**The Science of Reading is Culturally Responsive**

Hello, and welcome to the module on The Science of Reading is Culturally Responsive. My name is Katie Pekel and I'm the Executive Director of Educational Leadership at the University of Minnesota. Today I'm fortunate to have three leaders with us that we're going to engage in a conversation around how the science of reading is culturally responsive. So I'm going to have each of the panelists introduce themselves. I'm going to begin with you, Mona.

Hi, I'm Mona Perkins. I'm the Principal at C in Spring Lake Park. This is my fourth year here and I think my 12th or 13th as a principle.

Great. Thank you, Mona. And I invited Mona to be part of this because she has been a longtime elementary school principal and a fantastic literacy leader in her own right. Next, I'm gonna go to Maria.

Hi, I'm Maria Roberts. I'm the principal at Wilshire Park Elementary School in St. Anthony-New Brighton. It's my second year at Wilshire Park. Prior to this, I lead at the high-school level and district level.

Thank you, Maria. And I think it's important to note sometimes when we're talking about the science of reading, we really are focused on that K-13 realm. And Maria brings a K-12 focus in multiple different districts, so we're really happy that she was able to join us today. And finally, Jaimee.

Hi, my name is Jaimee Stanley. I am currently the literacy director for St. Anthony-New Brighton schools. Right now I'm focused at Wilshire Park, the elementary school. Prior to this, I taught third grade, second grade, and first grade. This is about my seventh year in education.

And Jaimee comes to us, actually fairly new to Minnesota, but with a lot of expertise and background in literacy. So we're really happy to have you join us today as well, Jaimee. So before we dive into the conversation, I know many have read Lisa Delpit's famous book, Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom. This book originates from her original 1998 Harvard Education Press article titled, The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children. In that article, Delpit takes up how black and indigenous educators' voices have been silenced in the dialogues happening around pedagogy and that their lived experiences were not a welcomed part of these dialogues. This article stemmed from an earlier article that she wrote in 1986 called Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator, where she explores her own interactions with a skills versus a processes approach to writing instruction. Delpit shares how she herself was educated, and how her own teacher training and graduate school education informed and shaped her thinking and how she would teach and how she had to ultimately wrestle with that of what she would call a progressive approach. In 1996, Delpit wrote,

> "However, writing-process advocates often give the impression that they view the direct teaching of skills to be restrictive to the writing process at best, and at worst, politically repressive to students already oppressed by a racist educational system. Black teachers, on the other hand, see the teaching of skills to be essential to their students' survival. It

> seems as if leaders of the writing-process movement find it difficult to develop the vocabulary to discuss the issues in ways in which teachers with differing perspectives can hear them and participate in the dialogue. Progressive white teachers seem to say to their black students, "Let me help you find your voice. I promise not to criticize one note as you search for your own song." But the black teachers say, "I've heard your song loud and clear. Now, I want to teach you to harmonize with the rest of the world." Their insistence on skills is not a negation of their students' intellect, as is often suggested by progressive forces, but an acknowledgment of it…"

If you're watching this, you're likely here to learn more about how to, about how to be a sound literacy leader, more about the science of reading. You also probably at some point in the last decade, engaged in some professional learning on race, culture, and social justice. Today I'm gonna be speaking with three women of color intentionally chosen, not only for their incredible leadership, evidence of results, but also to share their perspectives. They of course, do not speak for all leaders of color or all women leaders, or all elementary leaders. But these three have a perspective that we felt was important and worth sharing. They believe the science of reading is culturally responsive and I'm eager to have them share their perspectives with you.

So let's begin. So as you all know, it's probably not a mystery why I open with Lisa Delpit. As you know, I often say imagine if we had really heard Lisa Delpit in 1988, would Robin DiAngelo have become a New York Times best-selling author? Not that DiAngelo's work isn't important and needed, but why are we here? We know the data. Kids in America, in Minnesota, are struggling to read. Most severely impacted are black and brown and indigenous students. From your perspective, why do you think we are here? Mona, I'm going to start with you today.

