

# EXAMINING SHARED DOMAINS OF LITERACY IN THE CHURCH AND SCHOOL OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

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For many years educational researchers have attempted to improve the literacy development of African American children; despite their efforts, "the enigma" remains. What can we do to increase the reading achievement of African American children, thereby decreasing the gap between African Americans and their White counterparts?

As African American researchers, our research agendas focus on developing ways to alleviate the reading underachievement of African American children. We believe a large portion of the problem must be solved "in house"—in our homes, communities, and institutions that service our families. Therefore, in this chapter we share vital information by closely examining literacy practices in the African American Church environment, and considering how those practices might connect with, reinforce, and support literacy practices within the school environment. By utilizing our collective knowledge of two of the most significant institutions in the life of African American children, we hope to move the field closer to identifying possible solutions to the enigma surrounding African American children's reading failure.

Several researchers have emphasized the importance of considering the literacy practices of outside institutions in order to understand the literacy crisis within the classroom (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999; Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2002; McMillon & Edwards, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Resnick, 1990). In her groundbreaking study comparing the literacy practices of mainstream and

nonmainstream communities, Heath discussed the importance of studying all the environments within a community including, "ways of living, eating, sleeping, worshiping, using space, and filling time" (p. 3), in order to understand the entire process of literacy acquisition and development.

As lifelong participants in African American churches, we recognize that the church is a valuable resource that has been underutilized by educational institutions in the United States. Although the church is the most influential institution in the Black community (Franklin, 1997; Frazier, 1963; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990), it has not been invited into the conversation concerning the best way to educate Black children (McMillon, 2001). We believe that it is critical for educators to become knowledgeable about their students' cultural values and beliefs in order to develop creative connections for their students that build upon knowledge acquired from valuable out-of-school literacy experiences.

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## THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH

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The African American Church was created from a combination of beliefs, and was specifically designed to meet the multifaceted, complex needs of African Americans (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). It has historically been recognized as a very powerful institution in the

Black community (Proctor, 1995; Smitherman, 1977), and was the site of the first formal learning environment organized specifically for African Americans. Worship service was held in the church on Sunday, and the church building was utilized as a school during the week (Cornelius, 1991). At church, the importance of literacy skills has historically been emphasized, and continues to be a focus today (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

The African American Church is a rich environment for literacy development. However, for the purposes of this chapter, we are focusing specifically on activities that are considered "literacy events," defined by Heath (1982) as "any action sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role" (p. 92). The African American sermon fits this definition of a literacy event, and is the major literacy event that most African Americans have been exposed to in their communities, including those African Americans who do not attend church (Moss, 1994). In addition to the sermon, during worship service, students are given authentic opportunities to practice literacy skills by participating in various activities, such as singing in the choir, welcoming visitors, reading the announcements, and sharing the "thought for the day" with the audience (McMillon, & McMillon, 2003). Similar to the affirmation received at school by many White children who share primary and secondary discourse patterns with their classroom teachers (Delpit, 1995; Gee, 1991; O'Connor & Michaels, 1996), African American children are affirmed in the African American Church where their primary and secondary discourse patterns are similar to many of their teachers and adult leaders (McMillon, 2001).

The African American Church community creates a trusting environment where literacy and cultural practices are learned and reinforced. In Sunday School, Children's Church, and weekly Bible classes, instruction is often based on unique African American learning styles (Hale-Benson, 1986), and behavioral problems are essentially nonexistent because of close-knit relationships that are established between teachers and students. The importance of relationships is a cultural value taught and perpetuated in this environment (Fordham, 1988), where teachers often enjoy intergenerational relationships with parents, and hold high expectations for student performance (Edelman, 1999). Based on a positive self-fulfilling prophecy, most of their students achieve (Edwards, Danridge, McMillon, & Pleasants, 2001).

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### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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More than two decades ago, Anderson and Stokes (1984) observed families from Anglo-American, Black American and Mexican American populations to determine the average frequency of literacy events per hour of observation. They identified nine "domains of literacy activity" including (a) religion, (b) daily living, (c) entertainment (source, instrumental, media), (d) school-related activity, (e) general information, (f) work, (g) literacy techniques and skills (adult-initiated, child-initiated), (h) interpersonal communication, and (i) storybook time. In contrast to the belief that many minority children do not begin school with rich literacy backgrounds, Anderson and Stokes found that minority children in their study had varied literacy experiences in several domains of literacy activity. They found that 26.5% of all literacy activity for the Black American

population in their study fell into the category of religion, surpassed only by the entertainment category (30.2%).

