

# Reading Practices in African American Segregated Elementary Schools in the South: 1940-1970

Renarta Tompkins  
Mississippi State University

**Abstract:** This study examined the instructional methods utilized by African American teachers in several segregated elementary schools in Georgia from 1940-1970. Using a cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of the oral histories of six teachers' experiences in teaching reading in 17 segregated elementary schools from 1940-1970, the following question was explored: What modes of literacy instruction did African American teachers use in segregated school settings?

The study found that the instructional methodologies for reading and the materials employed by the teachers generally paralleled the recommended reading methodologies of mainstream teacher publications during the time period. These practices included reading aloud, round robin reading, phonics instruction, spelling, grammar, creative writing, recitation and memorization. However, three literacy related practices stand out, the first two, diagnostic assessment and flexibility in learning environment are not mentioned in the literature on segregated schooling. The third, informal literacy activities, merits mention because it figures prominently both in the reports of the teachers in the study and the segregated schools literature but receives far less emphasis in the mainstream reading literature. The study found that the teachers employed these informal literacy activities to broaden students' literacy experiences beyond the classroom and the community.

## Introduction

Reading instruction generally excluded attention to the culture and ethnicity of minority students prior to desegregation. In instances where culture was included in the discourse on reading instruction, it was typically viewed through a deficit lens. Generally through the 1960s, students whose cultures or ethnic groups differed from the middle-class White norm were variously labeled as "culturally deprived" (Foster, 1990) or "culturally disadvantaged" (Placier, 1994). In the predominance of cultural descriptors that reflected a deficit model, African American children were consistently portrayed as students without culture or as students for whom culture was a handicap to school success (Irvine, 1991).

This acultural and deficit perspective characterized the discipline of reading instruction for the decades prior to desegregation. Yet current revisionist histories describe segregated schools in the south as places where African American teachers held high expectations, maintained rigorous curriculum, and enforced strong behavioral norms, while refusing

to equate learning capacity with impoverished background or racial disparity (Morris & Morris, 2000, Walker, 1996, Walker, 2001).

However, neither the historical scholarship nor the reading scholarship has explored the nature of reading instruction in the southern African American segregated school environment. The historical literature on segregated African American schools affords little attention to any specific content area instruction, including reading. Likewise, in the reading scholarship, the experiences of African American children are ignored prior to desegregation, or simply dismissed as substandard.

This study expands the literature on reading instruction by providing a historical case study of African American teachers and their strategies for reading instruction in segregated African American elementary schools in a southern state. Specifically, it explored the teaching of reading in segregated school settings from 1940-1970, relying upon interviews and analysis of archival documents. The study sought to address the following question: what modes of literacy instruction did African American teachers use in the segregated school setting?

Based on anthropological and historical research that indicates that African Americans possess a distinct culture with "identifiable norms, language, behaviors, and attitudes" (Irvine, 1991, p.23), Irvine argued that the independent nature of the segregated African American school system allowed teachers and principals the autonomy to reflect the "patterns of communication, cultural preferences, and normatively diffused modes of behavior" (p. 35) of its community. In such an environment, a cross-case analysis of African American teachers may have revealed that they created culturally specific adaptations of reading instruction for students, adapting mainstream practices to reflect the cultural norms, values, and resources of the community.

## Methodology of the Study

This historical cross-case analysis explored reading instruction in segregated African American elementary schools in Georgia by interviewing African American teachers who taught between the years 1940 to 1970 and by supporting these oral history accounts through archival documentation.

### *Data Sources*

Six female African American teachers were interviewed for this study. The participants represented experiences in 17 different segregated African American schools from 1940-1970. The location of the schools ranged from small rural

schools to large urban schools. All the participants taught at the elementary school level, which spanned grades one through seven during the time frame of the study.

I also examined documents in public and private archival collections pertaining to reading instruction during the time period of 1940-1970. These included the documents of (1) The Southern Regional Educational Board, located at Atlanta University Archives, (2) The Division of Negro Education documents and county and school district historical documents, located at the Georgia Archives Building and (3) documents of the Georgia Teachers and Educators Association (GTEA), the African American teacher's union, housed in a private collection. However, the laxity of official record-keeping for Black schools and the destruction of many of the documents pertaining to these schools subsequent to desegregation allow only a generalized view of teaching in segregated schools in the state. Of these documents, most informative were the past issues of the *Herald*, the official magazine of the African American Georgia Teachers and Educators Association.

