

---

## Invisibility: An Unintended Consequence of Standards, Tests, and Mandates

Laurie Elish-Piper, [laurieep@niu.edu](mailto:laurieep@niu.edu)  
Northern Illinois University, Illinois, USA

Mona W. Matthews, [rmatthews@gsu.edu](mailto:rmatthews@gsu.edu)  
Georgia State University, Georgia, USA

Victoria J. Risko, [victoria.j.risko@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:victoria.j.risko@vanderbilt.edu)  
Vanderbilt University, Tennessee, USA

### Abstract

---

As elementary and middle school teachers and students face standards, high-stakes testing, accountability, and one-size-fits all curricula, concerns have arisen that these practices limit the relevance and efficacy of teaching and learning. In this paper, we argue that such practices exact personal costs on students and the teachers expected to implement them. With data from a series of studies implemented across several years, we show how such practices too often create an instructional climate that, in effect, renders teachers and students invisible and nonessential to the literacy instruction that occurs in the classroom. First, we discuss the research that grounds our thinking. Then, we describe three approaches that can overcome invisibility for both students and teachers: teaching with students' hearts and heads in mind, promoting culturally responsive pedagogy, and creating a productive literacy environment. We conclude with portraits of three teachers, who in spite of external pressures create literacy instruction that makes their students' capabilities visible in their classroom instruction.

**Key words:** invisibility, high-stakes testing, teaching as relational

Please cite this article as:

Elish-Piper, L., Matthews, M. W., & Risko, V. J. (2013). Invisibility: An unintended consequence of standards, tests, and mandates. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 9(2), 4-23. Available at <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/>

*My teacher doesn't know who I am, what I like, or how I think. It makes it hard for me to learn in her class because I don't think she cares. I mean, how much time would it take for her to get to know me...even just a little? --- Ben 6<sup>th</sup> grade student*

Ben shared his insights with us during a series of studies we undertook to understand how students, teachers, and parents viewed the reading instruction and experiences provided in schools (Bass, Dasinger, Elish-Piper, Matthews, & Risko, 2008). Ben's comments were not unique; in fact, many students told us their teachers did not know or care about them as individuals. Ben and his peers reported that their teachers rarely strayed from their lesson plans and failed to build the type of relationships associated with students' positive attitudes, increased engagement, and achievement (Meyers, 2009). We soon learned this was only half the story.

*I have all of these great ideas about what I want to do to make my students avid readers and writers, but I seem to spend all day working like a robot to get them ready for tests, for the standards, for the next grade level, but I am worried that I am not preparing them for life. – Jessica 6<sup>th</sup> grade language arts teacher.*

Like Jessica, many teachers in our studies expressed their concerns about how high stakes testing, scripted curricula, boxed intervention programs, and larger class sizes left them feeling disempowered and disconnected from their students. These comments were similar to those expressed by teachers with whom we, as literacy teacher-educators, work. Soon we began to see commonalities among concerns expressed by teachers, who feel disempowered and disconnected, and students, who wondered if their teachers cared about them and their learning.

As we read and reread the teachers' and students' comments, we searched for a word to capture their meaning and that expressed the personal experiences teachers and students reported. *Invisible* served both purposes. To be invisible, according to *Merriam-Webster online dictionary* (n.d.), means "ignored, unable to be seen, not taken into consideration." Franklin (1999) defines invisibility as "...the feeling that one's talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued or even recognized" (p. 761). Students spoke of feeling absent or invisible in the school literacy instruction and activities—activities with little or no relevance to their out-of-school lives. Teachers spoke of mandates that interfered with or even removed their ability to take time to cultivate communication and community in their classrooms. Teachers' and their students' goals remained invisible and were not initiated in the push to cover standardized curricula or prepare for high-stakes assessments. Our findings of students and teachers feeling powerless and invisible mirror those reported by Cummins (2001) and Hargreaves (2001).

Missing from the stories of students and teachers we interviewed was a vision of what Lake (2012) described as "teaching as relational," (loc. 873). Lake drew heavily on Noddings' (2005) extensive writings on the importance of teachers forming caring relationships with their students. When this premise guided instruction, Lake (2012) suggested, "Learning is never static but personal and multidimensional in ways that motivate both the 'carer and the cared for'" (loc. 873). Such instruction made students' capabilities, needs, and identities visible while supporting teachers' efforts to develop caring relationships with their students (Freire, 1998). Literacy educators, such as Santa (2006) and Short (1996), asserted that teaching is predominantly a

relationship. Noddings (2005), whose educational purview extends beyond literacy, considered care an essential aspect of the educational process. Research clearly identifies the benefits to students when their teachers foster a sense of belonging. When students feel accepted, valued, and respected, they exhibit more positive attitudes toward learning (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch (1994); enhanced motivation (Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2006), and increased academic achievement (Langer, 2001).

Unfortunately, many US teachers find their efforts to develop caring and supportive relationships with their students thwarted by external pressures—pressures resulting from what Ravitch (2012) referenced as corporate-style reform (p. 12) and Apple (2004) saw as the politicalization of schools. The consequence, they argued, of when national policies and mandates (Taubman, 2009) assumed greater influence over education than local needs or concerns. External efforts to control what happens in classrooms are most evident in curricular standards and testing.

