, the number of students meeting the threshold doubled in the second cohort.

Test of Word Reading Efficiency. On this measure, students showed 65% improvement in decoding pseudo words.

Oral Reading Fluency. From the first passage, before the intervention, students' words correct per minute increased by 42% (from 55 to 78).

Qualitative

In our interviews, instructors shared their theories about what it takes to promote literacy achievement for African American students. Embedded in volunteer perspectives were currents of thought consistent with historic African American figure community counternarratives related to soldering students' identities as capable and competent literacy learners, cultivating identities of possibility within students, and affirming Black humanity. Taken together, instructor perspectives highlight the invaluable assets within African American communities that can be leveraged to promote African American student literacy learning.

Counternarrative 1: Affirming African American intellect

One of the counternarratives that surfaced related to the affirmation of African

American intellect as a rejection of African American inferiority. To be sure, we are not suggesting that African American intellect itself is a finding. We do interpret instructors' affirmation of Black intelligence as an important counternarrative contained in participant interviews because it challenges dominant stories propagating African American intellectual inferiority as described by Perry (2003). Volunteers spoke emphatically and enthusiastically about the intellectual abilities of student participants in the WRB program, putting great emphasis on words such as "can" when reflecting on student capabilities. Comments from Joseph (pseudonyms are used to maintain participant confidentiality) reflects this belief: "They can read! These kids are smart! They do things right in front of you to see your reaction—if you make eye contact with them and show a little smile they can blossom." Joseph was an older Black man from Jamaica who had retired and wanted to get involved in the community by helping children. His comment reflects a key sentiment in the counternarrative substantiating the innate intellect of Black children as an explicit, subtle rejection of the ideology of Black intellectual inferiority.

Rachael, a middle-aged White woman who volunteered daily, expressed a similar idea. As Rachael described her interactions with students, she shared, "To sit and watch them read and discover and understand [makes me know] there is so much inside them that has to come out." She further explained,

You'll ask a child to read and, all of a sudden, a light bulb will go off in their head and they'll say, "I know that word." They just didn't know how to read it. I think this reveals that there's so much that children can learn about themselves that is tucked away that maybe they haven't disclosed or discovered yet.

Rachael's comments reinforce the perspective that African American children bring valuable resources with them to the learning environment, a story that departs from the pervasive metaphor of Black minds as barren fields.

In the same manner, Monique, an African American veteran with years of military service, reflected the counternarrative of innate Black intellectualism when asked to share about her volunteer experiences:

I've seen these children with a look in their eyes with amazement and interest. . . . *They're hungry*. These children *want* to learn, they want to read, we saw the excitement in them wanting to spell. . . . And I read something back in February, a story called *Roses and Concrete*, and these children are truly roses in concrete. They're growing and thriving regardless of all the barriers that they encounter each day.

Similarly, comments from Reginald, an elderly African American man who served as the community coordinator, reflected the narrative that Black children are knowledgeable and intelligent. Moreover, he connected this narrative of Black intellectualism to his role and responsibility as an instructor:

They know it, but they don't have the confidence to use it. So, you have to help them develop the confidence to use what they already know. . . . It's like this journey we take, and through those 90 days they really learn the skills, and then they develop the courage and confidence to put it into operation. That's like the second half of what we teach them to do.

Finally, Charles, a former community firefighter, also talked about students having a "hunger" to understand deeply. As he shared his ideas on ways to improve the WRB program, he indicated that more instruction should be provided in helping students understand the words they read because "that part *they were hungry for*, which I think was a rewarding and encouraging experience."

While these comments seem innocuous, when considered through an African American figured community lens, it is clear that instructors and community volunteers brought to their work a story privileging African American intellect and simultaneously rejecting dominant narratives in education that circumscribe Black children to identities of academic and intellectual inferiority.

Counternarrative 2: Cultivating identities of possibility

The interviews contained another counternarrative related to cultivating within students' identities of possibility. Instructors and volunteers used their voices and their insistence to communicate to students that they could be and do anything they aspired to. Reginald summed up these sentiments with this mantra he consistently shared with students:

I tell them [students], 'You have to endeavor to persevere because once you quit you just go back to your default position.' I say [to them], 'You read something every day...and you will continue to be successful as a reader and in your life.'

Reginald, an instructor and the community coordinator, was instrumental in cultivating the figured community created in the WRB program. He often shared stories about his own life and family, which he called "Mama says." It was during these moments when he would pass on stories of determination, persistence, and hard work that showcased the strength and resilience of African Americans, stories that counter dominant negative narratives. In reflecting on his "Mama says" moments, he shared,

You have to meet them exactly where they are. You can't wish they were different; you can't make them be different. You have to accept them exactly where they are and then you can help them to go someplace else that they want to go.

Another volunteer tutor, Cheryl, an African American community resident, expressed a similar idea: "I let them [students] know, if you can do this, you can do anything. . . . If you want to be a doctor, you can be a doctor, but reading provides the opportunity."