In addition to learning the importance of religious-oriented literacy activities in the lives of some Black Americans, Anderson and Stokes discussed social institutional influences that religious-oriented activities had on literacy practices and beliefs. They found information contrary to the belief that Black and Mexican American families who practice religion are only engaged in "oral tradition." In fact, the churches that the families in their study attended, encouraged—and in some cases required—an active, assertive approach to print, similar to the churches in our personal research studies.

In this chapter we extend Anderson and Stokes' religion category, specifically identifying *shared domains of literacy* (a phrase coined by the authors), in the church and school of many African American children. We have intentionally chosen to illuminate similarities in literacy practices at church and school, rather than differences. Although teachers may agree that difference does not mean deficit, it remains difficult for some of them to connect with students from diverse cultures. By helping readers look at literacy practices in the African American church through lenses of similarities, we establish a "common ground" that we hope will provide points of connection for teachers of African American students to utilize to improve literacy teaching and learning in their classrooms at school.

Conducting research in the context of the African American Church can provide educators with information concerning the educative processes utilized in a learning environment where many African American students are considered successful (McMillon, 2001). This information can assist teachers of African American students by illuminating possible points of connection through which school teachers may find creative ways to help students negotiate the cultural boundaries of their various learning environments. Additionally, we want to promote the idea of investigating students' cultural environments outside of school in order to identify ways to connect with students inside the classroom.

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### SHARED DOMAINS OF LITERACY

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Based on our review of the literature and personal investigations of the African American church, we have identified five *shared domains of literacy*. They include (a) culturally responsive teaching (b) concepts of print, (c) phonemic awareness, (d) storybook reading and responses (e) oral language development and oral retelling. Table 33.1 provides an explanation of each category and examples from both settings.

#### Culturally Relevant Teaching

According to Ladson-Billings (1994), culturally relevant teaching refers to the kind of teaching that provides successful learning opportunities for students and helps them recognize and celebrate value in their own cultures. This type of teaching empowers students to be critical examiners of the educational content and process in which they are exposed—continuously questioning its role in creating a democratic and multicultural society. Culturally relevant teachers possess three important characteristics: (a) culturally relevant conceptions of self/others in which they see themselves as part

TABLE 33.1 Examples of Similarities in the Shared Domains of Literacy at Church and School

Shared Domains of Literacy	African American Church	School Classroom
Culturally Relevant Teaching	Developing a trusting, positive, nurturing, all-inclusive environment where children know that teachers have high expectations for them. Structure, repetition, and memorization are a vital part of this learning environment.	Utilizing teaching techniques and assessments that consider students' learning styles. Providing opportunities for students to share and celebrate cultural values and beliefs.
Concepts of Print	Authentic opportunities to "experience print" occur when reading the Bible, songbooks, class materials, and weekly church bulletins.	"Print" is experienced when reading the Morning Message, Big Books, pocket charts, flip charts, overhead projectors, chalkboards, white boards, books, and other materials.
Phonemic Awareness	Learning and singing songs written in poetic form; "reading" and learning speeches for special occasions (i.e., Easter, Christmas, Black History programs); reading books.	Learning nursery rhymes and other poetry; participating in activities that focus on word families and written word/spoken word correspondence; reading pattern books.
Storybook Reading and Responses	Listening to and reading Bible stories and stories with biblical themes. Examples of responses include: biblically based dramatic skits, speeches, mimes, and choral selections, as well as predicting, questioning, and connecting and Sipe's dramatizing, talking back, critiquing/controlling, and inserting.	Listening to and reading storybooks. Examples of responses include: making predictions, asking clarifying questions, verbal and physical responses, making connections to their own lives and other texts; thinking of alternate endings and/or storylines.
Oral Language Development and Oral Retelling	Participating in worship service and classroom activities that require oratory skills such as reading scriptures, extemporaneous prayers and testimonies, welcoming the visitors, and class discussions. Oral retelling include memorizing scriptures, songs, and Bible stories; and utilizing poster boards, flannel boards, puppets, and other manipulatives as mnemonics to help remember story details.	Reading workshop, book club, literature circles, sharing time, circle time, buddy and partner reading, all types of group discussions, Reader's Theater, other dramatic play activities; centers that require interaction between students, language experience stories, Morning message, retelling stories and poems, presentations, singing, working with nursery rhymes, school programs, student read alouds.

of the community having a responsibility to help students make connections between themselves and their community; (b) culturally relevant classroom social relations in which teachers display a connectedness with students and encourage them to build a community of learners instead of basing success on competitive individualism; and (c) culturally relevant conceptions of knowledge, in which teachers establish standards of excellence to assess and evaluate students, that are sensitive to student diversity and individual differences.