Sure. I think it's a great question. One of the biggest reasons why I think we're here is I think our instructional practices are often impacted by our negative biases just regarding students of color in general. So e.g. I think a lot of times, being considered a multilingual learner is looked at from a deficit lens versus as an amazing skill that we should be leaning into. Additionally, I think that educators often want to focus on things that really are not within our realm of control. And that gets us sidetracked from the important work and the work of literacy and teaching all of the kids, like that is what our work is. We need to make sure that all of our kids walk away from our buildings able to read.

Mona, I just want to highlight for those who might be watching, when you mentioned our multilingual learners, you actually have some pretty personal and direct experience with that.

I do. I do. My family moved here from the Middle East to the United States when I was four. And, I say luckily, I had a year at home prior to starting school. But I even think about my two older sisters that had to come in and they were in the St. Paul School System, we grew up in St. Paul. And they had to jump right in. And just the whole process of educating our multilingual learners was very different back then. And I think about also at that time like the push was really assimilation. I think about how much we were pushed to lose such a big part of who we were, not just culturally but linguistically as well. Just to be able to fit in. This work is really, it's very personal to me because I was one of these kids.

Thank you. Thanks for letting me highlight that. I think it just brings an added lived experience to the conversation or to the dialogue as Lisa Delpit would say, Marie, I'm gonna go to you next. And just on this, this idea of why are we here today? Why are we in this space that we find ourselves?

I think that we have spent a lot of time in our systems talking about race and equity and having courageous conversations. And these discussions and conversations are really important, but they're not enough. And sometimes that's where we stop. Simply stated, we have to teach kids to read. We do need to discuss race, we need to name it. We also need to make sure that every single student leaves our schools able to read. And we also need to understand the racialized impact of not teaching our children to read. Discussion or reflection alone is not going to improve this system.

Thank you. Thanks so much for that, Maria. Jaimee, you have probably been most recently in the classroom as a teacher. I'm wondering from your perspective both as a classroom teacher, as a literacy coach, and now a literacy leader. Tell me, what is your perspective on why we're here, writ large in the nation, but also maybe even in Minnesota?

Yeah. I think that teacher training plays a really crucial part in all of this. I can recall many of my own experiences with training as a new teacher. I heard about phonics, I even heard about phonological awareness, but I think the part that was missing for me was how important both of those skills are to fluent reading and even comprehension. A lot of my early new teacher training gave me a lot of really good overall understanding of how important teaching reading is. But I wasn't given the intricacies of how to do that until much later. Oftentimes I think curriculum or curriculum materials are selected, and as a new teacher, you just use what you're given and you don't really have a lot of knowledge about, is this actually good? Is it actually going to work? And you just trust that those are the best resources that have been given to you to teach your kids. I want all teachers to be equipped with the knowledge they need to be able to critically analyze curriculum and use it as a resource.

Thanks for that. Jaimee. You kind of went to what I think is maybe some of what maybe Maria is talking about is the idea of what are we going to do? I want to switch gears now from why we are potentially where we are to now, what should we do as leaders? Now that we're here, we know what the data says. What are some things that we can potentially be doing as leaders? And Mona, if you don't mind, I'll start with you.

Sure. I think the very first thing is we need to make sure that we're aligning our beliefs with our actual actions. Because just to throw a bunch of beliefs out there that were not like we're not working towards them is not going to do us any good. If we say that we believe all kids can learn, then we have to make sure that we're teaching all of our kids, Students, how well they do, shouldn't be predetermined before they walk in our door. And I think right now that's what's happening in Minnesota. If kids aren't learning, it is not a deficit or an issue with the kid. It is the adult instruction that needs to change. And so we have to constantly be looking at our own practice and make sure that we're making adjustments.

So, Marie, Mona just touched on the role of the adults in the building. So maybe you could say a little bit about what you see the role of the adults being?

