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Title: Influences of the experience of race as a lens for understanding variation in displays of competence in reading comprehension

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Strand of Work: Theoretical/Integrative

Abstract

Race in the western world is a social and political construction that is important in education in terms of how it influences perceptions of human beings and structures opportunity to learn. In terms of reading comprehension, in the U.S., constructions of race have influenced perceptions of ability, language and even the role of texts in school curricula. The variety of English that has been most documented and examined in terms of its role in literacy learning is African American English Vernacular. Controversies over the inclusion of multicultural texts in the English Language Arts curriculum have been influenced by perceptions of race. Constructions of race have also influenced opportunity to learn. There have and continue to be persistent correlations of race with wealth and its affordances and with poverty and its disadvantages. Differences in resource allocation to schools (per pupil funding, teacher certification, technology access, etc.) associated with SES as SES is associated with race have been well documented. Perhaps the most proximal indicator of opportunity to learn – with regard to reading and other disciplines – is the rigor of curriculum. The preponderance of tracking, direct instruction on low level skills, lack of access to advanced placement courses, all contribute to opportunity to learn to read critically and with depth for students who are identified as non-white.

Beyond these structural inequities associated with race in the U.S., there are other ways that reading competencies and opportunities to learn are influenced by conceptions and perceptions of race. Reading comprehension is a domain that is under conceptualized in terms of how it should be taught. Reading comprehension is a dynamic and interactive process that derives from the intersections among a reader, a text, and the contexts under which reading occurs. It involves both generic skills and kinds of knowledge as well as discipline specific skills and kinds of knowledge. It is clear that language – oral and written – is a major foundation and conduit through which reading processes take place. And language is fundamentally cultural in its scope and uses. How cultural knowledge and experiences play out in reading processes has been documented (e.g. from Bartlett's early studies to Anderson's work on cultural knowledge in comprehension to Bransford and others' work on how differences in prior knowledge and reader's positioning influence

what meaning readers construct), but these studies have not been taken up in significant ways in how reading comprehension is taught in our schools.

Implications

Learning to read – in schools and everyday contexts – is not an isolated, purely individual set of acts. Rather, learning to read takes place in complex ecologies that include home, schools, and informal settings. Learning in these settings will be influenced by perceptions that participants have of the setting, the tasks and the people; by perceptions that learners have of themselves, their abilities and their priorities; and by the resources available in these settings to help shape what and how people are able to learn. This ecological perspective on learning holds explanatory power for understanding differences in trajectories for learning to read across the life course, including how these trajectories are associated with the experiences of race.

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