Many teacher-education programs, school districts, and individual schools are attempting to implement culturally relevant teaching ideas and techniques. In the school environment, culturally responsive practice is implemented in numerous ways. Some teachers facilitate relationships between students by concentrating on their responsibility to their peers through cooperative learning, including group discussions and other group activities. Having concern for students outside of their classrooms is encouraged through buddy reading and cross-age tutoring. Programs such as peer mediation and safety patrol also reinforce the importance of being responsible for fellow students. One of the greatest opportunities for students to express concern for others in the community has been for them to organize activities to help the victims of tragedies such as, 9/11, Tsu-

nami, and Hurricane Katrina. Teachers, parents, and students organized many activities to provide money and other needed items.

Many teachers foster concern for others rather than individual competition by implementing cooperative learning as a major focus in their class. Group projects that require everyone to be responsible for various tasks encourage teamwork. Students understand that group grades will be earned, and therefore each individual must contribute his or her portion of the work in order to get a good grade.

Also, many teachers reflectively take time to cater to their students' various learning styles. They utilize assessment tools to inform when teaching, recognizing that their foremost goal should be to effectively facilitate student learning. Culturally responsive teachers understand the importance of building on their students' knowledge. They make a conscientious effort to gather information about their students by implementing activities such as "Star of the Week," which requires each student to bring in pictures and artifacts from home. Parents often get involved in this activity because the student shares personal information about out-of-school experiences. Teachers are also making attempts to connect with parents by sponsoring curriculum night, offering parent conferences during the evening for working parents, and sending newsletters to parents to keep them informed.

Similar to the ongoing push for teachers to implement culturally relevant teaching in the school setting, church teachers, parents, and students also participate in united efforts to assist victims of tragedies. Our current research site sponsors an annual clothing give away and “Back to School Rally” for families in the community.

During class sessions, cooperative learning is commonly utilized in the church setting. Many groups create dramatic skits, songs, rap, poetry, and artistic drawings/sketches to show teachers that they understand Biblical concepts and/or stories discussed during classes.

In addition to implementing many team-building activities, culturally relevant teaching is implemented in many African American churches in terms of classroom structure and related teaching techniques.

Teachers in various churches often utilize similar instructional methods based on foundational cultural beliefs, supported by scripture, and perpetuated in the church environment. They have high expectations for students in this learning context, and students respond accordingly. To assist students in reaching these high expectations, teachers display a commitment to create a positive, nurturing, all-inclusive environment in their classrooms, which they accomplish through structure and repetition (McMillon & Edwards, 2000; McMillon, 2001).

In our studies, teachers provided a structured class environment, which followed a weekly pattern that was very familiar to the students. The pattern was (a) opening period, (b) Bible lesson, (c) learning activity, and (d) closing period. This pattern was followed in Sunday School, weekly Bible study, Children’s Church, and Vacation Bible School.

We found similar structured approaches in our studies of the school environment. Most teachers follow a repetitive structure each day in their classrooms at school. They begin with some type of opening activity. In early elementary, the opening activity is often called morning message. In later elementary and middle school, teachers may begin their classes with a discussion of current events or reminders about important school events. Regardless of how the class begins, many teachers have an established, structured way of organizing class time.

For example, many elementary teachers begin their afternoon sessions after lunch with a read aloud or independent reading. Pre-school and kindergarten teachers often have independent reading/play during the first few minutes of class, and circle time is usually conducted at the same time every day.

Establishing a repetitive structure for class time helps some students become more comfortable because they know what to expect each day.

### Concepts of Print

Concepts of print include awareness that print carries a message, and that there is a one to one correspondence between words read and printed text; there are conventions of print such as directionality (left to right, top to bottom), differences between letters and words, distinctions between upper and lower case, punctuation; and books have some common characteristics such as author and title (Clay, 1991).