### **Consequences of Standards and Tests: Unintended? Perhaps. Consequential? You Bet!**

Over the last three decades, curricular standards and the dual use of tests to evaluate student performance as well as teacher quality have been at the center of attempts to transform education (Taubman, 2009). The goal of standards-based instruction, implemented in US schools since the early 1990s, was to ensure equitable instruction, access to common standards, and set high expectations for the success of all students (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Yet these ambitions have produced mixed and unintended results with wide variability in the quality and content of instruction and tests used to measure achievement (Bandeira de Mello, 2011). Specific analyses of curricula designed to meet requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB, 2001) indicated a failure to reduce achievement gaps, little support for teachers to differentiate instruction, and punitive consequences for failure to meet adequate yearly progress (Guisbond, Neill & Schaeffer, 2012). High-stakes testing, associated with national policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act, aligned with a narrowing of curricula, increased controls of teacher actions, and less attention to students and their unique differences (Perlstein, 2007).

Too often efforts to standardize curricula have led to what Pianta referred to as “the narrowing of the educational design space,” (Martin, 2013) a consequence he attributes to viewing learning as a solely cognitive process devoid of any social, emotional or developmental influences. The result is students and teachers fade into the background as standards, tests, and mandates take center stage.

More recently, 45 states in the US have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (NGA, 2010). Central to the CCSS are the goals to build on and “broaden world views” of students (NGA, 2010, p. 3), depart from narrow curricula, advance higher level thinking across disciplines, and build knowledge in ways that relate to students’ experiences, questions, and imaginations. The CCSS identifies students’ histories, goals, and experiences as important for enhancing both knowledge and engagement with multiple texts and critical thinking. Empirical evidence suggests that an emphasis on critical thinking while integrating language arts with other disciplines, such as history, is associated with student-centered teaching (Au, 2007). Given these

goals and related research, we are hopeful that the CCSS will move instruction in directions that ensures high achievement and places students at the heart of instruction.

Even if the goals to build on, “broaden world views,” and advance critical thinking resonate with teachers, the demands of testing will likely stymie their efforts to actualize those goals (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Tests establish promotion and graduation guidelines, determine curriculum, and their scores reflect student performance. In 1982, Apple warned such practices lead to the deskilling of teachers, when districts, in an effort to standardize teaching, purchase packaged scripted programs that determine for teachers what to teach, how to teach it, and even at times, what to say. Time has not mitigated Apple’s (2004) concerns. As recently as 2013, he discussed how the continued and expanded use of scripted, reductive programs, accompanied by worksheets, books, tests, and curricular management teachers, remove teachers further from the conceptual work of teaching, relegating teachers to executing, rather than conceiving, reflecting, and adapting the curriculum (Apple, 2013).

In this paper, we argue that these practices create an instructional climate that renders too many teachers and students invisible. Within these climates, teachers and students do not develop personal relationships, and, too often, students do not see connections between what they are learning and their personal lives. First, we discuss how our previous research informs our thinking about the rights of readers and students’ access to meaningful connections to what they are reading and learning. Then we define what it means to feel invisible, and we consider three approaches to overcome invisibility for both students and teachers: teaching with students’ hearts and heads in mind, promoting culturally relevant pedagogy, and creating a productive literacy caring environment. We conclude with portraits of three teachers who demonstrate how to establish caring relationships with their students while enabling and deepening learning. Throughout we borrow from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1947) to convey the process whereby invisibility results.

### **Understanding the Issues**

Over a decade ago, we encountered the book *Better Than Life* (Pennac, 1999) that chronicled how the author’s son, a once-avid young reader, lost interest, as reading became a chore to be completed for school. Pennac (1999) proposed a series of readers’ rights based on his concerns about his son’s disengagement from reading. Pennac’s rights addressed the actual act of reading such as the right to skip pages and the right to re-read. While we found Pennac’s rights important and informative, we wondered how students, teachers, and parents would view readers’ rights in school contexts. Therefore, we began a series of research studies to explore the notion of readers’ rights in schools.

For the next six years, we conducted a series of studies with over 878 participants (399 teachers, 357 students, and 122 parents) in elementary and middle schools in the Midwestern and Southern US who represented a range of socio-economic levels and diverse cultural and linguistic histories. We used surveys, journal writing, and interview methodologies to determine how teachers, students, and parents viewed specific rights of readers. Analysis of data across studies led us to identify invisibility as a serious concern raised by many students, teachers, and parents.

To address this concern, we developed a set of rights that address specifically the issue of invisibility, both for students and teachers.

This Declaration of Readers' Rights focused on making the student visible and central to all aspects of the educational process, for example: all children and adolescents have the right: to be treated as competent; to have culturally relevant literacy instruction; to have literacy instruction that is individually appropriate. (See Bass, et al., 2008, for a complete description of the studies and the rights.). In addition, these rights support teachers' decision-making and active engagement with students in supportive relationships. With this background, in the remaining sections of this article, we focus on the issue of students, like Ben, and teachers, like Jessica, feeling invisible in the school literacy instruction and activities. Additionally, we offer suggestions for making students and teachers visible in literacy teaching and learning.

### **Invisible: Unnoticed, Obscured, Inconsequential**

*I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe, ... I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, ...and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me (Ellison, 1947, p.3).*

These words introduce readers to Ellison's (1947) nameless protagonist in *Invisible Man*, a fictional story of a black man living in the US during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Written in first person, *Invisible Man* chronicles the personal toll and harm bigotry and racism exact on this young, intelligent, observant man. Although racism and bigotry are not the explicitly stated causes of teachers' and students' invisibility in our studies, we use Ellison's words to bring attention to the personal costs when individuals feel invisible to those around them. The words suggest that for one to feel invisible, another must, due to neglect, intention, or hubris, refuse to see him/her. Although composed to describe a fictional character, Ellison's words help us understand the process whereby invisibility results. Certainly, there are many reasons an individual might feel invisible; however, we believe the process at work in classrooms is similar—teachers and students feel invisible, because others do not see them or choose to ignore them. The examples that follow, one from a teacher the second from a student, show two different situations that triggered invisibility.