Yeah. And even going back to what Jaimee was saying around supporting teachers and making sure that they know how to teach reading, and what has their experience been prior to teaching reading? How did they learn how to teach reading? We don't know that unless we uncover the skill set of our teachers. So if we spend most of our time talking about beliefs and asking teachers to interrogate their beliefs and none of our time actually sitting down with teachers and understanding, how did you learn how to teach reading? What do you know about teaching reading? Do you feel confident in your skills and your ability to be able to effectively teach reading? What do they name as their strengths? Where do they see their areas of growth? What kind of support do they want? We really have to dig into this conversation with our teachers the same way we want our teachers to dig in with their students when they're learning a skill or practicing a skill. It's our responsibility as leaders to really understand where each teacher in the building is in their effective delivery of literacy and reading instruction.

So Jaimee, you are in the role right now of helping to coach teachers. I would say a large number of elementary teachers, they get into teaching because they love kids, but they also I think love reading and love the teaching of reading. But I think I've heard you say before that, you know, that there's more to it than just loving kids and loving reading. So maybe could you share a little bit with folks about that?

Yep. So in Emily Hanford's podcast Sold a Story, Lacey Robinson is a teacher and she makes a vital point about how children learn to read versus fostering a love for reading. In my experience, some children come to us with this automatic love for reading and books, but they all won't. And that's okay. It's our job to teach all of our kids. Robinson says in the podcast that all children have the right to learn to read and write. She says that  love comes later, and I agree with her. I do want them to love to read, but in order for them to love it, they first must know how to do it. And it's our job to make sure that our teachers are appropriately trained and supported to be able to teach our kids how to read.

So, Mona, how do we do that? How do we know if our teachers are appropriately trained and how do we support them?

Well, I think that the leader in the building is critical. I know from my own personal experience, I was a middle school math teacher prior to becoming an administrator. And then I spent a couple of years at the secondary level prior to going into the elementary. I didn't know how to help the teachers. So I had to learn alongside them. So I think, if you want your teachers to learn it, you got to be willing to learn it as well. And I mean, Maria, I think you can speak to this, but you had a special ed background, your background might have been a little bit different, but as far as like elementary classroom instruction, I would you say you didn't have that either?

As a special education teacher, I never had to take a class to teach kids to read. I had to learn how to teach them art and music.

So that's like, that's the first place. I think we have to commit to going on the journey alongside our teachers and that requires vulnerability and encourage and it also shows like this is for everybody. There's nobody in the building that can be exempt from it. We have to look at our system, our school as a system, that supports the solid instruction of readings. So you have to look at it from every angle. What does our schedule look like? Do you have the right amount of time allocated to teaching reading? Do you have time at the primary levels focused just on phonics and phonological awareness? Do you have the proper materials, the resources? If not, what are you gonna do to supplement? Is there solid professional learning and not just to sit and get, a one and done. Is it followed up with coaching and feedback? And I never get the statistic totally right, but I think it's about 50 hours that people have to be exposed to something before it really sinks in. And so like, how much support are we truly giving the teachers? And then finally, do we have good assessment systems in place? Because we can teach all day long, but if we're not actually checking the learning, which is the important part, then we don't really know if we're making any progress. And we need to keep in mind that as leaders in the building, we have a lot of control, many times complete control of PD that happens in our building. But even if you don't have complete control, you do have an ability to influence and we just have to push through and make sure that we're that we're supporting the teachers, the kids, ourselves. And in the meantime, while you're going through it… my first year, I didn't have the expertise to lead the work. So then I had to pull in experts and that was okay. And that was that was how I was able to do the learning alongside the teachers. Know what you don't know and get some folks in there to help you.

Maria, Mona just actually described I think the situation maybe you found yourself in as a first-year elementary school principal, even with that background in special education as Mona mentioned. So maybe tell us how you approached that and how you got that needed support for you and for your teachers.

Absolutely. That sounded very familiar. Mona. I needed an expert. When I got here, our staff works incredibly hard. And I learned quickly all of those components that Mona just named, we didn't have in place in our building. And so without that kind of system, our teacher effort can be incredibly high and our results can still be low. I really think that we need to own that as leaders. We have to put those systems and supports in place. So I did. I went to my superintendent as a first-year principal and I said we need a literacy coordinator. We need that expertise. I need that expertise. And as Mona was saying, I need to learn alongside them too. My work doesn't stop because Jaimee came into our building. She doesn't own literacy by herself. But she is helping to support the learning of our teachers and me. We're all on this journey together. Interestingly though, as you know, when you go to your superintendent and say, I need a new staff member, I need a staffing change, they don't have this pot of money sitting next to them that they're just willingly throwing around. So as a leader, I had to make staffing decisions. As a first-year principal that's not always popular. But unpopular decisions doesn't always mean that that's the wrong decision. And I think that is so important for us as leaders to remember. We cannot ask our teachers to do hard work if we're not going to make hard decisions on their behalf.