In their classrooms at school, students have many opportunities to learn concepts of print. Some of these skills are taught explicitly by the teacher when she or he specifically shows students how

to read from left to right and make a return sweep to get to the next line. Schoolteachers also provide authentic opportunities for their students to practice these concepts when they read the Morning Message, Big Books, and other materials during class. The use of pocket charts, flip charts, overhead projectors, chalkboards, and white boards give students opportunities to develop and reinforce concepts of print.

Print awareness is developed at church when students have experiences with print in the Bible, songbooks, class materials, and weekly church bulletins. Students understand the importance of print in the cultural community of the African American Church. They see many adult role models utilizing these tools and are taught from a very young age to “read” their Bibles, and bring them to church to use while in class and during worship service. In class, students receive take-home literature each week. Sunday School teachers have been taught to use the literature as an evangelistic tool to encourage students to attend classes, remind them to apply their lessons during their everyday lives, and as a way to keep parents informed concerning what their children are learning in class.

Sunday-school literature often includes a lesson sheet to be utilized during class and taken home to read with parents. The lesson sheet for emergent readers includes a colorful picture that is related to the lesson with a Bible scripture (referred to by teachers as the “memory verse”) printed beneath the picture. Students are expected to memorize the memory verse during class and “read” it to their parents at home. The scripture is often short, and students follow along with their fingers as the teacher reads it first. Concepts of print, such as directionality and spoken/written word correspondence, are reinforced during this activity.

Advanced skills are developed and practiced when students use hymnbooks at church. The following song is taken from a popular hymnbook utilized in many African American churches (see Fig. 33.1):

Children who attend church learn how to follow the complex order of a song beginning on the first line, reading left to right, making a return sweep, going to the next line of music, reading the words on the first line again, and repeating this process until the first verse is finished. They also learn how to repeat the chorus. Adults and/or teenagers standing next to children are often found pointing at the words as they read and sing along.

In addition to following along on lesson sheets and in hymnbooks, requiring students to memorize scripture passages from the Bible also helps them develop print awareness and concepts of book print (McMillon & Edwards, 2000). Students were aware that memory verses were excerpts from the Bible (which contained many verses), and they understood that letters were used to make the words in those verses (an important prereading skill). Teachers frequently included the scripture reference when teaching the memory verse, and often explained that the Bible is divided into books, chapters, and verses. In fact, when memory verses are quoted, children were taught to end the verse by stating the book, chapter, and verse. For example, during data collection one child quoted, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, Philippians 4:13.” The “4:13” means the quote is found in the fourth chapter and the thirteenth verse of the book of Philippians.

Of course, we do not want to neglect what we believe is still one of the most important ways to teach concepts of print—simply by reading books. Read alouds are presented in both the school and church learning environments.

## Jesus Loves Me

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WILLIAM B. BRADBURY

1. Je-sus loves me! this I know, For the Bi-ble tells me so; Lit-tle  
 2. Je-sus loves me! He who died Heav-en's gates to o-pen wide! He will  
 3. Je-sus loves me! loves me still, Tho' I'm ver-y weak and ill; From His  
 4. Je-sus loves me! He will stay Close be-side me all the way; If I

CHORUS

ones to Him be-long, They are weak, but He is strong.  
 wash a-way my sin, Let His lit-tle child come in. Yes, Je-sus loves me,  
 shin-ing throne on high, Comest to watch me where I lie.  
 love Him when I die, He will take me home on high.

Yes, Je-sus loves me, Yes, Je-sus loves me, the Bi-ble tells me so.

FIGURE 33.1 Jesus Loves Me

## Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

*Phonemic awareness* is the awareness of constituent sounds of words and the ability to detect and eventually manipulate auditory units that do not necessarily hold syntactic meaning (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Phonological awareness encompasses emergent readers' abilities to detect progressively smaller units of sound within spoken words with three commonly identified levels: (a) syllables, (b) onsets, and (c) phonemes. Thus, phonemic awareness is a subset of the broader construct of phonological awareness (Snow et al.) and involves conscious awareness of the smallest distinguishable auditory units in words (Harris & Hodges, 1995).

Phonological awareness is the understanding that oral language is made out of sounds or groups of sounds. The process of developing phonological awareness begins when a child is able to recognize that speech is composed of words. This understanding is then extended until a child is able to recognize that words are composed of sounds, or phonemes, and he or she is able to manipulate those phonemes to accomplish various tasks (Griffith & Olson, 1992). One of the early

phonological awareness tasks is to learn to recognize and generate rhyming words.