Interestingly, both comments from Reginald and Cheryl not only indicate the counternarrative asserting identities of possibility, but also highlight an additional story embedded within historical African American figured communities that link literacy with economic autonomy and full citizenship.

Counternarrative 3: Asserting Black humanity

An important function of historic African American figured communities focused on situating the actions, behaviors, and needs of African American children within the scope of child growth and development. This counternarrative emerged in analysis of interviews with WRB volunteers and instructors, particularly when volunteers shared what they believed the students needed to be successful. Carlos, a Black man who emigrated to the United States from the Caribbean and also volunteered as a youth soccer coach, conveyed this message in his interview: "Kids need to know that they are in a safe environment. If they feel relaxed and content, they will learn."

Joseph's thinking on what children need to learn and grow also reflects this counternarrative: "Working with these kids on a one-to-one basis, I've seen so much improvement. They open up when they feel like you're loving to them and listening to what they say." What is important in these comments is how the instructors and volunteers

privilege African American students' identity as human beings and connect their social and emotional well-being with their learning and achievement. While research has linked social emotional health with academic achievement (Barnes, Smith, & Miller, 2014), some educators perceive African American children as less childlike and have difficulty meeting Black students' social and emotional needs.

Not only did WRB volunteers reflect the counternarrative asserting Black humanity in their ideas about students learning needs, but this narrative was also evident in comments related to the importance of relationship building in teaching reading well. Don, a middle-aged White man who was a former school psychologist for over 30 years, shared comments related to this finding: "It's getting to know the kid and the kid getting to know you—get a little bond there. You see the same kid every week and they actually want to see you. That feels good." Keturrah's thinking about the importance of consistency and relationships also expressed an underlying idea that meeting African American students' needs as humans was critical:

Sitting with someone else and listening to them read is such an experience. Someone was there day in, day out, every day. It made a difference. You can't say [go] read for most kids. Reading is not a natural act. Reading is learned and not everyone learns the same way. So, by having a program where kids are paced and followed and nurtured, it made a big difference.

Finally, Reginald's perspective reflects the counternarrative expressed among the community:

You have to pull them to you. You have to know their names and you have to have this personal relationship with them. You have to demonstrate through your actions that 'I care and I'm going to be different from all the other teachers you've had in your life. I'm going to stick with you.'

In essence, WRB volunteers and instructors conveyed the idea that there was no magic or mystery to helping African American children learn to read well. They posited that if you treat African American children with love, care, and commitment, then they will learn and grow in academic just like any other children.

Discussion

This article reports findings from a pilot study on the impact of one community-based literacy program, WRB, on the decoding ability and oral reading fluency of African American readers in Grades 3–5, and revealed the existence of a counterhegemonic figured community consistent with historic African American community support for education. Taken together, these findings highlight the power inherent in African American communities to bolster literacy proficiency for young readers.

To be sure, we are not suggesting a correlative relationship between what we consider the cultivation of a counterhegemonic literacy learning space for African American readers, as such claims are beyond the scope of our study. We think it important, however, to report findings related to student reading performance as well as instructor and volunteer perspectives because it contributes to the recognition of African American community literacies and literacy learning spaces as powerful pedagogical sites.

Community-supported literacy learning programs such as WRB demonstrate the ingenuity and self-determination embedded in African American communities to create the kinds of literacy learning experiences needed to cultivate a generation of successful

readers. A strength in African American community-based literacy learning spaces resides in the way these spaces forge a new normal in terms of the kinds of learning experiences children have access to. While the literacy learning experiences are not themselves new (i.e., reading and writing for real-world purposes, discussions about texts, teacher modeling and scaffolding, student-centered activities), the prevalence of these activities in classrooms serving African American children is not the norm (Author, 2016). However, community-based literacy learning spaces can uproot deficit-based instructional practices based on colorblind literacy research (Haddix, 2017) in favor of culturally relevant literacy practices that are connected to a rich African American legacy of literacy teaching and learning.

In this way, findings from the present pilot study highlight the important role African American communities and community literacy spaces play in reinforcing the centrality of the cultural context in effective literacy instruction. Many researchers have documented the powerful influence of culture in literacy learning, particularly related to text choices for African American adolescent males (Tatum, 2006), reading engagement and avoidance of culturally diverse students (Powell & Rightmyer, 2011), African American student literacy identities (Compton-Lilly, 2006), and literacy learning communities for culturally diverse readers (Turner & Kim, 2003). These researchers have argued that a focus on content mastery and literacy teaching strategies alone is not enough to meet the needs of African American readers, which are social, emotional, and cultural as well as academic. In the present study, we extend this argument to out-of-school literacy learning spaces. Attention must be focused simultaneously on ensuring that effective literacy strategies are used to support decoding, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary and on ensuring that children are immersed in a setting that caters to their cultural values, needs, experiences, and personhood.