### **Data Collection**

A three-tiered interview cycle (Seidman, 1998) was utilized for each participant. Each interview provided a foundation on which to build the next interview and the use of multiple interviews increased rapport with the participants. All interviews consisted of a semi-structured question-answer format (Merriam, 1998) that focused on the teaching of reading in segregated schools.

### **Data Analysis**

Broad coding categories had been constructed through the review of the literature and formed the first level of coding (McCracken, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Coding themes were refined with each interview then compared across each case study. To improve the validity and reliability of oral history accounts, consistency was verified across multiple interviews with the same subject by repeating the same questions. Where areas of concern emerged, clarification was sought through other participants or archival documents. Throughout the study, archival data was used to confirm, expand, or challenge the oral report, where possible.

A limitation of the study was the accuracy of the participants' memories of the time period of the study, as well as the high participant mobility across school settings, which may have obscured practices specific to a particular school site. However, most participants were able to provide general information regarding their teaching of reading; although some found it difficult to pinpoint a practice to a specific site, most were able to distinguish between pre-

desegregation teaching and post-desegregation teaching.

### **Results of the Study**

Although the historical literature on segregated schooling has not focused specifically on reading, several studies provided insight into literacy instruction in segregated African American elementary schools (Morris & Morris, 2000; Robinson, 1978, Walker, 1996). The practices described in the historical literature provide context for interpreting the results of this study.

### **Reading Materials**

The predominant basal reader used in mainstream White schools from 1940-1965 was the *Dick and Jane* reader (Fleish, 1955; Williams, 1995), likewise, in African American schools in this study, the most often mentioned basal for elementary instruction was the *Dick and Jane* reader (Dempsey & Noblit, 1993; Morris & Morris, 2000). However, *Dick and Jane* turned out to be only one of several different basal series being used by the teachers. Indeed, all but one of the teachers in the study had access to multiple sets of readers and often selected the reader they felt best suited the students' needs. One teacher found that for "many kids, it [*Dick and Jane*] was too repetitive" and used it only for the lowest students. She used Row, Peterson and Company's *Alice and Jerry* readers or the Allyn Bacon series for her more able students. Most teachers identified their basal text by the publisher's name and demonstrated familiarity with the series by actually attributing certain characteristics of text to a particular series. One of the teachers, Mrs. Waters explained it this way:

Let's say that for the lower group, you would want a series that really had a lot of vocabulary work and so forth and so forth, so you would put them in the Scott Foresman series...the next group might be in the Harcourt Brace series. We never had a problem. We had all those different series. You had to make a decision, but you got to know your series because you studied it.

Mrs. Water's explanation for the abundance of materials was that they never threw anything away.

In addition to textbooks, teachers in the study frequently utilized supplementary materials, such as leveled reading kits and multi-level readers for instruction. Consistent with Smith's (2002) contention that by the mid-1950s, teachers were urged to utilize non-textbook materials in the classroom, several teachers used a children's newspaper subscription in their classrooms, *The Weekly Reader*, to encourage outside reading. One of the teachers ordered each child's *Weekly Reader* on their individual independent reading level, even though she

was a sixth grade teacher. She stated, "Every child had his own and it was on a level they could read and they could go home and tell their parents the news and what was happening with the president and everything and they would just love being able to read the newspaper." Other supplementary books were the result of teachers' purchases with their own money. However, upon inquiry, it was found that none of the teachers attempted to collect literature that specifically reflected positive African American images. One participant felt that sufficient titles simply weren't available back then.

#### *Instruction*

The African American teachers in this study identified several instructional strategies and methods used for formal reading instruction. The methods most mentioned were reading aloud, choral reading, round robin reading, and silent reading. Teachers also mentioned creative writing, phonics instruction, recitation and memorization, and discussion. These practices correlate with the descriptions of reading instruction in the historical literature on African American elementary schooling (Morris & Morris, 2000; Noblit & Dempsey, 1996; Robinson, 1978 and are also consistent with the literature on White mainstream schooling (Smith, 2002; Martinez & McGee, 2000). However, in the cross-case analysis, two components, diagnostic assessment and flexible learning environments, emerged which were not reflected in the existing literature on segregated school instruction. Further, one component of instruction, informal literacy activities, is reflected heavily in African American segregated schooling but not in the literature on mainstream schooling.