So you all have just touched on an aspect that I'd like to highlight and bring about next which are the components of the system, or the parts of the system, right? I heard Mona say we need

to build a system that supports solid instruction in reading. I heard Jaimee say earlier that the materials that are provided to especially new teachers are just kind of what they use. With that being said, I'm hoping we can maybe take a closer look at some of the parts of this system. Is it curriculum or pedagogy? Is it chicken or the egg? Like, what do we need to do we need to address first? Mona, given your years of experience now in two different elementary settings. I'm going to start with you.

When we started this work at Webster, the first building I was a principal at, we did not have a ton of money. I know that's a shocker because there's so much money pouring into public education, but we did not. And so we knew that like, just purchasing a new curriculum wasn't going to happen. The other thing we also were doing is we were trying to intervene our way out of the problem. Our core instruction wasn't really solid, so we had all these kids in intervention and it was too much, there was no way we were ever going to get out of that. So we had to look at what materials did have, what was aligned to the science of reading. And we started, made sure that we did those components really well. We supplemented as needed. We tried to do as much as we could without adding any extra cost and really spent a ton of money, time and effort, really. It was the professional development. That's where the money came from for the teachers. And then they met regularly. And it wasn't just…it was building-wide and district-wide as we looked at the data and looked at what patterns are we seeing across the district with the instruction? What adjustments need to be made? And adjustments were made immediately to impact the kits at the core. And we adjusted how we were intervening. We adjusted the intervention piece as well. But we had to hit the core or we were going to stay in a place where we were trying to intervene our way out, which is I think pretty common because when I came here, I was, I'm feeling the same way. Like now we gotta get systems in place so that we're not intervening our way out and we're actually hitting most of the kids at the core.

So Jaimee, when we're working with teachers, like you do in your role as an instructional coach, what is it that you're really trying to help make sure that they understand so we aren't trying to intervene our way out of a tier one issue? What are the things that you're focusing on with teachers right now?

Yeah, I think we need to ensure that teachers have a really good understanding of the science of reading. They need to know what phonological awareness is and why it's important. They need to know what phonics is and how to teach it. They should have a really good sense or idea of what a good scope and sequence of those skills looks like. So then when it comes to selecting materials, they know what they're looking for. And that requires a lot of professional learning, dialogue and support.

Can I add something to that, Katie?

Yeah!

I'd like to add that it's important to recognize here we're trying to create neural pathways in the brain because our brains are not hardwired to read, they're hardwired to speak. And so you have to have a pretty structured and systematic approach to instruction in order to create those pathways. Because you are literally creating new ones. Like because brains are wired.

And that absolutely reminds me of Dr. Zaretta Hammond's work on culturally responsive teaching amd the brain. And she has an incredible visual that I think captures what we sometimes struggle with as educators. We're using different and sometimes wrong definitions of what we believe culturally responsive pedagogy, curriculum or education is. In this visual, you can see how Dr. Hammond will differentiate among and between culturally responsive teaching, social justice and then multicultural education. And so when you look at this graph where it talks about multicultural education, I go back to Katie, what you were saying, Delpit's quote in her writing, where she talked about progressive white educators saying like I'm gonna help you find your voice and sing your song. And we talk about things like windows and mirrors and those things. And that shows up a lot in multicultural education. And what we've done is we have taken that, and that those ideas and that thinking, and added culturally responsive education as the word that really goes with those actions. And Dr. Hammond would say that's not actually correct. Culturally responsive education is much more focused on helping the marginalized students develop into what she terms independent learners. And I think it's really important that again, we don't get stuck in this multicultural education or social justice education. Not that these are not important, they're very important. But at the end of the day, what we're trying to do is make sure that our kids have the opportunity to engage in productive struggle, and therefore, build their cognitive capacity in literacy or other areas. If you can't read that text that's in front of you, or if students of color are not reading, then our outcomes aren't equitable. And it doesn't matter about the pictures in the book or the author, any of that.