Teachers often utilize familiar and unfamiliar rhymes to help children develop phonemic awareness while enjoying the sounds and messages in the rhymes.

Although it seems reasonable to assume that orally reading books with a lot of rhyme and alliteration is likely to help some children become aware of the form of language, it is clear that this is simply not enough for many young children. Research demonstrates that directly teaching phonological awareness to young children causes them to respond more rapidly to beginning reading instruction and results in improved reading development (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1993; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Although researchers agree that children must have phonological awareness skills to learn to read, concern has been voiced in literature about teaching phonics skills in a decontextualized way to young children (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). Providing direct instruction of phonological awareness skills using the words found in familiar storybooks has at least two advantages. It may be important in helping

students, particularly students who are low achieving, to understand how phonological awareness relates to print. Using storybooks will make the phonological awareness activities more meaningful and connect them more clearly to print. Also, it is likely that the relationship to familiar storybooks will be motivating to students and teachers, resulting in increased levels of practice.

Learning phonemic awareness through songs, rhymes, and storybooks are productive literacy activities utilized in both the church and school environments.

Music in the context of the African American church not only enhances children's concepts of print, but also promotes phonological and phonemic awareness. Many children's songs are written in verse form with rhyming words, or in a patterned, repetitive format, such as "Jesus Loves Me" in Figure 33.1.

Children who participate in activities in the context of the African American church are exposed to many songs. They have numerous authentic opportunities to strengthen their phonological and phonemic awareness skills.

In addition to singing songs that help develop phonemic awareness skills, children who participate in the literacy practices in the context of the African American Church are given opportunities to memorize speeches for special occasions, such as Easter and Christmas. These speeches are usually written in a poetic format. Children are expected to memorize them and share them during church programs.

The speeches that children learn for special occasions at church are similar to the nursery rhymes that children are expected to learn in the school environment.

### Storybook Reading and Responses

Storybook reading enhances literacy development in children (Sulzby & Teale, 1991), assists with the development of a sense of story structure and narration (Phillips & McNaughton, 1990), increases vocabulary development and listening comprehension (Dickenson & Smith, 1994) and decoding and reading comprehension (Rosenhouse, Feitelson, Kita, & Goldstein, 1997); enhances knowledge of the conventions of print (Clay, 1991); and according to Wells (1986), the number of stories children hear read to them is the single greatest predictor of later success in reading.

Sipe (2002) contended that there are alternative ways that children respond to stories that he labeled "expressive, performative engagement," which can be demonstrated with words and physical actions, as the listeners become "active participants in the story." Sipe claimed that expressive engagement has five parts: (a) dramatizing, (b) talking back, (c) critiquing/controlling, (d) inserting, and (e) taking over. These actions move along a continuum with dramatizing being closely guided by the text, and taking over being at the extreme opposite end, allowing students to "rewrite" the story by deleting text and adding text extemporaneously.

Expressive and performative responses are highly valued by the African American community, and in our studies, we found that many teachers are encouraging the various types of expressive, performative engagement in their classrooms at school (McMillon & McMillon, 2003; McMillon & Edwards, 2004). Teachers understand the importance of children connecting with storybooks. They encourage students to make predictions, ask clarifying questions, and respond verbally and physically during storybook reading. They allow them to make connections to their own personal lives and

other texts, and some teachers encourage students to think of alternate endings and/or storylines.

At school, children become familiar with storybook reading by listening to others read and memorizing and retelling children's stories and poems (Edwards, 1995a, 1995b). Similarly, students who participate in classes at church become familiar with storybook reading in their classes by listening to Bible stories and narratives with Biblically related themes. Listening to stories in both the school and church learning environments increases expressive and receptive language development in the context of literature. Most children enjoy listening to stories read to them by their teachers and other adults, and they respond to stories in various ways.

Sipe's (2002) explanation for the response to storybook reading is especially helpful in understanding the responses seen in the context of the church-learning environment during our studies.

Dramatizing was frequently utilized in the church settings, especially on special occasions such as Easter, Christmas, Black History month, and Thanksgiving. Children and youth participated in dramatic skits and performed speeches, mimes, and choral selections related to Bible stories during these special programs. Additionally, in weekly Bible study sessions, drama was utilized to assist students with comprehension. Dramatization varied—it was not always a skit presented by the students; sometimes the teacher used puppets or flannel boards to dramatize the Bible stories.

