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THE DISCONNECT OF POOR-URBAN EDUCATION: EQUAL ACCESS AND A PEDAGOGY OF RISK TAKING

PHILLIP J. BELFIORE AND RUTH AULD

Mercyhurst College

DAVID L. LEE

The Pennsylvania State University

In an age of educational accountability and school competition, the gap between current poor-urban school performance and standards of excellence remains glaringly obvious. As poor-urban schools scramble to "close the gap," many abandon sound pedagogy, becoming entrenched in a curriculum where basic-skills worksheets are the primary method of educational delivery resulting in a disconnect between pedagogically sound educational practices and those very students that need it most. Two literacy pilot programs are discussed as applied examples showing that good teaching and accountability result in increases in early reading skills as measured by the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test-Revised (R.W. Woodcock, 1998). Results are discussed in light of raised teacher expectations, assessment-driven small class grouping, and active student learning. In a supportive, challenging environment, the basis for a pedagogy of risk taking emerges. © 2005 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Although recent reports indicate some progress in closing the K–12 academic-achievement gap, poor-urban schools continue to underperform according to national averages and standards for proficiency (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Using National Assessment of Educational Progress data, the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that reading and mathematics scores continue to show disparity between national and central city public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This disparity increases when looking at the largest urban/central city public schools (e.g., Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, District of Columbia, Houston, Los Angeles, and New York City), and further increases when looking at those students eligible for free/reduced-price school lunch in these largest urban districts. For example, students at or above proficient levels in reading in the nation's public schools were 30% (fourth graders) and 30% (eighth graders); however, in central city schools the percentage drops to 20% (fourth graders) and 19% (eighth graders). In Houston and Washington, DC, for example, the percentage of students at or above proficient-in-reading benchmarks drops to 18 and 10% (fourth graders) and 10 and 10% (eighth graders), respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). When eligibility for free/reduced-price lunch becomes an added variable, fourth-grade students at or above proficient in reading from Houston and Washington, DC schools decrease to 12 and 6%, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Similar results are found with fourth- and eighth-grade mathematics and writing results across all six of the largest urban districts reporting (Lutkus, Weiner, Daane, & Jin, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

In light of federal academic-achievement data, a number of variables emerge as urban districts try to close the achievement gap. Poverty, teacher shortages, undercertified/noncertified teaching staff, chronic illness, violence, and low-level/watered-down curricula all play a part in the struggle for equity in urban education (Black & Krishmakumar, 1998; Haycock, 2000; Haycock, Jerald, & Huang, 2001; Jerald, 2002; Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Warren, 2002). Of particular importance to education reformists should be how the outcomes of such reports (as documented by Haycock and others) play on the delivery of educational services to children in poor-urban

Correspondence to: Phillip J. Belfiore, Education Division, Mercyhurst College, 501 East 38 East St., Erie, PA 16546. E-mail: belfiore@mercyhurst.edu

schools. In relationship to educational service delivery, three critical issues must be addressed: (a) the role of how teacher beliefs-behaviors drive curriculum, (b) the real utility of accountability, and (c) poor educational practices encouraging student underachievement as a direct result of (a) and (b).

There exists a unique belief-behavior system endemic to poor-urban education, when compared to non-poor, non-urban education (Freire, 1998; Haberman, 1991; Hilliard, 2003; Kunjufu, 1984; Rist, 1970; Warren, 2002). As reported, a number of teachers in poor-urban schools have a *belief* that student underachievement is a result of circumstances outside the realm of educational control (e.g., lack of parental support, teen pregnancy, lack of technology, lack of funds, economic struggles of the home, school, and/or local community, lack of student ability). As a result of such teacher beliefs, the *behavior* of teachers towards curriculum and instructional practices in poor-urban schools suffers (Freire, 1998; Haberman, 1991). Surprisingly, when urban teachers are asked, the one variable that rarely emerges in relationship to the "causes" of student underachievement is sound pedagogical practices (i.e., "Maybe the reason Johnny reads so slowly is that he has not yet had effective instruction in reading."). Following a series of teacher interviews, Warren (2002) reported low teacher expectations and lack of efficacy often resulted in lowering teaching standards, less teacher effort, and watered-down curriculum for underachieving students, especially in poor urban schools Thus, the very thing that teachers have the most control over—their power to educate—is often the last thing on the minds of teachers in poor-urban schools when questioned about why "Johnny can't read" (see Figure 1). In other words, the day-to-day teaching practices occurring in poor-urban schools play heavily in the creation of student underachievement (Perry, 2003).