We met Mrs. Olson and Mrs. Renfrow during our studies. Mrs. Olson's reflective journal entry illustrated how her students became invisible to her.

*Dear Students:*

*When I started teaching, I had a passion for helping children learn, grow, and discover the joy of reading and writing. Over the years, I feel like I've lost sight of the real reason why I wanted to be a teacher – to make a positive difference in the lives of every child who was in my classroom. I have gotten bogged down in the skills and the assessments. I have been too worried about "covering the curriculum" and using "best practices" to teach. I have forgotten that real teaching and learning take time, care, creativity, and listening. I fear that I've*

*forgotten to listen to you, my students, to see what you think and what you need from me. I am embarrassed to say it, but I think that over the years, I've become better at what to teach and how to teach, but I've lost sight of who I teach – you. This year, I promise to think about you first and foremost in my lesson planning. I promise to make our classroom a place where we will all learn and experience the joy of learning and reading. I promise to do better because we both deserve it.*

*Sincerely,  
Mrs. Olson*

Mrs. Olson admitted she lost sight of her students; focusing instead on the skills, assessments, and details of teaching. Her words described an insidious process, one that occurred over time, without notice. Yet, Mrs. Olson was reflective and a problem solver, becoming aware of what obscured her sight, her focus on tests and skills, and that her students had become invisible to her. Through this newfound awareness, Mrs. Olson explained, “I think about my students first and make decisions about the best ways to teach and support each of them.” While we only share one sample entry from interactive, reflective journals we implemented with teachers in our research, the themes in Mrs. Olson’s letter ran through the writing and views shared by many of the teachers. They wrote of the loss of joy in teaching and learning, the inability to make professional decisions related to instruction, and the emphasis on teaching skills for tests rather than teaching students in ways that prepared them for their lives. The concerns raised by Mrs. Olson correspond to the cautions raised by Tatum (2007) that literacy instruction and opportunities for students need to go beyond just tests and assignments to focus on literacy as an essential component of a full and fulfilled life.

Mrs. Olson expressed how she felt inconsequential, disconnected from the students in her classroom, and other teachers in our study reported these same responses. Furthermore, students in our studies helped us understand the impact on them when their teachers emphasized teaching skills and preparing for tests. Narrowing the curriculum resulted not only in restricting the focus on what was taught and how something was taught, but also, by default, reduced students to being inconsequential to the learning that occurred in their classroom.

Likewise, Hai, a student in Ms. Renfrow’s classroom, described a situation that led her, as a seventh-grade student, to feel inconsequential to her teacher. When we interviewed Hai about her school experiences, she described the difficulty she had trying to make connections between what she was reading and her own experiences. Hai came to the United States from China with her parents and younger brother when she was ten. She explained that reading and writing about US history is difficult for her because she did not always understand the examples provided in the textbook or by the teacher. For example, the class was reading about reform efforts that occurred in the US during the 1800s that continued to affect history in the next century. These reform efforts included those for laborers, education, and women.

Hai explained to us,

*Yesterday when she was lecturing me, I was looking off to the side with little tears coming into my eyes. I didn't want them to come but they just did. I guess I'm just*

*too sensitive. There were times when the tears burned my eyes so much that all I could see was a blur and my head felt like it was on fire. I was so sad.... I did everything I could to make the tears stop coming. I couldn't cry in front of everybody. Besides, no one noticed. No one noticed that I was standing there, my shoulders shaking and my eyes going all red. And even if people had noticed, they wouldn't have cared. Who cares about some dumb little Chinese girl who's always off alone by herself? Who cares that she's on the verge of crying out loud? No one cares, that's who. No one cares about me. No one would understand. I might as well be invisible – that's how I feel.*

Hai elaborated on her experiences in Ms. Renfrow's classroom, making it clear that Hai felt this teacher ignored her life experiences and culture. Ignoring what was such an important part of her identity left Hai feeling unnoticed, invisible to her teacher. Ms. Renfrow was a dedicated teacher who had specific content goals that she wanted her students to address, and these content goals were situated in the study of reforms in US history. She knew that her students would be tested for factual knowledge and an understanding of the impact of reforms on societal changes. With a priority for helping her students master the targeted content and achieve high test scores, Ms. Renfrow lost sight of the need to support, incrementally, the growth and development of individual students, particularly those at risk of becoming unnoticed, invisible. Moreover, she failed to acknowledge her students' capabilities and knowledge that could support their future learning.

When schools force teachers to prioritize test scores over student growth and development, they shift their focus away from knowing, teaching, and supporting individual students. Ms. Renfrow knew Hai as a student whose test scores did not meet standards, but she did not know her as an individual of Chinese heritage whose experience of living in another country might be tapped for making connections to understanding US history. Setting up inquiry projects, for example, where students interview their parents to learn their perspectives on how reforms in work places or in schools affected their lives in the US or in other countries could provide students with real life examples of the reforms that may be too abstract when described in the social studies textbook. Such home-school connections could foster opportunities for Mrs. Renfrow to learn about the cultural experiences of her students and use these experiences to leverage connections to academic content (Allen, 2007). Additional inquiry projects with narratives and biographies, including multicultural texts, that provide multiple examples of effects of reform efforts in the US and the world, would further support and deepen the learning of Hai and her peers.

Additionally, if Hai participates in inquiry projects, sharing family stories with peers, then Ms. Renfrow will have opportunities to learn about Hai. She will learn that Hai is literate in two languages. She will learn that Hai worries about her English pronunciation and grammar; therefore, she tends to write and speak as little as possible in her classes. She will learn that Hai reads and writes for recreation at home, and that her goal is to become a university professor. Listening to students' life stories and their goals will provide an opportunity for Ms. Renfrow to plan for teaching strategies, such as storytelling and/or using prior knowledge to make sense of novel content.