Talking back is a somewhat *natural* response in the African American church setting because regular discourse in this learning environment includes the call—response form of dialogue, especially during the Sunday morning sermon (Moss, 1994). The audience responds to the melodic, rhythmic exposition of the minister by saying "Amen," "Thank you, Jesus," "That's right," "Yes Lord" and varied affirmative grunts. Similarly, while participating in storybook reading, some students may respond verbally or with facial expressions and/or hand gestures.

Inserting is the final type of response that we want to expound upon. Inserting has a long-standing history in the context of the African American Church. Historically, Blacks have inserted themselves into the Old Testament "Exodus story." For many years, Blacks have compared their plight with the Children of Israel. Blacks' involuntary migration to America, their long-term slavery, their resilience to survive, and their commitment to God and belief that He will rescue them has many striking similarities to the story of the Children of Israel in the Exodus story. Thus, having a history of *insertion*, many African American children oftentimes respond to stories in this way.

### Oral Language Development

Children's oral communicative ability is vital to the development of their literacy skills and has been directly linked to their literacy development (Torrence & Olsen, 1984). Dickinson and Snow (1987) pointed to the need of more refined work in this area by asserting that the connection between language skills and reading was more often assumed than demonstrated. In response to this challenge, several researchers found that the individual sounds produced when speaking, called *phonemes*, have a compelling influence on literacy development (Ehri, Nunes, Willows, Schuster, Yaghou, & Shanahan, 2001). Additionally, Cooper, Roth, Speece, and Schatschneider (2002) contended that there is a developmental relationship between oral language and phonological awareness skills, which directly

supports reading. In their study of over 200 students in kindergarten through second grade, they found that "general language skill measured in kindergarten predicts a significant and meaningful proportion of unique variance in phonological awareness skills, from kindergarten to second grade, beyond the influence of letter and word knowledge (p. 411)."

The functionality of language is vast. Talking can help children make sense "out loud" as they attempt to understand new ideas. It is the bridge that helps them connect relationships between what they know and what they are coming to know. It is through speech that children learn to organize their thinking and focus their ideas (Lyle, 1993). Furthermore, children who are allowed to develop their oral language skills in a variety of settings do better on formalized literacy tests (Galda, Shockley, & Pellegrini, 1995). Throughout life, oral-language skills will remain essential for the communication of ideas and for engagement in intellectual dialogue and activities.

Across cultures, variations in the ways of speaking reflect important differences in beliefs, practices, values, and norms. These differences enter into the organization and systemic use of language at many levels in every community. It follows, then, that when children are acquiring their language, they are spoken to and are learning to talk to others according to ways of speaking that reflect the beliefs and values of their particular speech community. Much of the language children learn reflects the language and behavior of the adult models they interact with and listen to (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). Adults scaffold children's language learning by providing a model that is expressive, responsive, and enjoyable. At church, the sermon, with its expressive "call-and-response" pattern, provides an important language model for children (Moss, 1994).

At school, several classroom teaching methods and activities teach and reinforce oral language development. Sharing time (also called "show and tell") is a recurring classroom language activity, where children are called upon to give a formal description of an object or a narrative account of some important past event. (Michaels, 1981). Sharing time can be an important event in the oral preparation for literacy (Michaels). Other activities include reading workshop, book club, literature circles, sharing time, circle time, buddy and partner reading, all types of group discussions, reader's theater, other dramatic play activities, centers that require interaction between students, language experience stories, morning message, retelling stories and poems, presentations, singing, working with nursery rhymes, participation in school programs, student read alouds, and many other activities emphasizing oral language development in the context of school.

The oral tradition of the Black Church requires members to give extemporaneous prayers, testimonies, and speeches (Edwards, et al., 2001). Sunday School and other classes are a "training ground" to develop and refine oral language skills, and prepare students to participate in worship services with adults.

In addition to the weekly classes and monthly worship service opportunities to develop and practice oral skills, the African American church encourages language development by encouraging students to participate in programs for special holidays, such as Easter, Christmas, and Black History Month. To prepare for the programs, children are given speeches to memorize and share with an audience. Some students also get a chance to participate in dramatic skits or full-scale plays with stage props, costumes, etc. In our studies, the younger children were given speeches, and the older children participated in the dramatic presentations. These programs are festive occa-

sions that children and adults prepare for with great anticipation. Children attend rehearsals to practice their speeches and dramatic presentations. They have to repeat their parts numerous times until the coordinator of the program is satisfied with their performance. During this time of preparation, children learn the importance of practice and are often told, "practice makes perfect." When the day of the program arrives, the children do not disappoint. They make their presentations to the awaiting church audience and receive immediate encouragement and gratification in the form of standing ovations, and verbal responses from the adults such as "amen," "good job," and "beautiful children—that's beautiful" (McMillon & McMillon, 2003).