I appreciate that Maria and that visual is really helpful for us to think about a conceptual framework for this type of approach to teaching. So we know there's going to be resistance to work. It'll show up in different ways. So I'm wondering from each of your perspectives, what might that resistance to the work look like? Then how as a leader do you work to counter that resistance? I just want to acknowledge resistance just doesn't mean like teachers don't want to do something because they're principal is telling them. There's, there's oftentimes real legitimate reasons for people to feel like, oh, I'm gonna resist this, or this doesn't feel good or etc. So I'm going to start with you, Jaimee. What are some things that maybe you've seen and how you work to try to counter that?

So back to knowing what your teachers know. There are likely some teachers who may already have knowledge around the science of reading. I've been a teacher in a building that had some of that knowledge. But I was working in a building that didn't have resources to support it. And I didn't have leaders that shared the same knowledge that I already had, right? So as leaders, I think it's important that we share knowledge with our teachers to be able to support them. On the other side of that, we have teachers who will no doubt feel shame and guilt in discovering that what they'd been doing was wrong. I've been there too. And I believe that it's important to provide a space where we can talk through this literacy journey together with teachers as they feel a variety of emotions. At Wilshire Park, we're hosting a Sold a Story discussion group where teachers get to come into a safe space, feel and verbalize experiences and frustrations. We're learning and unlearning together. It goes back to the old saying, when you know better, you do better.

Jaimee, I like the terms you use there that we're learning and we're unlearning together. I was an elementary school principal, well, now about 20 years ago. I led a building where we absolutely were implementing a balanced literacy approach and phonics. It had a place in first grade was only because we had a really strong speech language pathologists that really ensured that we were teaching phonics. But even then it wasn't that sort of what research suggests that 20 to 30 minutes a day. So I appreciate your acknowledgement of when you know better, you do better. Mona, what are some other ways that maybe you've encountered or seen pushback and how do you counter that?

I think one area that I sometimes get a little frustrated with is what I'd call coded language. It's kinda excuses and, you know, different reasons why we can't or aren't teaching kids to read. So I hear the word trauma used a lot. Some will say not everybody has trauma. Some say everybody has trauma. Wherever you fall in that thought process, not everybody's background is so traumatic that it's impacting their ability to learn. And I think a lot of times we use that word really predominantly when we're talking about black and brown kids and we have to be really careful with that. Or we say things like, how can I teach this kid how to read when he doesn't even have a bed to sleep in at night? And worried about things that really don't fall within our realm of control. I think we make a lot of assumptions about kids that just aren't accurate. So like, if you go back to when my family moved here… Like we'll say kids don't come from a literacy rich home environment. Okay, I was four when we moved here. We got a couple of suitcases that each of us could bring on an airplane. Were we going to pack them with books? We didn't. We had other things we had to bring here. But does that mean my family didn't value education? No, not at all. The whole reason we moved here was so that the four girls, there was four kids in the family at the time, we can have a better education. And so we put a lot of value statements and we make a lot of assumptions about kids that just aren't really accurate. And then we want to focus on things that are not within our realm of control. So when I think about that, when I talk to staff about, I see it as a Venn diagram. So there's this whole circle of things that matter when it comes to education, literacy. A lot of things matter. There is a whole other circle of things within our realm of control. And what we have to focus on is that sweet spot where the two overlap. Because if you're focusing on important things that you have no control over, it's a waste of everybody's time. If we keep our focus there, we are really going to see our kids thrive.

Thank you. Thanks for that, Mona. Maria, you have done a lot of professional development in your roles, both within districts and then outside of districts as well. You've done some work for me at the university in the Minnesota Principals Academy, you helped develop the unit that we do on culturally responsive school leadership within the Principals Academy. So obviously you've spent quite a bit of time in that space as well, and it's been that race equity work has been a large part of your leadership and a very successful part. But what do you say when you encounter some of the resistance or what are your ways of thinking about that?