Even though we present two examples among the many stories shared by the teachers and the students in our research, these stories contained a recurring theme—teachers and students experience literacy teaching and learning in very personal ways—ways that connected to their life experiences, prior knowledge, and interests. Teachers overwhelmed by external pressures to teach skills and raise test scores lost the passion they once had for teaching, and when students believed their teachers did not see, know, or honor them for who they were, they felt invisible, unimportant, and in effect inconsequential to the teaching that took place in their classrooms.

In the remaining sections, we offer an antidote to invisibility—approaching teaching as relational. First, we describe what grounds this view of teaching. Then, we describe three approaches that promote teaching as relational, and by doing so, overcome invisibility for both students and teachers. After that, we share portraits of three teachers we met during our studies who demonstrate how to establish caring relationships with their students while enabling and deepening learning. We continue to use Ralph Ellison's words from *Invisible Man* (1947) to convey the process whereby invisibility results.

### **Teaching as Relational: An Antidote to Invisibility**

*You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world  
(Ellison, 1947, p. 4).*

Ellison's character yearned to feel part of the world in which he lived. Although the character in *Invisible Man* was its author's creation, the feelings he expressed have a strong basis in fact. As humans, our need to connect, to be part of the world around us, begins at birth and continues throughout our lives (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969), and does not abate when we enter a classroom. In a review of a school's impact on students' mental health, Gershoff and Aber (2006) concluded that the quality of the teacher-student relationship affects students' mental health. Teachers who engender such relationships hold high expectations; create a caring, supportive learning environment; and model positive behaviors. Consequently, their students experience more positive attitudes toward school, higher achievement levels, and less anxiety (Gershoff & Aber, 2006) than students with less-than-positive relationships with their teachers do. When students are in classrooms where they feel safe, connected, and supported, they are more likely to stay in school, complete homework and school assignments, and demonstrate a positive attitude toward school and learning (Freiberg & Stein, 1999). School and classroom climate includes physical characteristics such as cleanliness and comfort, and intangibles such as a sense of respect for each other (National School Climate Council, 2007). Others, such as Pianta and Hamre (2009) maintain providing emotional support is an essential characteristic of effective teachers. One way teachers demonstrate such support is by learning about their students' lives outside of school.

Johnston (2004) in *Choice Words* described a trait many effective teachers he knows exhibit—a genuine interest in their students' home and community experiences. They commit to make personal contact with each student each day. They seek to learn about their students' interests, and they use what they learn to create engaging literacy instruction. Many examples exist in the literacy literature of teachers who exhibit the genuineness Johnston describes. We share one. Salcedo (2009) implemented dialogue journals as a way to provide authentic and relevant writing

experiences for her English Language Learners. She communicated regularly with them by responding in personal and authentic ways as they revealed information about their families and their interests. While initially Salcedo offered the journal activity as a means to enhance the students' writing, she soon realized they provided a means for her to connect to her students' lives outside of school. Individually each student shared information with her and in turn, she crafted a personal response to each. The personal and individual nature of her written communications demonstrated to her students that she genuinely cared about them as individuals, which, in effect, made each other visible and consequential to the success of the experience.

Both teachers and students need to believe they are consequential to what takes place in their classrooms, and that they equally are influential in what and how curricula is taught. The approaches described next support teachers' efforts to create such literacy experiences: teaching with students' hearts and heads in mind (e.g., Bass et al., 2008); promoting culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995), and creating a productive literacy environment (e.g., Langer, 2001). By design, these approaches require personal input from teachers and students. Teachers must apply their personal expertise to create classroom literacy events and students must be able to participate in literacy experiences that build on their personal backgrounds and needs.

### **Teaching with Students' Hearts as well as Heads in Mind**

For many years, literacy educators have embraced theories that support efforts to teach with the hearts and heads of their students in mind. These include critical pedagogy (Freire & Macedo, 1987) educational equity (Darling-Hammond, 2010), and critical literacy (Luke & Freebody, 1997). They share beliefs that all students are capable and competent learners; all students deserve instruction that meets their individual needs, and all students deserve respect. As discussed in the previous section, research supports the need to consider both the hearts and heads of teachers and learners as essential components of effective literacy instruction. Essentially that need resides in how, as humans, we experience the events and interactions in our lives holistically (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). What we learn, how we experience that learning, and how we interpret that learning is the consequence of the interaction of our mental representations (cognition), our feelings (emotions) and our relationships with others (social) (Sroufe, et al., 2005). As humans, we cannot parse our responses into separate compartments, where each lies in waiting, dormant and inactive, until called upon. To ignore or disregard this principle of human learning leaves us open to inaccurate, or at the least incomplete, conceptions of literacy learning and teaching.

In line with these findings, are concerns raised by literacy educators, such as Johnston (2004) and us (Bass et al., 2008) about promoting literacy teaching and learning as solely a cognitive process. In fact, connections can be made between Pianta and Hamre's (2009) definition of Emotional Support in their *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS) framework and Johnston's (2004) discussion of genuineness. We learn from the students in our studies that practices communicate that they matter and are consequential to the literacy instruction that occurs in their classrooms.

## **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Culturally relevant pedagogy is an instructional approach designed to build on students' provisions – namely the knowledge, language, beliefs, attitudes, interests, and experiences they bring to their learning (Bass et al, 2008; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gutierrez, 2005). This type of pedagogy “requires respect for differences; respect that is constantly displayed when teachers and students actively listen to each other, engage in dialogic conversations, learn new concepts, and ask questions that genuinely interest them” (Bass et al., 2008, p. 27). Numerous researchers have demonstrated culturally relevant pedagogy's positive impact on students' engagement and learning and for providing authority to students' cultural history and identities (e.g., Obiddah, 1998; Torres-Guzman, 1992).