Oral language development is emphasized in both the school and church learning environments. Teachers in both settings provide numerous opportunities and activities that help children acquire and develop oral language skills. One of the most prevalent areas of language development found in these settings was *oral retelling*.

**Oral Retelling** A number of researchers have explored children's understanding of the story genre through the use of retellings, a postreading recall during which children relate what they remember from reading or listening to a particular text (Gambrell, Pfeiffer, & Wilson, 1985). As Irwin and Mitchell (1983) noted, "Retelling reveals what a child comprehends . . . as well as how the child comprehends" (p. 392). Moreover, retellings afford children the opportunity to play an active role in reconstructing text. Such experiences have been shown to enhance the development of comprehension, oral language, and sense of story structure (Zimiles & Kuhns, 1976). Story retellings have also been used as assessment tools in the examination of developmental trends in story comprehension (Mandler & Johnson, 1977).

In school, some teachers use retelling to provide practice time for oral language development, while others use it as an authentic assessment tool for student comprehension. Retelling stories with the appropriate sequence of events, including issues related to character development, plot, themes, and setting inform teachers of student understanding of story structure and components of narrative texts. Retelling takes on many forms at school including skits, puppetry, art, and written form.

Storytelling and retelling require memorization, a skill that is well developed in the African American Church (McMillon & Edwards, 2000). Bible stories are frequently retold and students memorize the stories after hearing them repeatedly. The Sunday-School teacher in one of our studies also utilized story telling as a way to help students understand abstract concepts and assess student comprehension.

During data collection, students were asked to retell stories utilizing a poster board and heaven box as mnemonics to assist with details of the stories (McMillon & Edwards, 2000). Regular class members are expected to remember these stories and be prepared to share them with younger students and new students until they also learn them. Requiring students to memorize and retell stories helps develop oral language as a bridge to reading (Searfoss & Readence, 1985) and fosters the beginning of metacognitive strategies for reading comprehension (Mason, McCormick, & Bhavnagri, 1986). Students are able to ask questions that address specific issues about the story. Teachers provide clarification on these issues and help students think about ways to apply the story to personal circumstances. Oral retelling activities also build confidence by giving students opportunities to share their knowledge with others.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Although many researchers have attempted to address the problem of reading failure among African American children, the enigma still persists. Standardized test scores and other assessments reveal that Black children lag behind their counterparts. While there are many possible reasons for this problem, the purpose of this chapter was to explore possible solutions. By identifying shared domains of literacy between the church and school environments of African American students, we believe that we increase the possibility of alleviating the reading achievement gap.

When first considering this body of work, there may be a tendency to take a pessimistic stance. After all, in the United States there is a separation of church and state. However, a relatively recent paradigm shift in the field of education toward a sociocultural perspective challenges us to broaden our scope by becoming willing to admit that the culture of teachers and students influences classroom literacy teaching and learning. We know that many teachers are afraid to "trespass" into the unknown territory of their students' out-of-school lives. Some teachers believe that their focus should be what goes on inside their classroom at school. They think that whatever goes on outside of their classroom is not "their business."

On the contrary, we believe that it is imperative that teachers learn to draw on the rich resources of outside institutions, including the home and church. How can we get teachers to do this? The solution to the enigma begins with teachers' willingness to tap into their students' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

We know that children who are read to and talked to in certain ways easily transition into school, especially students who share primary discourse patterns with their teachers. Denny Taylor's *Family Literacy* (1983) is a classic example of how middle-class White children easily transition from home to school. Their home activities mirrored school literacy activities. However, Taylor's book with Dorsey-Gaines, *Growing Up Literate* (1988), provided examples of school and inner-city home literacies not being connected. It is clear when children's literacies are aligned with school, these literacies are recognized, accepted, and built upon. Others are ignored and dismantled.

