

Preface

WHY IS THIS TEXT NEEDED?

We, the authors of *50 Literacy Strategies for Culturally Responsive Teaching, K–8*, saw a great need for this text in our nation’s schools. (Together we have 30 years of public school classroom teaching experiences and an additional 20 years in teacher education and research.) We discovered this need as we began talking with teachers and teacher educators across our country and working with our graduate and undergraduate students. Present and future elementary and middle school teachers appeared to be aware of our nation’s ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, but they expressed concerns about the lack of appropriate strategies and resources for differentiating instruction for these students in urban, rural, and suburban classrooms. Therefore, we were inspired to develop a literacy strategies text that emphasized cultural sensitivity and an appreciation for diversity, and that promoted literacy learning at elementary and middle schools. We see the concept of culture as the factor that embraces all kinds of diversity. For example, if the culture that surrounds linguistic or economic diversity is not addressed, how can we make the English language arts relevant? At first, we were hesitant about dealing with such a huge and complex task. But because of the unmet need, we decided that we must do something. As the medical profession pledges, “First, do no harm,” we believed we must start somewhere. As a result, we state, honestly, that this text is not comprehensive; it is just an early attempt to assist teachers as they implement culturally responsive instruction.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS TEXT?

The purpose of this text is to help present and future teachers begin to make home/school/community connections that promote our students’ academic and social achievement. All strategies connect to the English Language Arts Standards proposed by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (Appendix A) and the standards will be noted in the introduction of each strategy. Many of these literacy strategies are not new, but are simply modified for culturally responsive instruction, thus demonstrating that making learning culturally relevant is not a great hurdle. We have also avoided too much specificity, since teachers traditionally adapt what they teach to their own students’ specific strengths and challenges. Rarely do teachers implement strategies in exactly the same way each year.

WHERE HAVE APPLICATIONS OF STRATEGIES OCCURRED?

We have repeatedly observed the application of most strategies in numerous elementary and secondary urban, high-poverty classrooms, so one could say that the strategies have been tested for success. A few teachers have adapted them for high school, and a few teachers in suburban and rural settings have successfully used them in their classrooms. These teachers realize that diversity exists in all populations. (Actually, every family has its own special culture: its own way of talking, working, celebrating, playing, etc.) The teachers ranged in professional experience from novice to 25 years and were willing to try these strategies simply because they were curious about them, frustrated with present teaching/learning results, and/or desired to encourage more successful literacy development. They recognized the time-consuming aspects of some strategies, but their efforts yielded the positive results that motivated them to continue with adaptation and application. Interviews and anonymous surveys revealed comments that have been inserted at the end of several strategies. We thought that these would be informative and encouraging.

WHAT ABOUT STEREOTYPICAL THINKING?

We realize that stereotypical understandings of certain groups of people can be strongly embedded in the psyche and that it is no easy task to change attitudes. But we believe that most teachers are predisposed to the negation of harmful stereotypes and want all students to achieve emotionally, socially, and academically in their classrooms. Moreover, we think we have seen that successful applications of the strategies may actually reinforce positive cultural sensitivity and might even begin to eliminate negative notions about certain groups of people.

WHO WILL FIND THIS TEXT USEFUL?

Inservice teachers will find *50 Literacy Strategies for Culturally Responsive Teaching, K–8*, particularly useful since it offers literacy strategies with transformative messages that can be used across the curriculum. According to English standard dictionaries, “a strategy is a carefully devised plan to achieve a goal or the art of developing or carrying out such a plan.” Preservice teachers will also find this text useful as they practice teaching and designing literacy lessons.

HOW MUCH TEACHER EDUCATION IS NECESSARY TO USE THESE STRATEGIES?

This unique text may encourage teachers to use culturally responsive strategies in their classrooms on Monday morning. We know that teachers appreciate an

understanding of the theoretical foundations for particular strategies, so that they will be better prepared to implement them. Often, however, there is little time to discuss theory when there are pressing classroom requirements. Actually, the application of strategies helps teachers begin to think differently about differences, seeing first hand how they can be adapted to fit the needs of particular students. The very act of planning strategy application promotes communication between home, school, and community, thus strengthening connections for relevant instruction. Additionally, translators, sign language, and basic personal contacts promote relationships for English Language Learner (ELL) student success.

WHY EMPHASIZE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES?

Our focus is on cultural differences, since we believe that they have been ignored too long in favor of the dominant mainstream culture that empowers the European American and middle class population at the expense of the human dignity of the traditionally ignored peoples. It is “nice” to address similarities in classrooms. Doing so serves an important unifying purpose, but similarities are not what cause wars and serious disturbances in our world. Therefore, learning to value differences in perspectives, languages, cultures, physical appearances, and so forth, offers opportunities to expand inquiry learning, critical thinking, and problem solving (Siegler & Alibali, 2005). We have also included strategies related to differences in climate, geography, measurement, architecture, and flora and fauna. These differences demonstrate the evolution of human diversity and help us appreciate other cultures by bringing new ideas to our own.