We believe culturally relevant pedagogy provides instruction that meets students where they are, helps them to make progress toward real-life goals, and builds on student strengths or provisions (Risko, Matthews, Elish-Piper, Dasinger, & Bass, 2005) that serve as the foundation for all instruction. In this approach to literacy instruction, teachers use what students know about communicating, sharing, and making meaning as the starting place for instruction.

Students bring three types of provisions or resources to their learning: literacy knowledge provisions, cultural provisions, and social provisions (Bass et al., 2008). Literacy knowledge provisions refer to the in-school and out-of-school knowledge that students possess. In addition, students bring cultural provisions to school through “shared knowledge, customs, emotions, rituals, traditions, values, and norms” (Ogbu, 1988, p. 11) that they acquire through their lived experiences in their homes and communities. Finally, social provisions refer to the ways that students learn to interact with others in the routines and contexts they encounter both in and out of school (Bass et al., 2008, p. 50). By using these provisions as the basis for instruction, teachers design and deliver culturally relevant instruction that honors students for who they are and what they bring to their learning and ensures that the students see themselves in the instruction that occurs in their classrooms.

## **A Productive Learning Environment**

A productive learning environment can be defined in a variety of ways including a positive climate, a rich literate environment, and a focus on creating in students a passion for reading and writing (Langer, 2001). Schools with a positive climate have fewer discipline problems that interfere with learning (Esposito, 1999), and have a void of psychological factors that affect student learning and sense of well-being (Kelley, Glover, Keefe, Halderson, Sorenson, & Seth, 1986). In effect, these factors create a comfortable and safe environment for learning (Tableman, 2004). While mandates, curricular requirements, and high stakes assessments may make it challenging for teachers to establish and foster a productive learning environment, it is not impossible.

A productive learning environment immerses students in meaningful literacy activities and materials, including varied print, digital, and media texts. Such classrooms also provide relevant opportunities for students to interact with their peers and teachers around various texts. Through these social interactions, students envision themselves as literate beings who can read and who

choose to do so for various meaningful purposes (Bass et al., 2008). Access to such a literate environment contributes to many positive outcomes for learners, including excitement about learning (Langer, 2001), enhanced comprehension while creating digital texts (Mahiri, 2006) or performance poetry (Rudd, 2012), and critical literacy (Mosley, 2009).

A productive learning environment builds a passion for reading and writing, along with key skills and strategies (Malikow, 2006). Teachers who build such passion toward reading use practices such as teacher read-alouds (Ivey, 1999), independent, silent reading (Cunningham & Allington, 2007), and student-led literature discussions (Pflaum & Bishop, 2004) to give students a chance to build positive attitudes, interest, and intrinsic motivation related to reading and books. As students develop internal motivation to read, their passion for reading guides their efforts.

Through the interplay of these three components – a positive climate, a literate environment, and a passion for reading – students can be situated in learning contexts that support their interest, engagement, and immersion in literacy. These factors then create a positive synergy that allows students to support their own literacy engagement and development further. In other words, when students are interested in reading and books, they are more likely to engage with various literacy activities and become immersed in literacy, which can lead to improved performance, and can build greater interest in reading and so forth (Stanovich, 1986).

In summary, these three approaches build on the beliefs and expertise of teachers—teachers matter; what they know matters; their beliefs about literacy development matter; the decisions they make matter. They are visible in the instruction. Teachers who implement these approaches make their students visible in the literacy instruction by situating their students in learning contexts that support their interest, engagement, and immersion in literacy. Students see themselves in the instruction, and, consequently, believe they matter.

In the next section, we introduce three teachers we met during our studies who create classrooms where their students are consequential to what they teach and how they teach literacy. They have found ways to work against external pressures to increase test scores and to conceive literacy curriculum as a one size fits all. Each teacher's approach is different, bearing that teacher's personal influence.

### **Teachers Working Against the Grain**

Each of the three teachers found a different way to ensure the students in his or her classroom remained visible, evident, and consequential to literacy teaching. Mr. Roberts demonstrated how he accounts for his students' hearts and heads in his literacy instruction. Ms. Jacobs embraced the differences among the students in her classroom and honored each student as an important individual. Mr. Miller, with his own enthusiasm for reading and the structures in place in his classroom, built a student-centered literacy rich environment.

## **He Wants to Change Teaching for a Lot of People: Teaching with Students' Hearts and Heads in Mind**

When we met Mr. Roberts, he had been a fourth-grade teacher for six years. During his tenure, Mr. Roberts had witnessed his school's transition from one with a predominantly middle class, population to a more economically and linguistically diverse one. Even though pressures to increase test scores mounted, he persisted in his commitment to his students' hearts and heads. He maintained high student expectations, continued to ensure all students learn, and created literacy experiences that promote active and engaged learning as advocated by Guthrie (2004). The result, despite the change in school population, is that Mr. Roberts' students continued to outperform those in the other fourth grade classrooms.

Mr. Roberts situated his teaching within an overarching focus on building a learning community. He began to establish this community before the school year started by sending a letter to each student. In that letter he asked each student to bring to school one object, small enough to fit into a sandwich bag, that represented the student's interests outside of school. This object was a part of the student's introduction to their classmates. Once school began, Mr. Roberts continued to nourish this community by:

- using literacy activities, such as Readers Theatre, to reinforce three ideas he will reference all year, collaboration, persistence, and taking risks when learning;
- greeting each student by name when the student enters the classroom; and celebrating when students meet individually set reading and writing learning goals

To create an active and engaged learning environment, Mr. Roberts provided experiences that situated his students as active participants in their own learning. Therefore, when he introduced literature circles, he borrowed an idea from Cole (2003) where students identify interaction patterns unique to discussions by viewing clips from television programs and round table news programs. Then, once literature circles began, the students and Mr. Roberts examined their own efforts to implement discussions by setting class goals and holding "how did we do" debriefing sessions.