I think one of the hardest ones for me, Katie, is this idea of when you don't understand what culturally responsive instruction or education looks like, you can easily weaponize it if you want something to stop. So if a leader doesn't understand what it looks like, a staff member goes to them and says like, well, science of reading, it's not culturally responsive. There's these buzzwords that are being used that immediately, if you don't have a solid understanding, you're

gonna make decisions that you're going to pause or stop because what leader wants to not be culturally responsive. And so again, it is really our responsibility as leaders to understand that, to understand the science of reading and how the two fit together. And it goes back to that misunderstanding that we previously talked about. And I think a lot about when people say things like that, it's absolutely very confusing to me, like why you would say using science to teach children to read, all children, black and brown children, is not culturally responsive. And I wonder about things like, why would we…sometimes I'll hear people lift up Dr. Gholdy Muhammad's work over science of reading, and why would we be pitting these things against each other? You know, Dr. Gholdy Muhammad would talk about this idea that Historically Responsive Literacy falls under the umbrella of culturally responsive teaching. And within her framework, that HRL framework, she talks about skills. And she has clearly identified that when you bring things like identity into instruction, you don't remove skills. I would say additionally, the science of reading doesn't communicate that the only way to increase students' literacy and reading and love for reading is through teaching skills. It's simply using the research to support the teaching.

Right, it's not one or the other. And to hand a kid a book that has pictures of people that look like them, but they can't read the book, we've done the kid a disservice.

Yes.

Yeah, thank you. Our time together here is kinda coming to a close, but I'm interested in your closing thoughts. We opened with the premise that the science of reading is culturally responsive. What thoughts do you have that you might want to end on with that premise? And Jaimee, I'm going to start with you this time.

Okay, I think through good PD, coaching and providing the necessary resources, we can support teachers with making meaningful connections between the science of reading and our culturally responsive work. Back to what Maria and Mona said earlier, being culturally responsive and teaching the science of reading they work together.

Thank you, I appreciate that. Maria, you opened with this idea of doing. Does that come out for you again or what do you think?

Absolutely. We've got to act. We have to stop just talking or theorizing, or dreaming and imagining what could be for kids. And we've got to put it in place for them and that takes work. So as leaders, we have to provide a culture and an environment where teachers can try, they can take risks and they can fail. It is okay for them to fail. That is part of learning and it's part of improving. We have to get them to see themselves and allow them to see themselves, not just as implementers, like here's your curriculum, you have to just do this thing, but to see themselves as learners first. And then the best way to do that as leaders, we have to model being learners as well. I think through all of our learning we'll not only become more effective implementers, but we are able to then better articulate how the science of reading is an essential component to being culturally responsive. And that is really our work.

Mona, what do you think is our work as, as principals and leaders of literacy?

I think this is our work to lead. It is our job to have this work at our building levels. We have to create systems that are equitable and grounded in research. If you don't know the research, find it. We need all of our actions to be aligned with our beliefs so that we get the results that our kids are deserving of, which is not what we're currently doing. Like Maria said, we have to do a lot of the learning alongside our teachers, for especially the ones that aren't there yet. And above all else, we need to monitor our progress to see how we're doing as a system. Because this isn't just when you're looking at it class by class, and then you have to look at it as a system. And let's be honest, numbers don't lie. They will always be honest with us.

On that note, I want to thank you, Mona, Maria, and Jaimee for your time with us today. We'll make sure to link on the website to the Lisa Delpit articles because anytime I can get those out in the hands of people, you know I like to do that. We'll also link to that visual that Maria mentioned. We'll link to the Zaretta Hammond's book, which I think is really helpful book for folks to be thinking about that. And Maria, you mentioned Gholdy Muhammad’s book, when she actually has a brand new book that's about to drop next week. So we'll try to link to those two as well. So thank you for your time today. I really appreciate your leadership and your wisdom and your lived experiences that you're willing to share with us. Thanks so much.

Thank you.

Thank you.