Some strategies do not specifically and directly address certain groups, but will certainly assist in recognizing their enriching differences in the classroom. These strategies will assist in building learning communities that not only foster an appreciation of differences, but also promote reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing through meaningful activities. Additionally, these strategies may allow teachers to individualize and accommodate across different categories of special learner needs, such as students with academic, social, cognitive, emotional, physical, linguistic, and ethnic differences. All can participate and learn.

WHAT IS THE ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT?

There are six major sections in this text. The first section is entitled Classroom Community: Getting to Know Me, Myself, and Us. It contains strategies to develop a risk-free learning community, one that offers a comfort level for sharing. Students in such classrooms are confident that their questions, answers, and contributions will be thoughtfully and respectfully responded to in ways that assist in the learning process for all. So we think these strategies may be useful at the beginning of the school year. However, any of these strategies may

be repeated throughout the school year, as reminders and reinforcement for the importance of diverse learning communities, communities that support their members for understanding the curricula.

The next section, Home, Community, and Nation: Making Contributions to Literacy Learning, has strategies that can be interspersed throughout the school year whenever appropriate. We feel these strategies can be used again and again, with slight modifications, as students begin to see how important it is to connect with their home, community, and nation.

The third section, Multicultural Literature Events: Motivating Literacy Learning in Content Areas, is meant to do just that, with rich pieces of youth literature. The literature resources given as examples are presented to entice teachers to explore the many literature resources that exist to promote understanding of particular subjects in a content area. The List of Cited Youth Literature provided at the end of the book serves as an additional resource. These pieces of literature are successful motivators for culturally responsive lessons, since they represent numerous cultures. They are written and illustrated by authors and illustrators from diverse backgrounds.

The next section is Critical Media Literacy: Exploring Values. Today's youth are exposed to the media for many hours daily. Therefore, we believe it is essential to include culturally responsive strategies that encourage youth to critically analyze visual and print messages. These strategies may help students consider and think critically about stereotypes, fads, and biased news presentations.

The fifth section is Global Perspectives and Literacy Development: Understanding the World View. This group of strategies presents the *big picture*. Students are provided with opportunities to situate themselves and their cultures on the planet Earth. Activities related to the strategies help students see their own lives in relation to the lives of people from other parts of the world. The purpose of these literacy strategies is not only to help students deepen understanding of the curriculum, but also to extend their learning beyond local and national communities.

The last section is Inquiry Learning and Literacy Learning: Beginning to Know Research. The theme for this group of strategies is “questioning is the answer.” School students learn early on that “the teacher asks questions and students give expected answers.” Unfortunately, this is the structure of numerous classrooms throughout the world. However, in a democratic society, a questioning citizenry is what keeps democracy alive (Dewey, 1916; Herber, 1978; Schon, 1987). Therefore, it is the work of the educator to stimulate questioning behaviors and an inquiring spirit. These strategies will help students begin to take risks and ask questions and learn basic research procedures.

HOW DO I USE THIS TEXT?

Each strategy in *50 Literacy Strategies for Culturally Responsive Teaching, K–8* is presented to encourage easy implementation and adaptation to suburban, urban, and rural student populations in numerous curriculum content areas. Most strategies are presented with a brief explanation, links to the ELA (English Language Arts) Standards, and then steps to follow for beginning, intermediate,

and advanced learners. Some strategies combine beginning and intermediate levels and others combine intermediate and advanced levels. For most strategies, materials are suggested and examples given. Furthermore, the strategies are not so prescriptive that the experienced teacher will feel as though she or he is following a script. The authors actually hope the strategies stimulate critical analysis and creative thinking. So, we encourage teachers to modify and extend lessons with more appropriate ideas and activities. At the end of each strategy, suggestions for curriculum connections are provided to assist in a broad-view, thematic learning process. Hopefully teachers will seize these opportunities to integrate and collaborate for connections across the curriculum and grade levels.

Please note that each strategy is connected to the IRA and NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts. Notice that teacher comments accompany many strategies as experienced “words of wisdom.” These helpful comments may alert you to specific aspects in the implementation process.

Teachers may wish to begin at the beginning of this text, since the first two sections, Classroom Community: Getting to Know Me, Myself, and Us and Home, Community, and Nation: Contributions to Literacy Learning, focus on building strong learning communities and positive connections between home, school, and community. However, we also think that any of the strategies in different sections may be used in any order, as long as the classroom teacher integrates the strategy with a particular instructional goal or curriculum focus.

A word of caution is necessary here. Sometimes, communication with families and communities can be challenging when teachers are attempting to develop working relationships. So, the following tenets may be helpful to remember:

- Many teachers have discovered that sending notes home is the least effective way to contact families.
- Many teachers have discovered that personal phone calls and meetings on neutral ground, such as those at a recreation center, park, or local coffee shop, are most useful for initiating relationships with family and community members.
- Many teachers know that an interpreter-translator may be necessary for those new to this country who are learning our culture and the English language. Even though some people may appear to have a high level of English language proficiency, they may not understand the nuances of the culture. Therefore, interpreters-translators may be necessary for communication between home and school for those new to the English language as well as those new to the culture.

The key idea to remember is that the environment for sharing and collaboration must be *risk-free*, a place to begin positive and carefully attentive communication.