During a visit to Mr. Roberts' classroom, we heard first-hand from Shane how students' perceived learning in Mr. Roberts' class. Mr. Roberts had asked his students to write letters to the children who would be in his class next year. He asked them to tell what it was like to be in his room. Shane promptly began to write. Curious about his response, one of us, as researchers, bent down and asked, "What do you want Mr. Roberts' future students to know about him?" Shane responded, "He wants to change teaching for a lot of people." When asked to explain he said, "He makes learning fun. We get to choose the book we want to read and then we draw or make something, like a game, to tell about the book. Plus, he's funny and makes us laugh."

Mr. Roberts' efforts to establish a learning community and create literacy experiences that promote active and engaged learning communicate to his students that they are visible to him. Through his instruction, Mr. Roberts communicated to his students that he noticed and cared for them. He gave them choice, he asked their opinions, he greeted them when they entered the

room; in these, and in other ways, he demonstrated that he genuinely cared about them. Mr. Roberts' uses of language and communication demonstrated that he sought to build relationships and a classroom climate that supported students as literacy learners and as individuals in ways similar to those described by Johnston (2004).

### **An Amazing Assortment of Talents, Goals, and Desires: Embracing Individual Differences**

Miss Jacobs embraced the different types of students in her classes and viewed them as “an amazing assortment of people with many talents, goals, needs, and desires.” Located in an inner-city neighborhood, Miss Jacobs' school served many children from low-income, diverse, and linguistically diverse backgrounds. More specifically, 87% of the students at her school qualified for free or reduced lunch, 62% of the students came from minority backgrounds, and a total of 27 different languages were spoken by students. Miss Jacobs addressed her district's literacy curriculum, but she tailored how she teaches, using a variety of instructional methods and materials, to make sure her instruction was meaningful, engaging, and effective for the students. She took time to learn about her students' provisions. She used the “2 by 10” approach to get to know her students from the first day of school (Curtis, 2005). She identified students whom she did not know well or who seemed to be struggling or disengaged in class, and she committed to talking to that student for two minutes for ten consecutive days. By speaking with students about their families, hobbies, interests, concerns, struggles, goals, and successes, Miss Jacobs built a sense of school connectedness that made students feel involved, committed to, and engaged in their schools. Her approach to building school connectedness aligns with recommendations by McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002).

Miss Jacobs learned about her students' provisions through conversations, home visits, and class activities such as literacy autobiographies. She then used this information to forge connections between her students' provisions and the curriculum. For example, when she found out that many students knew myths, legends, and folktales from their cultures, she built on this knowledge during a unit on traditional tales. Miss Jacobs invited students to interview family or community members to learn these traditional tales or to gather them from print, online, and multi-media resources. They then represented and shared these tales through retellings, artistic representations, multi-media presentations, dramatic renditions, movement, or other forms. Some students invited family members to tell stories or share artifacts related to traditional tales. Students then compared the various tales shared by their classmates and in their textbook to identify common themes and unique attributes of the tales.

Throughout the traditional tales unit, Miss Jacobs differentiated instruction in several ways. She used teacher read-alouds, teacher modeling, partner reading, self-selected reading, small group discussions, and online discussions to meet the needs and build the interest and engagement of all students. She provided choices to students for the projects they completed during the unit so each student could demonstrate his or her learning in ways each preferred. Framing all her instruction, Miss Jacobs emphasized the importance of reading and writing as real-life activities.

Ms. Jacobs embraced the differences in her students and communicated this to her students in multiple ways. She searched for real-life applications such as a community traditional tales celebration enacted at the end of the unit to honor the stories meaningful in her students' lives.

She challenged her students to use their literacy skills to build their own futures through activities such as writing traditional tales that document a hardship in their lives and how they will overcome it to learn an important lesson, reach a life goal, or make a difference in the world. The message communicated to her students through her teaching was that she cared about them as individuals; they mattered and they saw themselves in the literacy instruction they experienced in her classroom.

### **There Was a Great Vibe in That Room: Establishing a Productive Learning Environment**

When we first met Mr. Miller, his passion for reading, books, his students, and teaching was clear. During our first observation in his classroom, we were taken by the joy, enthusiasm, and excitement he demonstrated about books and reading. Samantha told us,

*Mr. Miller loves reading and books, and once I got in his classroom, I loved them too." She continued, "I was okay about reading up until fourth-grade. I mean I didn't hate it or love it. It was okay. That changed after about three days in Mr. Miller's classroom. I still love reading and books, and I think I'm a better reader because of that. It's all because of Mr. Miller. I think all kids deserve to have at least one teacher like Mr. Miller.*

In our research, we learned from Samantha that her fifth grade teacher, Mr. Miller, created a positive learning context in his classroom. Located in an economically depressed community, the tiny elementary school served only about 300 children in grades K-5. Most of the children at the school were classified as Caucasian or multi-racial, and almost all were considered low-income, mainly due to a series of factory and plant closings over a decade's time. We had the opportunity to observe Mr. Miller teaching and to interview him to learn more about his practice. Mr. Miller's classroom was a warm, inviting place with beanbag chairs, bookshelves organized by genre and topic, displays of favorite books – his and his students'--, and tables and clusters of desks for small group discussions. He had classroom rules posted that focused on establishing a safe, comfortable climate for all. These rules stated: 1. Do your best work. 2. Be the best friend and classmate you can be. 3. Be responsible for your actions, words, and materials. When asked about these rules, Mr. Miller explained,