Accountability in the educational system is critical for evaluative purposes. The current static approach to accountability (i.e., single posttest) must be replaced with a more dynamic accountability system. Dynamic accountability includes (a) analysis of assessment data as disaggregate, (b) analysis of assessment data as improvement (i.e., pre- and posttest analysis within 1 academic year, and/or running records of academic-year performance), and more importantly, (c) using assessment data to differentiate instruction. Although No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2004) requires disaggregate data, the real challenge for urban schools is to use those data to target unique groupings of students so individual differences can be noted, flexible groupings can be organized, and differential practices can be implemented. Improvement data allow accountability to target not only performance but more importantly, improvement within the school year. Accountability, using standards-based assessment to drive instruction, must take into account where children began to better evaluate where they are and how fast they are getting there.

Compound this belief-behavior misconception with the current wave of static, stand-alone accountability and we begin to see a widespread abandonment of any remnants of sound pedagogy, replaced by curriculum weak in challenge and pessimistic in expectation (Haberman, 1991; Hilliard, 2003). While non-urban and non-poor schools continue to take for granted rich, cross-curricular and extracurricular opportunities (Cuban, 2004), poor-urban schools, in fear of federal consequences, are providing increased basics-only, paper-and-pencil practice in test-specific content (e.g., reading and mathematics). Poor teaching practices requiring only the basic levels of knowledge comprehension by students undercut any real accountability efforts mandated from state and federal levels (Hilliard, 2003). Educational practices that (a) increase time on meaningful task, (b) allow for increased active opportunities to respond to academic-specific content, and (c) increase teacher and caregiver support have been shown to be effective in poor-urban schools (e.g., Belfiore & Agramonte, 2002; Campbell-Whatley & Comer, 2000; Hutchinson & Belfiore, 1998).

Educational risk taking, the ability to challenge oneself by raising the educational bar, is within reach when poor-urban schools realize they must foster in students a history of academic