Evident in all but one account of reading instruction is the use of some form of diagnostic assessment, such as informal reading inventories, to determine a child's literacy abilities prior to grouping, a practice consistent with mainstream instruction (Smith, 2002), yet absent from the historical literature on segregated schools. Two teachers mentioned the use of self-constructed assessments to measure students' independent, instructional, and frustration levels of reading. One of the teachers, Mrs. Peters, described her home-made assessments this way:

Well, the general thing that I used to use all the time, give a child a reader and let him read 100 words and if he missed more than five it was not his independent reading level. So, don't try to assign him nothing in that because he can't read it. Missing five words out of a hundred, that was the basic one and then I had further tests.

This method of leveling is still currently in use to determine appropriate reading levels for students (Smith, 2002). Other teachers used publisher-supplied tests to assess their students' reading levels. These

publisher-supplied tests apparently came with the purchased commercial reading text series.

In addition, teachers provided flexibility in learning environments for students. This included flexible grouping, whole class, and individualized instruction. While ability grouping of students was a common practice and was recommended by the reading experts of the time (Smith, 2002), it was only one of the methods mentioned by the teachers in the study. An early elementary teacher, Mrs. Taylor, offered the following description of her ability grouping experience in one of the school. She arranged her students into three ability groups and partnered with another teacher so that one teacher could work with all the lower-achieving students while the other worked with all the higher-achieving students. The teachers alternated from year to year so that neither teacher was consistently assigned the same ability group. She commented that "back in those days it was an acceptable practice to move students back and forth among classrooms," although she had noticed that teachers today do not share their instructional responsibilities in the same manner.

Three teachers made specific reference to their use of whole class instruction, usually with the teacher reading aloud and evoking responses from the students, particularly for teaching vocabulary and comprehension. When teaching first grade, Mrs. Taylor described how she used a program in the 1960s that provided filmstrips to accompany stories, while Mrs. Peters discussed the elaborate preparations that she made in anticipation of her Friday story-hour with the students. During the discussion of whole group instruction, Mrs. Taylor stated, "We taught our stories", which prompted a description of instruction that was a combination of reading a short portion of a story and then allowing students to discuss their interpretation of the story and how the story related to their lives. The role of discussion was confirmed by both Mrs. Taylor and another teacher, Mrs. Haver, as a way of developing students' use of oral language. Mrs. Haver believed that vocabulary development was integral to her students' success. She loved engaging the children in conversations because she believed those conversations improved their language skills. For example, she encouraged discussions about the literature, about the subject they were learning, or just about themselves. She reports that she talked to them as much as they talked to her, encouraging them to think about what they wanted to do when they finished school even though they were only in the fourth grade.

Despite large classes, three of the teachers in the study set aside some time for individualized instruction in their day, a practice consistent with Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002) assertion that, in the classroom of caring African American teachers, "weak children were not left to themselves" (p.81). Individual instruction was provided for students who

had not performed well within their reading groups and needed a little extra help. One teacher had a set goal of working individually with three children a day. While this practice was specifically discussed by three of the teachers, other teachers may have felt that they addressed individual needs sufficiently through ability grouping.

Lastly, African American teachers supplemented in-class learning through informal modes of instruction. Numerous studies of segregated schools (Davis, 1996; Edwards, Royster & Bates, 1979; Robinson, 1978; Tilford-Weathers, 1982; Morris & Morris, 2000; Savage, 2001; Walker, 1996) illustrate the ways in which elementary and secondary teachers reinforced literacy by requiring recitations and performances and by encouraging students to engage in literacy-related activities and clubs that encouraged discourse in literacy. The goal of many of these public demonstrations of literacy was to motivate students to develop the facility to speak clearly and to maintain poise under pressure (Edwards, Royster, & Bates, 1979), in addition to providing parents evidence of accomplishment in school. This practice of public literacy is supported by McHenry's (2002) historical examination of African American literacy societies. McHenry's study sites the development of public displays of literacy as a tradition of sharing literacy within the community. In addition to speaking and reading, writing was also supported. Students practiced writing skills by being placed on the school newspaper or yearbook committees in most elementary and secondary schools (Davis, 1996; Edwards, Royster & Bates, 1979; Savage, 2001). While these activities likely were not exclusive to African American schools, the existence of these activities proved to be a prominent theme in the historical segregated school literature. Five of the teachers in the study had at least one form of public presentation of literacy each year. No distinction was made between those presentations that were school wide as opposed to those performed for PTA meetings or Christmas pageants. One suburban school had regularly scheduled monthly assembly programs, and two of the teachers from other schools recalled preparing presentations specifically for Negro History Week. It was also in the area of these public performances that teachers related their most embarrassing or fun moments. Mrs. Harris related humorously that the month she began her teaching assignment was the same month that her class was scheduled to present the assembly program but, luckily, one of the other teachers "bailed" her out by taking on the task. In another interview, Mrs. Peters' seeming flair for drama was evident in her students' assembly programs. She declared, "When it came my time for the assembly program, I would try to have something outstanding." She enjoyed practicing with the students and would try to make sure that they did not make any mistakes and "do real, real good." One

of her students later became an actor appearing in a well-acclaimed movie.