*On the first day of school we talk about the type of classroom we want to have, and the students and I develop the rules together. We always make them positive "I will" types of statements to focus on the positive things we will all be doing in this classroom. Every year the rules are a bit different, but they work because the students believe in them.*

Mr. Miller's classroom was truly a literate environment. He had several bookcases with a wide variety of books and magazines that represented many genres and topics that were of interest to his fifth-grade students. For example, in addition to award winning books and classic titles, he

had a large bin of joke books, a collection of biographies including some focused on sports stars and pop culture figures, graphic novels, video-gaming manuals, how-to books, and many visually appealing magazines. Students were able to access the Internet to research topics and to contribute to the classroom wiki and online discussion boards. Mr. Miller also brought non-print texts such as videos, song lyrics, and photos into the classroom to help students think and learn about topics from various perspectives. The use of a wide range of texts is optimal for addressing students' individual histories and preferences (Bass, et al., 2008). Furthermore, multimodal texts, in particular, encourage students to choose their own pathways for entering and exploring texts while enhancing comprehension (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

We learned about Mr. Miller from Samantha. Samantha, at the time a seventh grader, told us about Mr. Miller, her fifth grade teacher. From the detailed descriptions she offered, it was clear that Mr. Miller left a long-term impression on Samantha. She told us that he made her love reading. He accomplished this by creating a productive learning context in which he shared his love of literacy and afforded his students the time and the means needed to develop their passion for reading.

### **Confronting Obstacles to Ensure the Visibility of Teachers and Students**

*“So after years of adopting the opinions of others I finally rebelled.” (Ellison, 1947, p. 573)*

Like Ellison's character in *The Invisible Man*, we met teachers who pushed against the heavy weight of challenges placed before them by others. Their efforts were visible to us as observers, and to the students they teach. Samantha introduced us to one, Mr. Miller, her fifth grade teacher. He, like many wonderful teachers we know, found ways to work against the constraints placed before him so he could create a classroom environment where he could express his love of literacy and his students could develop theirs. Unfortunately, for many, external pressures make it impossible for teachers to oppose the mandates, standards, and testing that constrain their ability to teach, and by consequence their students' ability to learn. We learned from our work that such constraints exact a personal cost on teachers and their students. Those costs, we assert, are too dear to pay.

When teachers find ways to share their passion of literacy with their students and seek ways to create that passion in their students, students feel visible, recognized, and valued. Their teachers cared enough about them to create literacy experiences that mattered to them. We return to Samantha who told us what students take away when this occurs,

*I loved being in that classroom. There was just this great vibe in that room. The beanbag chairs, the bookshelves loaded with books that kids really wanted to read, daily reading time, and Mr. Miller who just made us want to learn. It was such a happy and interesting place. I will never forget that classroom. I became a real reader in that classroom. I think all kids deserve to have at least one teacher like Mr. Miller.*

We agree whole-heartedly with Samantha.

## References

- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Allen, J. (2007). *Creating welcoming schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Apple, M. W. (1982). *Education and power*. Boston, MA: Routledge.
- Apple, M. W. (2004). Controlling the work of teachers. In D. J. Finders & S. J. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (pp. 183-197). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Apple, M. W. (2013). *Knowledge, power, and education: The selected works of Michael W. Apple*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher*, 36(5), 258-267.
- Bass, J. A., Dasnger, S., Elish-Piper, L., Matthews, R., & Risko, V. J. (2008). *A Declaration of Readers' Rights: Reclaiming our commitment to students*. Allyn Bacon/Pearson.
- Bandeira de Mello, V. (2011). *Mapping state proficiency standards onto the NAEP scales: Variation and change in state standards for reading and mathematics, 2005-2009 (NCES 2011-2458)*. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol.1. Attachment*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Cole, A. D. (2003). *Knee to knee, eye to eye: Circling in on comprehension*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cummins, J. (2001). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Los Angeles, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Cunningham, P. M. & Allington, R. L. (2007). *Classrooms that work: They can all read and write* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Curtis, D. (2005). *Ten tips for creating a caring classroom*. Retrieved March 15, 2006, from [www.glef.org](http://www.glef.org)
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Ellison, R. (1947). *Invisible man*. New York, NY: Vintage International.

- Esposito, C. (1999). Learning in urban blight: School climate and its effect on the school performance of urban, minority, and low-income children. *School Psychology Review*, 28(3), 365-378.
- Franklin, A. J. (1999). Invisibility syndrome and racial identity development in psychotherapy and counseling African American males. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 27(6), 761-793.
- Freiberg, H. J. & Stein, T. A. (1999). Measuring, improving, and sustaining healthy learning environments. In H. J. Freiberg (Ed.), *School climate* (pp. 11-29). Philadelphia, PA: Falmer Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare teach*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Freire, P. & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gershoff, E. T. & Aber, J. L. (2006). Neighborhoods and schools: Contexts and consequences for the mental health and risk behaviors of children and youth. In L. Balter & C. S. Tamis-LeMonda (Eds.), *Child psychology: A handbook of contemporary issues* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), (pp. 611-645). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Guisbond, L., Neill, M., & Schaeffer, B. (January, 2012). NCLB's lost decade for education progress: What can we learn from this policy failure? Retrieved September 2, 2013 from <http://fairtest.org/NCLB-lost-decade-report-home>
- Guthrie, J. T. (2004). Teaching for literacy engagement. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 36(1), 1-30.
- Gutierrez, K. D. (2005). The persistence of inequality: English-language learners and educational reform. In J. Flood & P.L. Anders (Eds.), *Literacy development of students in urban school: Research and policy* (pp. 288-313). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Hargreaves, A. (2001). The emotional geographies of teaching. *Teachers' College Record*, 103(6), 1056-1080.
- Invisible. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary* (11th ed.). Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/invisible>
- Ivey, G. (1999). A multicase study in the middle school: Complexities among young adolescent readers. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 34(2), 172-192.