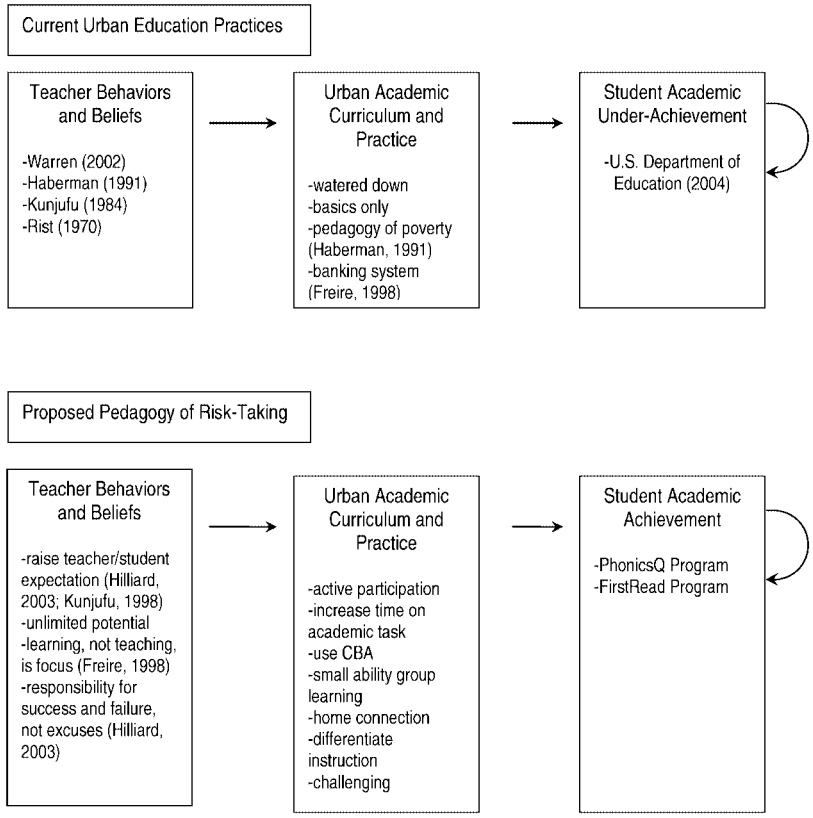

FIGURE 1. Uni-directional flow in poor-urban education: teacher behavior-beliefs influence urban academic curriculum which directly impacts student achievement.

success and establish in schools an environment rich in reward (i.e., challenge and support). If we are to close the academic gap between the underachievement of students enrolled in poor-urban schools and the potential of those students, we need to provide the opportunity for those students to experience academic success early and often.

The purpose of this article is to present two early literacy programs as examples of how sound pedagogy can close content-specific achievement gaps in poor-urban schools. Numerous researchers have suggested reading as a pivotal academic skill, permeating all academic content and stabilizing and leveraging opportunities for students to learn (e.g., Roller, 2000; Simmons & Kameenui, 1998). Additionally, researchers have suggested a phonological approach to early reading achievement is critical (Belfiore & Agramonte, 2002; Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001; Sener & Belfiore, 2005).

THE FIRSTREAD PROGRAM

FirstRead was designed as a twofold enriched literacy program consisting of an after-school component meeting two times per week (2:30–4:00 p.m.), and a parental home-support component. The after-school program was designed to target literacy and socialization skills for academically at-risk students. The key to literacy in the FirstRead program was a phonemic approach

using explicit instruction delivered in small reading-ability groups on initial sounds, end sounds, rhyming, and vowel–consonant families (e.g., /at/, /en/, /op/). Increased time also was spent on writing as well as individual and paired reading. In addition, initial grouping was determined and monthly progress was monitored using curriculum-based assessment (CBA) on reading fluency and reading level. Socialization targeted the same phonemic skills, but in the context of word and board games and creative writing activities, with college students serving as mentors. The home-support program consisted of monthly parent meetings to discuss after-school progress in reading, consultation with parents to read at home with the child, and a free book per monthly meeting giveaway. The book giveaway was in place to help establish a home library and give parents ideas about home reading programs.

Three classroom teachers and three to five college mentors provided instruction during the Monday and Wednesday afterschool component. The three after-school classroom teachers also were responsible for the parent home-program component.

Students and Setting

FirstRead was implemented in an urban parochial school. Enrollment at the K–8 school was 178, with 69% of the students eligible for the federal free/reduced-price lunch program. Fourteen students at risk for academic failure were identified for participation in the program. Three students from the first-grade classrooms were identified from observational and grade reports provided by the first-grade teacher. Eleven students from second-, third-, and fourth-grade classrooms were identified by scores obtained from pretest Woodcock Reading Mastery Test (Woodcock, 1998) scores. Of the 11 students from second, third, and fourth grades, all but 3 students were at least one grade level below their current enrolled grade as indicated on any one of the Woodcock Reading Mastery subtest [Two students (second grade) were not pretested, but referred by the classroom teacher, and 1 student (third grade) was a half-year below current grade level, but was identified by the classroom teacher as needing additional reading support.] All instruction and assessment for the FirstRead program was carried out at the K–8 parochial school by the classroom teachers.