To begin using the strategies, teachers may prefer experimentation, so they might study strategies, find one that seems appropriate to the curriculum, and try it. The following directions may help.

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- Read the first paragraph that describes the strategy.
- Then study the steps for beginner, intermediate, and advanced learning. These three levels are arbitrary at best. Beginners might be defined as kindergarten through second-grade interest and/or academic abilities. Intermediate might be defined as third- through fifth-grade interest and/or academic abilities, and advanced may be described as sixth-through eighth-grade interest and/or academic abilities. Additionally, some strategies are labeled *beginner/intermediate* and/or *intermediate/advanced*. These were designed in this manner to indicate that the steps may be appropriate for both levels.
- Decide what level would be most appropriate for specific students in your class.
- Decide what can be accomplished by the whole class, what can be accomplished by small groups, and what can be accomplished by pairs or individual students.
- For English Language Learners who were good students in their native lands, pairing with an equal-ability student will maintain interest levels. If the student has had little formal education, the interest level is key. In both cases, drawing upon the positive memories of students' native lands and cultures is the first consideration. Students must be assisted in their comfort and interest levels to motivate them (Cummins, 1986; Igoa, 1995; Schmidt, 1998a, 2002).
- Family and community surveys, notes, or other written communication may need to be translated. Oral communication may also require translators. However, personal efforts to communicate with sign language can be effective when there is a sincere person-to-person effort put forth by the teacher.
- Study the curriculum connections to see how activities for the strategy can be integrated into particular content areas.
- Follow the steps, but always be open to modifying and adjusting to your students' interests and challenges.
- Finally, don't give up after one strategy doesn't seem to work. Try another . . . and don't worry about perfection. The strategies were created to produce a "healthy hum" (Schmidt, 2001, p. 141) in classrooms where reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing are used as powerful learning tools.

WHY IS THIS TEXT SO IMPORTANT?

This section is included as a brief theoretical framework and rationale for this text. The list of citations is referenced in the back of this text, so that educators may study more in-depth research.

The U.S. Department of Education predicts that by the year 2010, minority populations will become the majority populations in our schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Presently, this diversity has had a significant impact on urban education, but in the future, will have an even greater impact

on rural and suburban education. Therefore, it is time for successful teacher inservice and preservice programs to connect home, school, and community with culturally relevant or culturally responsive teaching (Au, 1993; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Florio-Ruane, 1994; Moll, 1992; Noordhoff & Kleinfield, 1993; Osborne, 1996; Schmidt, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005; Tatum, 1992, 1997; Tatum, 2000; Willis & Meacham, 1997; Zeichner, 1993).

Research and practice demonstrate that strong home, school, and community connections not only help students make sense of the school curriculum, but also promote literacy development (Au, 1993; Boykin, 1978, 1984; Edwards, 2004, 1996; Faltis, 1993; Goldenberg, 1987; Heath, 1983; Leftwich, 2002; McCaleb, 1994; Moll, 1992; Reyhner & Gracia, 1989; Schmidt, 2000, 2004, 2005; Xu, 2000b). However, in recent years home, school, and community connections have become a significant challenge.

There are various reasons for this situation. First, as our school population has become increasingly diverse, both culturally and ethnically, our teaching population has consistently originated from European American, suburban experiences. Typically, educators describe themselves as white and middle class and often add, during discussions about diversity, "I'm an American; I don't have a culture." (Paley, 1989; McIntosh, 1990; Florio-Ruane, 1994; Snyder, Hoffman, & Geddes, 1997; Schmidt, 1999a). Second, most teachers have not had sustained relationships with people from different ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. As a result, much of their knowledge about diversity has been influenced by media stereotypes (Finkbeiner & Koplín, 2002; Pattnaik, 1997; Tatum, 1997). Third, school curriculum, methods, and materials usually reflect only European American or white culture and ignore the backgrounds and experiences of students and families from lower socioeconomic levels and differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Boykin, 1978, 1984; Moll, 1992; Foster, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Delpit, 1995; Purcell-Gates, L'Allier, & Smith, 1995; Nieto, 1999; Howard, 2001; Sleeter 2001; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2001). Fourth, many teacher education programs do not adequately prepare educators for "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson-Billings, 1995) a term that directly relates to making strong home, school, and community connections (Wallace, 2000; Sleeter, 2001; Lalik & Hinchman, 2001). Fifth, when cultural differences are ignored in classrooms, student fears and alienation increase (Cummins, 1986; Igoa, 1995; Schmidt, 1998a, 2002; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). Consequently, this disconnect has become a national problem whose influence has been linked to poor literacy development and extremely high dropout rates among students from urban and rural poverty areas (Au, 1993; Banks, 1994; Cummins, 1986; Edwards, 2004; Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999; Goldenberg, 1987; Heath, 1983; Nieto, 1999; Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2005; Schmidt, 1998a, 1999b; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kurtin, 1990).

It is obvious that there is a significant body of research concerning culturally responsive teaching. Unfortunately, there has been little evidence of its implementation in our nation's schools. So, it seems appropriate to suggest that this text, offering culturally responsive literacy strategies, is not only needed, but also, as some would say, "urgently necessary."