Mr. Baird and Ms. Lawson, both European American monolingual English-speaking teachers from suburbs in the Midwest, teach sixth grade at Washington Heights Middle School in urban Michigan (names represent composite teachers and school). Almost 85% of the young adolescents at Washington Heights are African American, and most of these middle level students speak African American English (Alim & Baugh, 2007). The remaining 15% of the young adolescents at the school are Latino, Asian American, European American, and Middle Eastern.

The students in Mrs. Baird’s and Ms. Lawson’s classrooms roughly mirror the overall racial make-up of the school. Both teachers have a reputation for working hard and caring about their students; however, the students in one of these classrooms are much more successful literacy learners. Let’s take a quick look inside each of their classrooms to explore which teacher’s instructional practices are most conducive to effective literacy learning for young adolescents from nondominant backgrounds and why.

Ms. Lawson’s Classroom Literacy Program

Ms. Lawson groups her middle level students by instructional needs and works with them in small reading groups using her district’s adopted basal text. She also has daily silent reading for approximately 20 minutes, and she reads aloud to her students several times per week. In addition to the writing that her students are asked to do associated with their basal texts, Ms. Lawson’s students write in journals daily. Usually she provides the journal prompts for her students; at times, however, she allows her students to select their own writing topics. Ms. Lawson reads and responds to one-fifth of her students’ journals each night so that by the end of the week, Ms. Lawson has read and responded to each child’s journal. Ms. Lawson wants to prepare her students for college and future employment. She believes that her students will have more opportunities if they speak and write Standard English. Consequently, whenever her students do not speak or write Standard English correctly, she corrects them.

Mrs. Baird’s Classroom Literacy Program

Reading

Mrs. Baird intentionally groups her young adolescents in heterogeneous groups for collaborative tasks and by instructional needs for daily guided reading groups (Schulman, 2006). However, during those daily guided reading groups, Mrs. Baird uses children’s books (both narrative and informational) that are not only appropriate for her students’ reading levels, but that reflect her students’ interests. Additionally, Mrs. Baird uses informational texts for guided reading, and she strives to link the topics and issues that her students are learning in social studies and science to their reading, writing, and discussions during guided reading.
Like Ms. Lawson, Mrs. Baird has daily silent reading in her classroom for approximately 20 minutes, but she uses that time differently. Whereas Ms. Lawson uses those 20 minutes to grade papers, Mrs. Baird spends about 10 minutes reading her own book (Jacobs & Tunnell, 2000), and the other 10 minutes providing instructional support to her students; for example, she might help them learn to choose appropriate books for silent reading time or listen to individual students read excerpts of text and suggest various strategies (i.e., pertaining to fluency, comprehension, and decoding) that they can use in their own reading (Worthy, Broaddus, & Ivey, 2001).

Unlike Ms. Lawson, Mrs. Baird’s overall classroom literacy program includes Book Club, an instructional framework for using children’s literature meaningfully in the classroom. Approximately three times per week, students read quality children’s literature written at various reading levels and centered around particular themes. Among the books that Mrs. Baird has used during Book Club are The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 (Curtis, 2000), Elijah of Buxton (Curtis, 2007), Monster (Myers, 1999), and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Taylor, 1976/2004). While the teacher usually chooses the focus theme for a Book Club unit, students have choices regarding the books they read within each theme, as long as the books are appropriate for each child’s reading level.

A typical Book Club lesson might include whole-group community share; time for reading, writing, and discussing in small peer-led groups; and closing whole-group community share. During the initial whole-group community share, the teacher provides instruction in any of the components of a Book Club lesson that are appropriate for the entire class—background information pertaining to the focus theme, norms for engaging in meaningful peer-led discussions, etc. During reading time (which may be 10 to 20 minutes), students can read silently, partner read, listen to their book on tape at a listening center (if their text is above their reading level), and so forth. Next, students write in their Book Club logs about some aspect of their reading, focusing on writing prompts that are sometimes chosen by the teacher and sometimes chosen by the students. After writing, the students move to their small peer-led discussion groups—the heart of Book Club—to discuss their reading. During this time, the teacher circulates around the classroom to note the topics and issues that students are raising and discussing. Finally, during closing community share, the teacher raises important topics, issues, and concerns with the whole class that emerged during small-group discussions.

**Writing**

Like Ms. Lawson, Mrs. Baird asks her young adolescents to write daily; however, Mrs. Baird implements writing workshop in her classroom (Tompkins, 2008). The major components of writing workshop in Mrs. Baird’s classroom include daily read-alouds (whereby Mrs. Baird reads literature to model the kinds of writing she is teaching her students), minilessons (either small- or whole-group—depending on her students’ writing needs—where she models writing skills and strategies her students can use in their own writing), daily individual writing time, and sharing time (Tompkins, 2008).