Method of Evaluation

The Woodcock Reading Mastery Test-Revised/NU (WRMT-R/NU; Woodcock, 1998) was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the FirstRead program. The WRMT-R/NU is a comprehensive battery of tests measuring important aspects of reading ability. Scores are arranged into clusters, with each cluster containing two subtests: (a) Readiness Cluster (Visual–Auditory Learning and Letter Identification), (b) Basic Skills Cluster (Word Identification and Word Attack), (c) Reading Comprehension Cluster (Word Comprehension and Passage Comprehension), and (d) Total Reading Cluster (Basic Skills and Reading Comprehension Clusters).

Because the FirstRead program was developed for reading fluency and comprehension, only the Basic Skills and Reading Comprehension Clusters were administered. Pretest data were collected during the first week of November 1999, with posttest data collected the first week of June 2000. Total length of FirstRead implementation was 7 months (i.e., 0.7 of the academic school year).

Results and Summary of the FirstRead Program

Pretest and posttest results from the WRMT-R/NU were analyzed using a paired *t*-test procedure. The Bonferroni correction was used to hold experimentwise error to $p < .05$. Because there were five comparisons, the significance level was set at $p < .01$ for each comparison (Keppel, 1991).

The purpose of the primary analysis was to determine the effects of FirstRead on overall reading scores. Of primary importance, the posttest scores for the Total Reading Cluster were significantly higher than pretest scores, $t(8) = 6.40$, $p = .0002$, indicating reading achievement gains for students in the FirstRead program (see Table 1 and Figure 2). Scores from both the Basic Skills Cluster and the Comprehension Cluster also were analyzed. Pretest/posttest differences were found for the Basic Reading Cluster, $t(8) = 7.31$, $p = .0001$, but not for the Comprehension Cluster, $t(8) = 2.13$, $p = .066$.

Results of the FirstRead program showed that significant progress can be achieved in slightly less than 1 school year when working with children from poor-urban schools when schools and parents promote the same academic agenda. By creating a literacy-rich environment coupled with hands-on, active-participation, ability-level grouping and the support of school and home, students identified as at risk for academic failure and those students at least one grade level behind increased time on task. In turn, the increased time on literacy tasks resulted in increased success with literacy. In addition to the test results, increased success was anecdotally noted by after-school teachers, other school teachers, and parents during the monthly meetings.

The PhonicsQ System

The PhonicsQ System (2000) is a commercially available visual-learning system designed to help students link the phonemes of oral language and the graphemes of written language to decode, encode, and produce new words. The materials include wall posters consisting of picture/letter(s) cues grouped as alphabet, single vowels, consonant combinations (e.g., /bl/, /sm/, /tw/), and vowel combinations (e.g., /ai/, /oy/, /ue/). The program also contains (a) 116 stimulus display cards grouped as alphabet, short vowels, consonant blends, digraphs, ending and vowel combinations, open syllable, long vowels, vowel-consonant *e*, and less common single-vowel sounds, (b) blackline cue sheets, and (c) audiotapes for pronunciation cues.

The PhonicsQ was initiated in January 2002 and continued through the end of the academic year (May 2002). Student ability groups were initially determined through CBA. PhonicsQ was used directly to supplement daily literacy instruction already ongoing at the school. As a supplement in small ability-level groups, PhonicsQ was used in shared reading and guided reading. When working individually, teachers used PhonicsQ as added academic time on task though explicit teacher-directed instruction and hands-on activities. Wall charts were accessible references when students worked independently throughout the day across other curriculum areas.