The time has come for teachers to think more critically about the needs of their students. How do their out-of-school lives connect with what goes on in their classrooms? Perhaps the students are not just simply disinterested or incapable of learning. Instead of rushing to judgment, critical discussions about specific, practical ways that schools can incorporate multiple literacies within their curriculum need to take place. Why do we accept some students' literacies and reject others? As researchers, our challenge is to unveil the masks of disillusion and doubt and reveal realistic possibilities—practical solutions to the problem of reading failure among African American students. We can no longer ignore the environment where African Americans are succeeding, especially the African American Church where they have historically been successfully educated. We must make the school environment recognizable and inviting for children from multiple out-of-school literacy environments.

Drawing from the *shared domains of literacy* discussed in this chapter, we have several suggestions for teachers of African American students:

1. *Develop a relationship with your students.* Most students work harder for teachers with whom they connect. Remember, for some

students the old cliché is operative: "You can't teach me until you reach me." Many African American students are relationship oriented and their teachers need to be culturally responsive to their need to bond with significant adults in their lives.

2. *Develop a home-school connection.* Parents are a child's first and most important teacher. They hold the key to unleashing your students' literacy learning potential and your literacy teaching potential. Let parents know that you value their input and need them on your team by asking them to share vital information about students' past and present out-of-school literacy experiences. Show parents that you genuinely care about their children through honesty, open-mindedness, and consistency.

3. *Provide structured class time.* African American students who participate in church classes may benefit from having school teachers who provide structured class time, because they are accustomed to this approach to classroom teaching and learning. If students know what to expect, they can focus on the tasks/activities, rather than spending time trying to figure out what happens next. We found that a higher level of comfort and increased participation resulted when teachers began to implement more structured class time.

4. *Develop creative memorization and repetition activities based on class content.* Two integral parts of "structure" in the African American Church setting are memorization and repetition. Many teachers in school do not understand the importance of these two concepts for students with certain styles of learning. Students who are musically oriented have great memories and understand the importance of repetition, because repeated practice is a major part of their development. In our studies, children learned scriptures by repeating them rhythmically. Kinesthetic learners love clapping their hands, marching, and dancing to the beat. At church, children are encouraged to enthusiastically move and groove while learning. Mathematical formulas, Standard English language rules, historical dates, important speeches, vocabulary definitions, and word wall words are examples of school-related topics that can be put to rhythm and or music, repeated, and memorized by creative students and teachers.

5. *Provide all children with opportunities to develop their oral language skills.* A child's language is one of the outward manifestations of personality and we have to do everything within our powers to make him or her feel that it is worthwhile, even though he or she may speak a different language and come from a home where respect for language is slight or nonexistent.

Teachers of African American children need to understand that they often utilize a "topic-associated" way of communicating, as opposed to the "topic-centered" method that is more frequently used by middle-class Whites (Michaels, 1981; McMillon & Edwards, 2000). Unintentionally, teachers can "deny access to key literacy-related experiences" (Michaels, 1981, p. 423) when they have differing communicative styles than their students. These miscommunications can lead to students becoming uncomfortable in class and may result in student frustration or resistance.

6. *Teach students how to interact in acceptable ways in various environments.* We fail children if we do not help them learn to use commonly accepted speech patterns. For example, students need to be explicitly taught that talking in dialect and speaking out of turn



when talking with friends is perfectly acceptable. However, in the classroom, during certain activities, specific participation structures are often required by various teachers. Students who do not develop an ability to communicate "appropriately" based on the teacher's expectations may suffer academically and socially (McMillon & Edwards, 2000; McMillon, 2001).

7. *Enhance students' comprehension skills by encouraging expressive, performative engagement of texts and oral retelling.* Allow students to become personally engaged with texts by teaching Sipe's five alternate ways to respond to stories. Scaffold their attempts to dramatize, talk back, critique/control, insert, and take over in response to stories. Develop activities that reinforce these responses. Also, find ways to connect expressive, performative responses directly with oral retelling as a way of comparing author's intent, and audience perception.

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### THE PROPER RESPONSE TO "THE ENIGMA"

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The African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child" is true. Working together, researchers, schoolteachers, church teachers, and other significant members of the community can collaboratively provide the proper response to "the enigma". We believe African American students can and will become successful in America's classrooms when members of their literacy network systems, in and out of school, build bridges that connect the gaps between influential institutions in their lives. As African American researchers, we are facilitating this process by illuminating shared domains of literacy between their school and church learning environments. Our goal is to help African American students become "border-crossers"—successfully negotiating the cultural boundaries between their multiple literacy worlds.

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