While Mrs. Baird’s students engage in journal writing, they also learn letter writing, persuasive writing, information writing, narrative writing, and poetry writing. The class is currently creating a book of poetry that they will perform for their parents during Back-to-School Night. For example, Mrs. Baird introduced Found Poems by first reading Maniac Magee (Spinelli, 1999) aloud to her students.

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Then, during a daily minilesson, she used an excerpt from *Maniac Magee* to demonstrate how to write a Found Poem—select an especially poignant section of text, circle the most important words (to the writer) in that section, and then arrange them as a poem (see Fig. 1). After demonstrating how to write a Found Poem, Mrs. Baird then invited her students to use *Maniac Magee*, the different books the students were reading for Book Club, and/or the books that they were reading for daily silent reading to create their own Found Poems. After the Back-to-School night performance, each child will receive a copy of the class poetry book to take home.

Like Ms. Lawson, Mrs. Baird knows that her students will have increased schooling and employment opportunities if they speak and write Standard English in addition to their home languages and language varieties. Unlike Ms. Lawson, however, *Mrs. Baird does not believe that Standard English should replace the languages and language varieties that her students speak.* Rather, *Mrs. Baird knows that the languages and language varieties that students speak are part of their identities and the identities of their families and communities* (Delpit, 1995). Consequently, Mrs. Baird adopts an additive approach to her students’ language (Valenzuela, 1999). By that we mean that *Mrs. Baird values and honors the languages and language varieties that her young adolescents come to school speaking and/or writing* (Gee, 2007). If her students do not speak a standard variety of English, she seeks to help them add that language variety to their repertoire of language varieties (Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2007; Gee, 2007).

Of course, Mrs. Baird also teaches her students to use academic registers pertaining to social studies and science in her weekly instruction (Brock, Lapp, Salas, & Townsend, 2009). How does she do that? We revisit Mrs. Baird’s overall classroom literacy instructional program to illustrate just one of the many different meaningful ways that she strives to help all of the middle level students in her classroom add language varieties to their existing language repertoires.

**Using *Elijah of Buxton* during Book Club**

When students are reading *Elijah of Buxton* (Curtis, 2007) in Book Club, Mrs. Baird focuses a whole-group minilesson on showing how the award-winning children’s author Christopher Paul Curtis uses different language varieties in his own life and work. For example, Mrs. Baird might first show the class the following excerpt of dialogue from the text:

I said, “Pa, Old Flapjack just got wind of some folks in the trees off to the east.”

Pa didn’t quit working nor look ’round nor act like I’d talked to him, he just said, “Is they white?”

“No, sir.”

*Figure 1.* To introduce Found Poems, Mrs. Baird wrote this example based on a reading from *Maniac Magee.*
“How many of ‘em is they?”

“All I saw was two, sir. Looks like a man and a boy.”

Pa said, “Cooter, head on back and find where Emma Collins is at. Tell her she needed. Don’t be looking back, and once you’re out of sight, run hard.” (p. 155)

Mrs. Baird then contrasts the author’s ability to use African American English (Alim & Baugh, 2007) in this excerpt of text with his choice to use a variety of Standard English in an interview at the end of his book. When asked how his book *Elijah of Buxton* came about, the author stated the following:

“... When I write, I like to put myself in the place of a character and try to imagine what that person’s life would be like. But I’m just not able to imagine what it would be like to be a slave, to be completely dehumanized—and even words, to have to teach your children that they too have to give up their humanity.”

Mrs. Baird uses concrete examples such as these within the meaningful literacy framework that she has created in her classroom to help her students understand how successful people—like Christopher Paul Curtis—have a command of a variety of language repertoires that they can draw on in different contexts for different purposes.

**Relationships between Beliefs and Practices**

Even though Mrs. Baird and Ms. Lawson engage in some of the same literacy activities in their classrooms, you have likely discerned that the students in Mrs. Baird’s classroom are the more successful literacy learners. Let’s take a look at some of Mrs. Baird’s underlying beliefs about language, literacy, and learning that undergird her effective instructional practices and decisions. *Mrs. Baird understands that beliefs matter; in fact, as Mrs. Baird knows, our underlying beliefs as teachers—examined or unexamined (and our unexamined beliefs can be the most dangerous ones with respect to mitigating against student learning)—shape our actions in the classroom* (Adger et al., 2007; Beach, Campano, Edmiston, & Borgmann, 2010; Gee, 2007).

**Beliefs about Language**

Mrs. Baird understands that no speakers of English speak in some “idealized” or “pure” form of English; rather, all English speakers use varieties of English in their everyday acts of communication (Adger et al., 2007; Hymes, 1974). Moreover, the language varieties that people speak are acquired by “adopting the speech features of those around them, not by failing in their attempts to adopt ‘standard’ language features” (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998, p. 7). Additionally, according to linguists, language varieties, like African American English (AAE), are systematic, regular, and rule governed; consequently, the negative stigma associated with AAE in mainstream America is a social issue, not a linguistic one (Adger et al., 2007; Gee, 2007). Thus, because Mrs. Baird recognizes and values AAE, as well as the other languages and language varieties that her students speak, she does not view her students’ languages as something to eradicate; rather, she views their language backgrounds as important foundations on which to build.