In addition to public performance, library use was also an integral part of three of the teachers' informal instructional activities. One of the teachers not only sent her students to the library once a week, but often borrowed large numbers of books for students to use in the classroom, occasionally inciting the wrath of the librarian. Her school was fortunate in having a library facility, fewer than 30% of all schools in the country boasted such a luxury until federal monies became available in the late 1960s (Martinez & McGee, 2000). Other teachers in the study mentioned the use of public libraries. The state of Georgia maintained a few Negro-only libraries for public use. However, it is unclear whether students in small rural towns had access to public facilities during the time frame of this study.

The final mode of informal literacy instruction that emerged from the cross-case analysis was the use of fieldtrips, although only two teachers felt these were important specifically for improving reading achievement, citing the value of building students' background knowledge for comprehension. Most teachers viewed the use of fieldtrips as a way to broaden students' knowledge of the world, which confirmed Harris' (1992) contention that African American teachers believed that literacy included the ability to understand and to participate in the sociocultural aspects of society. Fieldtrips that allowed students' to be exposed to government, music, drama, and careers outside of their neighborhoods reflected one of the ways in which this understanding of the sociocultural aspects of the greater society could be achieved. Mrs. Taylor believed that "fieldtrips made a great deal of difference to the children," then added that today there is media, such as computers and videos, and these media are used to build students' experiences outside of the classroom. The option of using media was not available 50 years ago. Mrs. Haver used her fieldtrips to go to the State Capitol or the fire station and sometimes to visit neighborhood businesses and stores within walking distance of the school. Other fieldtrips mentioned were factories and cultural sites that would allow African Americans to visit. It should also be stated that most of these trips would have funded by the parents or teacher, no funding for fieldtrips was available from public monies for African American schools until after *Brown v Board of Education*.

## Discussion

This study provided a surprising portrait of African American teachers from 1940-1970. By no means does this study excuse the neglect of the southern school boards towards African American segregated schools, rather it substantiates the agency of African American teachers in making the best of

the resources that they had despite the circumstances under which they and their students lived.

The stereotypical depiction of African American teachers prior to desegregation is one of a dedicated individual working with few and outdated materials and utilizing old-fashioned methods of teaching. This study found that despite the isolation of African American teachers from their White mainstream counterparts, there was a flow of information that allowed them to learn and utilize the most recent methodologies and strategies in reading instruction. Overall, the consistency of the use of these strategies indicates that these teachers were abreast of the trends in reading instruction that were current during the time they were teaching. The teachers in this study did not confirm these deficits in materials. This availability of materials sharply contrasts with the literature (Foster, 1990; Robinson, 1978, Savage, 2001), however, two factors may account for teacher's perceptions of adequate materials. The first is increased funding by districts to counteract the implementation of Brown v Board of Education. The second factor may have been that the gradual accumulation of materials in African American schools over the years gave teachers the perception of abundance and variety. This may account for the practice of using multiple texts in the classroom to facilitate the groupings of students and individual instruction on various levels that teachers practiced.

Surprisingly, teachers did not appear to consider racism a factor in their instruction. No mention was made of inequities in funding, though ample public records exist to attest to lower funding for African American schools prior to 1950. Yet, while it was not mentioned as a factor in instruction, clearly teachers were aware of the circumstances for African American children and worked to counteract the effects of racism on their students by choosing fieldtrips that exposed students to new ideas and environments.

In addition, while teachers did indicate that they attended separate professional development activities from their white counterparts, they expressed no concerns that their activities may have differed from their white colleagues. However, the reluctance to see themselves as less effective or less valued as teachers was consistent across interviews. The African American teachers in this study clearly expressed the belief that they delivered the best possible education to their students.

Finally, this study raises a number of additional questions regarding the practices of African American teachers and reading instruction. Such questions focus on the dissemination of current reading methodologies among the isolated African American teaching community, the value of teacher-selected reading materials as opposed to mass textbook adoptions, and the similarity of literacy practices across multiple school settings despite the

lack of professional development for African American teachers. These questions as well as others beg for deeper exploration of the historical practices of African American teachers.

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