Community-based literacy learning spaces are also invaluable resources because they can be sites where teaching and learning from a community-centered, cultural perspective can drive instruction. Ball (1995) writes that community literacy reading programs can be considered grassroots reading reform driven by the interests, needs, and wisdoms indigenous to local communities. WRB was born out of community concern for the literacy achievement of African American children in local schools and long-term community sustainability. Anderson (1995) notes that all successful reform efforts for African American children have built on the strengths inherent in communities, families, students, and teachers. He argues that this aspect of improving education “should be developed and relied on, not ignored or dismissed as pathological” (p. 15).

Anderson’s (1995) argument reinforces Perry’s (2003) theory of African American educational achievement and its relationship to the invaluable resources Black communities provide to put the theory into practice. Perry notes that during the pre-civil rights era, Black communities mirrored the segregated Black schools in the way schools intentionally organized to counter the ideology that promulgated White supremacy and Black intellectual inferiority. Regardless of the specific objectives of these community-based organizations, goals were accomplished within the context of the larger and more important goal of affirming Black humanity, intelligence, and achievement. Individuals and institutions in the community reinforced these ideas.

In the present study, while growth in phonics skills was the intervention focus, this academic designation was in a space that was formally and informally steeped in African American educational perspectives of literacy as a tool toward empowerment, autonomy,

and social success. Both goals existed together and may have a symbiotic relationship that should be explored in future research. Perry (2003) asks, “For what groups of African Americans is this [African American] philosophy of education still compelling? How would it be manifested, ritualized, and represented in the post–Civil Rights era?” (p. 51). Findings from the present study offer a response by highlighting African American community literacy spaces as sites to transmit the ideology of African American achievement through the 21st century manifestation of a counterhegemonic figured community.

Implications

For Communities-Based Organizations

Community literacy spaces must provide readers learning to decode with explicit and systematic phonics instruction, small group sizes, focused instructional time, and trained instructors (National Reading Panel, 2000). However, it is critical to understand that effective literacy instruction for African American learners must go beyond “best practice” in literacy instruction and intervention. Based on findings from the present study, we recommend that community-based literacy learning spaces exist authentically by elevating principles and practices that are culturally situated and relevant, rather than attempt to replicate existing school-based reading practices. For example, the idea of literacy as a matter of justice and freedom undergirded African Americans’ understanding of the value of literacy and fueled the surge in literacy attainment in the 1900s, and the community was instrumental in passing this idea down to subsequent generations (Anderson, 1985; Perry, 2003). It is possible that situating literacy learning and the desire for reading proficiency within the democratic messages of justice and freedom can have similar outcomes for African American children today. Therefore, instructional practices in African American community literacy spaces should be encapsulated within larger societal goals of racial and social justice, community uplift and well-being, and universal human freedom. These goals produce spaces that can afford young African American readers the opportunity to learn how to read well as a matter of economic survival, democracy, and civic engagement.

For Teacher and Teacher Educator Practice

Examples of reading instruction in community literacy spaces demonstrate how teachers can indeed support African American student literacy learning. In this way, community-based literacy learning spaces such as WRB are promising because they can offer pedagogical support to preservice and practicing teachers. Through collaborative partnerships with African American community organizations, teachers (prospective and practicing) can learn to intentionally provide reading instruction that is culturally relevant to students. In her policy and program recommendations for increasing teacher diversity and better supporting the professional and pedagogical needs of teachers of color, Haddix (2017) concludes that community literacy spaces have the potential to serve as pedagogical laboratories in which prospective teachers of color can learn to teach in culturally relevant ways and develop empowering professional identities.

For Literacy Education Researchers

Findings revealed that the WRB program, which combines elements of culturally relevant pedagogy and sound literacy instructional practices, had a positive impact on students’ decoding ability and oral reading fluency. This could be because students’ social, cultural, and emotional literacy needs were met through culturally relevant practices. More research is needed to better understand the ways culturally relevant community-based literacy learning spaces meet the social, emotional, and cultural needs of African American

readers, and the relationship between meeting these needs and meeting students' academic needs. Such research could explore the influence of community literacy spaces on African American readers' literate identities.

Further studies should also investigate how counterhegemonic figured community literacy spaces enhance and restore African American children's identity as readers and writers. Research of this nature is important because it presents an opportunity to learn with and from African American communities, build on the wisdoms of practice embedded in these communities, and render Black folks as the subject, rather than as objects of literacy research. The opportunity for humanizing and culturally situated literacy research and practice is monumental, the need is substantial, and the outcomes are transformative.

Conclusion

Community-based literacy learning spaces for African American students can be powerful because they often encompass the purposeful integration of literacy learning that reflect the confluence of African American theories of education and effective literacy teaching strategies. Insights can be drawn from community-based literacy learning spaces on how to improve learning outcomes for African American children. Therefore, continued study of community-based spaces as valuable sites of literacy learning is important. It is crucial to learn to value the everyday contributions communities make to student success and build on the strong practices used by community-based programs to promote student well-being.

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