

## Chapter 36

# Exploring Cultural Responsiveness in Literacy Tutoring: “I Never Thought About How Different Our Cultures Would Be”

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Embracing a culturally responsive teaching pedagogy in classrooms is one means for addressing literacy inequities with students of color. Afterschool literacy tutoring is another means of addressing these inequities, but little is known about implementing culturally responsive teaching in afterschool environments. This qualitative case study explored how cultural differences impacted an urban elementary afterschool literacy tutoring program. Grounded in participatory literacy theory, the authors conclude that it is normal for cultural differences to occur and cause disruptions during tutoring; however, culturally responsive teaching can mitigate these interruptions through developing caring relationships, creating a safe learning environment, implementing a participatory student-centered curriculum using online resources, and critiquing social inequalities. The discussion offers seven principles of culturally responsive teaching to use in literacy instructional environments.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Literacy learning is not equitable for all learners (Banks & Banks, 1995; Zirkel, 2008). For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) revealed 79% American Indian, 44% Asian/Pacific Islander, 80% African American, 77% Hispanic, and 53% White fourth-grade students scored below proficiency in reading on the 2017 National Assessment for Educational Progress test. As evidenced, culturally diverse learners are struggling disproportionately with literacy. Two effective approaches for addressing this issue are afterschool literacy tutoring (Burns, Senesac, & Symington, 2003; Vadasy, Sanders, Peyton, & Jenkins, 2002) and culturally responsive teaching in the classroom (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). However, little is known about using culturally responsive teaching specifically in afterschool tutoring. Addressing this need, this year-long qualitative case study explored how cultural differences between college tutors and elementary-aged students of color impacted an afterschool literacy tutoring program. Research questions included: (a) How do tutors experience culturally mismatched events? (b) How do children experience culturally mismatched events? (c) How are culturally mismatched events mitigated?

## **BACKGROUND**

An essential lens used to frame this study is the concept of participatory literacy. Jurmo (1993) discussed that participatory literacy includes key characteristics such as learners engaging actively in their learning, exerting control and responsibility, and working as a team all while facilitators operate as a guide and resource to the learners. Consequentially, power is shared “equally among learners and staff” (Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989, p. 1). Ideally, the learner functions at a level of participation manifesting great control, responsibility, and reward from the activity instead of merely being physically present in the program (Jurmo, 1993). The application of this framework in an instructional environment can therefore bring efficacy to learning, promote identity development, and be a catalyst for social change (Campbell, 1996; Deluca, 2018; Jurmo, 1993; Yang, 2010).

In Tierney’s (2018) work with cross-cultural meaning making, he discussed the idea that participatory literacy can “promote approaches that are cooperative, collaborative, and contrastive but respectful and reciprocal” (p. 413). To complement the cooperative nature of participatory literacy, the framework of culturally responsive teaching was also chosen since it can address issues of social injustice and ways of acknowledging all learners’ backgrounds (Banks & Banks, 1995; Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016). In this vein, culturally responsive teaching was embraced to illuminate ways teachers incorporated the learner’s culture into the teaching process (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Lee, 1992; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Lipman, 1995). Frequently interchanged with the term culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994), this paper uses the term culturally responsive teaching which Gay (2010) defines as: “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of references, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for [students]” (p.31).

Culturally responsive teaching aims to narrow the academic achievement gap between culturally diverse students and their White counterparts by building on “what students bring to school” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 69). Research has supported this technique of celebrating learners’ various backgrounds (Howard, 2001) and although not inclusive, the following lists some of the culturally responsive teaching components Gay (2002) recommends: (a) acquiring a knowledge base about ethnic and cultural diversity;

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