Table 1
Results for the 6-Month FirstRead Program: Pretest/Posttest Means and SDs Woodcock Reading Mastery Test (Total Reading, Basic Skills, and Reading Comprehension Clusters, and Individual Subtests)

	Pretest		Posttest	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Total Reading	86.67	5.45	92.00	4.30
Basic Skills Cluster	85.56	5.03	91.89	4.08
Word Identification	87.33	5.24	91.00	4.21
Work Attack	86.56	5.00	95.67	4.39
Reading Comprehension Cluster	87.67	7.78	91.33	8.79
Word Comprehension	86.11	9.18	93.22	8.04
Passage Comprehension	89.00	6.20	90.88	9.27

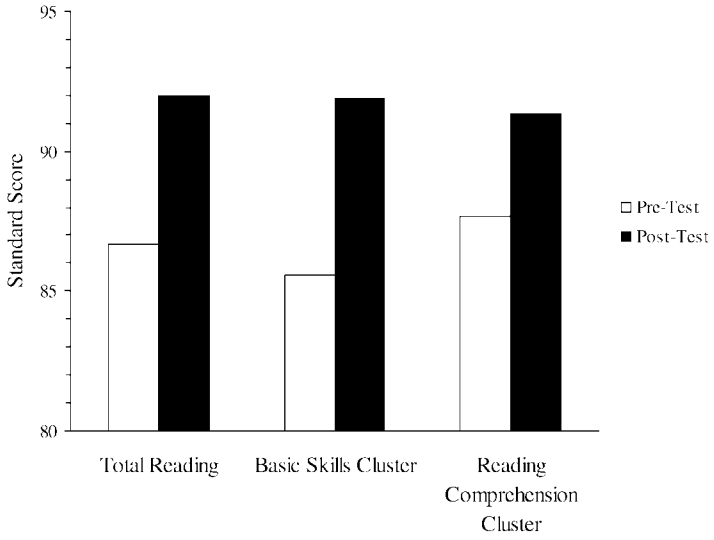

FIGURE 2. Mean standard score WRMT-R/NU for FirstRead program

Students and Setting

The PhonicsQ was integrated into the second-grade program, enrolling 43 students in two classrooms of a K–8 urban public school with 94% of the student population eligible for the federal free/reduced-price lunch program. Due to student movement within the local school district and the state as well as outside the state, only 28 students completed the entire program (i.e., 65% of the 43 original students in the second grade at the start of the program). All instruction and assessment occurred on site and was implemented by the classroom teaching staff.

Method of Evaluation

The WRMT-R/NU also was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the PhonicsQ. Because the PhonicsQ was developed for early phonemic/reading readiness, only the Readiness and Basic Skills Clusters of the WRMT-R/NU were administered.

RESULTS AND SUMMARY OF THE PHONICSQ

A paired *t*-test procedure, similar to that employed in the first study, was used to analyze PhonicsQ data. A Bonferroni correction was similarly employed to hold experimentwise error for the PhonicsQ analysis to $p < .05$. Because there were two comparisons, the significance level was set at $p < .025$ for each comparison (Keppel, 1991).

The analysis of the PhonicsQ data yielded pre/posttest differences for the Readiness Cluster, $t(26) = -2.39$, $p = .024$ (pretest $M = 97.56$, $SD = 5.68$; posttest $M = 102.04$, $SD = 11.87$); however, no differences were found for the Basic Skills Cluster, $t(26) = .174$, $p = .863$ (pretest $M = 101.56$, $SD = 15.10$; posttest $M = 101.30$, $SD = 18.10$).

Results of the PhonicsQ showed pre- to posttest improvement for reading readiness only. As with the FirstRead program, the PhonicsQ demonstrated how sound instructional practices within CBA-driven grouping, embedded within multiple content areas, result in significant reading readiness progress within less than 1 school year.

General Discussion

Freire (1998) and McLaren (2000) strongly suggested that there is no teaching without student learning. Given this as an educational benchmark, instructional implementation in poor-urban schools should be called to question. In addition, without student learning, as evident in the academic achievement gap, educational accountability (i.e., No Child Left Behind) in poor-urban schools needs reexamination. When assessing the accountability of both the FirstRead and PhonicsQ programs on literacy achievement of academically at-risk students enrolled in poor-urban schools, students showed positive as well as statistically significant gains in less than 1 school year. Teachers using reading CBA data to drive student grouping and instruction demonstrated sound teaching practices (e.g., teacher-directed, hands-on instruction, active participation, increased time on academic task) differentiated to the ability groupings. Accountability, as a critical assessment, was able to be documented because student learning was the priority. Using assessment data, teachers were better able to group and instruct all students.