- Lankshear, C. & Knobel, M. (2003). *New literacies: Changing knowledge and classroom learning*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Johnston, P. H. (2004). *Choice words: How our language affects children's learning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Kelley, E., Glover, J., Keefe, J., Halderson, C., Sorenson, C., & Seth, C. (1986). *School climate survey*. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465-491.
- Lake, R. (Ed.). (2012). *Dear Nel: Letters to Nel Noddings from circles of care* [Kindle version]. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Langer, J. A. (2001). Beating the odds: Teaching middle and high school students to read and write well. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(4), 837-880.
- Luke, A. & Freebody, P. (1997). The social practices of reading. In S. Muspratt, A. Luke, & P. Freebody (Eds.), *Constructing critical literacies* (pp. 182-225). Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Mahiri, J. (2006). Digital dj-ing: Rhythms of learning in an urban school. *Language Arts*, 84(1), 55-62.
- Malikow, M. (2006). Teaching the affective domain: Turning a crier into a crier. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 43(1), 36-38.
- Martin, M. (February 12, 2013). Boys are at the back of the class. In M. Martin (producer). *Tell me more*. National Public Radio.
- McNeely, C. A., Nonnemaker, J. M., & Blum, R. W. (2002). Promoting school connectedness: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. *Journal of School Health*, 72(4), 138-146.
- Meyers, S. A. (2009). Do your students care whether you care about them? *College Teaching*, 57(4), 205-210.
- Mosley, M. (2009). Talking about war and freedom in critical book clubs. In R. Rogers, M. Mosley, & M. A. Karamer (Eds.), *Professional development towards social change: A portrait of the literacy for social justice teacher research group*. New York: Routledge.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers. (NGA, 2010). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts & Literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. Washington, DC: Retrieved from [www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI\\_ELA%20Standards](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards)

- National School Climate Council. (2007). *The School Climate Challenge: Narrowing the gap between school climate research and school climate policy, practice guidelines and teacher education policy*. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/school-climate-challenge.pdf>
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S. C. 6301 et seq. Retrieved March 5, 2006, from <http://www.ed.gov.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/nclb/>
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Obiddah, J. E. (1998). Black-mystery: Literate currency in everyday schooling. In D. E. Alvermann, K. A. Hinchman, D. W. Moore, S. F. Phelps, & D. R. Waff (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing the literacies in adolescents' lives* (pp. 51-71). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Ogbu, J. (1988). Cultural diversity and human development. In D.T. Slaughter (Ed.), *Black children and poverty: A developmental perspective* (pp. 11-28). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Pennac, D. (1999). *Better than Life*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Perlstein, L. (2007). *Tested: One American school struggles to make the grade*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.
- Pflaum, S. W. & Bishop, P. A. (2004). Student perceptions of reading engagement: Learning from the learners. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 48(3), 202-214.
- Pianta, R. C., & Hamre, B. K. (2009). Conceptualization, measurement, and improvement of classroom processes: Standardized observation can leverage capacity. *Educational Researcher*, 38(2), 109-119.
- Ravitch, D. (2012). The teacher accountability debate. In G. M. Boldt & W. Ayers (Eds.), *Challenging the politics of the teacher accountability movement: Toward a more hopeful educational future* (pp. 12- 14). Bankstreet Occasional Papers 27.
- Risko, V. J., Matthews, M. W., Elish-Piper, L., Dasinger, S., & Bass, J. F. (2005). Parents' voices in the discussion of the rights of readers. In W. Trathen & B. Schlagal (Eds.), *It is reading research: Has it made a difference in student learning*. Boone, NC: American Reading Forum.
- Rudd, L. L. (2012). Just slammin!: Adolescents' construction of identity through performance poetry. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 55(8), 682-691.

- Ryan, R. M., Stiller, J., & Lynch, J. H. (1994). Representations of relationships to teachers, parents, and friends as predictors of academic motivation and self-esteem. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 14*(2), 226-249.
- Salcedo, J. B. (2009). Inviting students and teachers to connect. *Language Arts, 86*(5), 440-448.
- Santa, C. (2006). A vision for adolescent literacy: Ours or theirs? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 49*(6), 466-476.
- Short, K. (1996). Caring teachers. *Teacher Talk* (1). Retrieved March 6, 2006 from <http://www.education.indiana.edu/cas/tt/v1i1/caring.html>.
- Sroufe, L. A., Egeland, B., Carlson, E. A., & Collins, W. A. (2005). *The development of the person: The Minnesota study of risk and adaptation from birth to adulthood*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Stanovich, K. E. (1986). Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly, 21*(4), 360- 407.
- Tableman, B. (2004). *School climate and learning. Best practice brief* (No.31). Michigan State University.
- Tatum, A. W. (2007). Literacy development of African American males. In A. Berger, L. Rush, & J. Eakle (Eds.), *Secondary school reading and writing: What research reveals* (pp. 184-202). Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Taubman, P. M. (2009) *Teaching by numbers: Deconstructing the discourse of standards and accountability in education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Tomlinson, C. A., & Jarvis, J. (2006). Teaching beyond the book. *Educational Leadership, 64*(1), 16-211.
- Torres-Guzman, M. E. (1992). Stories of hope in the midst of despair: Culturally responsive education for Latino students in an alternative high school in New York City. In M. Saravia-Shore & S. F. Arvizu (Eds.), *Cross-cultural literacy: Ethnographies of communication in multi-ethnic classrooms* (pp. 477-490). New York, NY: Garland.