Mrs. Baird’s beliefs about language impact her interactions with students regarding their language use. That is, Mrs. Baird does not correct her young adolescents when they use AAE, or other language varieties, in her classroom. Au (1993) asserts that when teachers focus on correcting a student’s speech, they run the risk of alienating “children from school learning situations by subtly rejecting their speech. Teachers can discourage children by constantly correcting their speech and by implying [perhaps unintentionally, in many cases] that they know very little” (p. 131). Mrs. Baird further recognizes that by attending to the “correct” form of language rather than to the meaning that can be constructed through language use, students learning English—or varieties of English, as an additional language or language variety—may come to believe that form is more important than content. Instead of correcting her students, Mrs. Baird pro-
vides myriad examples (and identifies features of those examples) of the different varieties of language that she wants them to learn.

Beliefs about Literacy

Mrs. Baird does not believe in an autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1984). An autonomous model of literacy holds that literacy can be taught as a discrete set of skills, transmitted in isolation, and divorced from meaningful contexts (Beach et al., 2010). Rather, Mrs. Baird believes that literacy is embedded in particular practices in specific contexts (Gee, 2007). As a concrete example, one might point out that just because one can read, write, and speak does not mean that one can be a lawyer. Being a lawyer requires using reading, writing, and speaking in particular ways that are unique to that particular community of practice.

Mrs. Baird applies this logic to her instructional practices by teaching her middle level students to read and write in a variety of genres; she understands that the norms for writing poetry, for instance, are not the same as the norms for writing a persuasive essay. As Mrs. Baird’s use of Elijah of Buxton (Curtis, 2007) illustrates, she also believes that “there are many different ways to be literate but some have more capital in schools than others” (Beach et al., 2010, p. 14). That is, Mrs. Baird tells her students that Christopher Paul Curtis’s ability to use both AAE and a variety of Standard English is a tremendous asset in his life and work. Finally, Mrs. Baird believes that the many ways to be literate extend beyond just print-based literacy. She includes digital, visual, audio, and performed texts as important avenues to literacy in her classroom (Beach et al., 2010).

Beliefs about Teaching and Learning

Mrs. Baird believes that students learn best when she provides appropriate modeling and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). That is one of the reasons that she spends part of silent reading time each day reading her own book; she believes that by modeling a love of reading, she will encourage her students to develop a love of reading (Jacobs & Tunnell, 2000). With respect to scaffolding, every component of Mrs. Baird’s literacy instructional program—even down to the ways she helps her students learn to choose appropriate books during silent reading time—includes thoughtful and measured scaffolding designed to work with her students at their conceptual level in order to move them forward (Vygotsky, 1978). Mrs. Baird also knows that “literacy learning best occurs when students are engaged in meaningful activities that have authentic purposes” (Beach et al., 2010, p. 15). Moreover, Mrs. Baird also believes that students will be more motivated to learn when that which they are asked to learn has relevance to their lives (Beach et al., 2010). Consequently, during Book Club lessons, Mrs. Baird uses culturally relevant texts that are meaningful to her young adolescents. During writing workshop, Mrs. Baird asks her students to read and write for meaningful purposes—like preparing a performance for parents at Back-to-School Night.

We end with a central point pertaining to Mrs. Baird’s beliefs about literacy teaching and learning: Mrs. Baird loves to learn, and she sees herself as a lifelong learner. She assumes an inquiry stance toward her work as a teacher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), and is a member of a small and informal teacher-inquiry group. She and three of her friends meet monthly to discuss books and articles that they have agreed to read. They also bring samples of their students’ work to discuss, and they share and sort through thorny problems of practice. When asked about her work as a teacher, Mrs. Baird replies, “I love teaching and learning; I guess my love of learning rubs off on my young adolescents!”

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Notes

1. Almost 90% of teachers in American public schools are European American monolingual speakers of English; consequently, Mrs. Baird and Ms. Lawson represent the “norm” with respect to the teachers teaching children in American schools (Au & Raphael, 2000; Cummins, 2000).

2. While we realize that these children’s books are written by African American writers, we wish to point out that these are just some examples of the culturally authentic children’s books that Mrs. Baird uses in her classroom. We noted these choices because most of Mrs. Baird’s children are African American. Mrs. Baird also uses other culturally authentic children’s literature written by a wide variety of authors.

3. The order in which teachers structure Book Club lessons can vary, depending on teachers’ instructional goals. This particular order serves as but one example of a structure for a Book Club lesson.

References


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