Given the current existence of a learning gap between poor-urban school students and standards of proficiency/mastery, educators and reformers have at least three options to consider. First, we can maintain the status quo, believing we have little control over the academic achievement of students in poor-urban schools (e.g., Warren, 2002), resulting in a continued watering-down of curriculum—what Haberman (1991) called a pedagogy of poverty—and a disregard for accountability. Second, we can attempt to implement existing, successful programs designed for students to begin to achieve at levels equal with non-urban, non-poor schools. If we are a morally just educational system, the first option can neither continue nor be considered. The second option results in parallel growth with non-urban/non-poor schools, but because many students in poor-urban schools start out underprepared, this does not close the existing gap. Additionally, related to the second option, Hilliard (2003) stressed this gap (i.e., poor vs. non-poor, urban vs. non-urban) is not the critical analysis. Rather, Hilliard (2003) stressed educators must critically examine the gap between the current level of underachievement and potential academic levels of excellence within the underachieving group. The last option, and the only one that is educationally responsible, is to (a) establish pedagogically sound, assessment-driven programs uniquely differentiated to meet the needs of all students while (b) creating working caregiver partnerships where educational expectations are raised and supported at home and at school. This last option was demonstrated in the two pilot literacy programs presented earlier.

This third option begins with (a) teachers believing all children have the potential to learn, which in turn results in (b) teacher designing and implementing pedagogically sound practices that (c) create an academically challenging (i.e., not watered-down) curriculum (see Figure 1). Within a challenging, educatively supportive curriculum, students increase academic performance, which in turn increases self-efficacy and, ultimately reaching the goal of all urban education, an increase in the academic risk taking of students.

The third option requires educators to be in the business of helping children "run faster." Gaps in academic achievement cannot be closed until this is believed and then acted upon in poor-urban schools. Although small in sample size and without a control comparison group, the two pilot programs discussed in this article begin to provide a framework for success. To "run faster," educational reformers must address two critical variables: choice and persistence. Choice requires the creation of rich and rewarding situations, where students select school academic behavior over non-school/non-academic behavior. Poor-urban schools must become places where children want to engage in academics. To understand this, these schools must compete with the rewards available for selecting non-school and non-academic options. For example, the FirstRead program rewarded students for attending the program by providing more academic instruction

with more instructional support and attention (by teachers and college students). Attendance for the after-school component of the program was near 100%. Given the choice between going home, playing with friends, or watching television, the students who enrolled in the FirstRead program selected more school time and more school work. We cannot close the gap unless children see academics as important and they respond by making the choice to participate.

Choice gets students in the door, and persistence keeps them engaged in the face of obstacles in and out of school. Experimental research has demonstrated that behavior will persist (i.e., more resistant to change) in the face of disruption when the antecedent condition in which that behavior occurs is more rewarding (Nevin, 1992). Poor-urban education must begin a campaign to foster educational environments rich in academic challenge and support, similar to the FirstRead and PhonicsQ programs. The more time spent in these supportive and challenging educational environments, the more persistent children will become in the face of school and non-school disruptions and distractions. In this type of "resistance to change" classroom or school, students faced with (a) potential disruption (i.e., difficult, novel, or advanced academic work) or (b) outside distractions (i.e., substitute teacher, peer pressure) will resist the opportunity to quit, thus sustaining academic engagement and setting the stage for academic excellence.

Understanding academic achievement as choice and persistence within the context of sound pedagogy stressing excellence and support is the first step to equal educational access for all students. Hilliard (2003) stated that we have the educational expertise to academically challenge and support all children. Now it is a matter of will.

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