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**Improving Literacy Skills with Urban Children  
in U.S.A.**

**Kim Song  
Susan Catapano**

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# Improving Literacy Skills with Urban Children in U.S.A.

Seeing themselves in Literature Books

Kim Song, University of Missouri - St. Louis, United States of America

Susan Catapano, University of Missouri - St. Louis, United States of America

*Abstract: Early childhood education teacher candidates enrolled in a special topics class conducted a reading support project for the children in a low-income, urban setting, who were reading at least two grade levels below their assigned grade. The purpose of the project was to examine if the children can improve their reading and writing skills through pre-instructional assessment and individualized reading strategies incorporating with diverse reading materials and technology. The preservice teachers engaged in activities using grade level vocabulary words, individualized reading strategies, children's literature books, and informational technology to support the development of reading and writing skills. The strategies to improve children's literacy skills included 1) one-on-one preassessment of their reading levels, 2) individualized instructional plan based on #1, 3) read-alouds using diverse children's literature books, and 4) autobiography book using pictures and writing using computer desk-top software. The result of the study showed that the participating children read at a higher-grade level than they started with. In addition, the preservice teachers reflected that they developed their own skills in conducting reading assessments, developing reading materials to meet the individual needs of children and using technology to support the development of teacher-made materials.*

**Keywords:** Urban Education, Reading Strategies, Assessment, Children's Literature, Instructional Technology, Individualized Instruction, Collaboration Between Teacher Education and Public Schools

## Introduction

**U**RBAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS in the United States of America struggle with a large portion of the children scoring below their grade-level on standardized tests. Many attempts to support children learning to read in urban schools have failed (Washington, 2001). Reasons for urban children reading below their grade-levels have been attributed to limited exposure to literacy, standardized test bias and low teacher expectation of children (Kiviat, 2000; Washington, 2001). Many children entering kindergarten in an urban setting lack literacy foundation skills that include: 1) recognizing environmental print, 2) understanding story grammar, 3) knowing how to hold and share a book, 4) understanding that books are read from left to right, and 5) recognizing that the pictures are described by the words (NICHD, 2000; Clay, 2002; Snow, et. al., 2005). Many kindergarteners in low-income, urban schools have limited letter recognition or letter sound understanding (Washington, 2001). The urban children without these basic reading skills are already falling far behind what is expected for kindergarten children when they walk in the front door of the school on the first day (Clement & Warncke, 1994).

Hart and Riseley (1995) document that there is a significant difference in the number of words spoken

and the extensiveness of the vocabulary used by preschool children in White, middle income families when compared with preschool children of African American parents living in poverty. It is not surprising that as early as 36 months of age, the earliest age of formal diagnosis and testing; the oral vocabulary knowledge difference between the two groups is already significant (Farkas & Beron, 2000, Farkas, 2003, Snow, et. al., 2005). When developing reading comprehension skills, children must be able to generate meaning out of the story by relating what is happening in the story with what is or has happened in their personal experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lobron & Selman, 2005; Snow, et. al., 2005). If the story does not generate meaning for the children, they will struggle to read, miss the cues in the story and illustrations, and may give up reading the story (Hart & Riseley, 1995).

In this study, researchers are to ask if the explicit teaching and assessment strategies and individualized activities help African American children, in urban schools and living in poverty, improve their literacy skills.

## Theoretical Framework

One key reading skill that children need to develop is to connect what they are reading with what they have experienced in their life. Being able to see them in the literature helps children apply their emerging



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reading skills to reading for pleasure and increases their reading skills through the process (Cooper & Kiger, 1997). Children's literature books that are commonly used to broaden the classroom experience and support developing reading skills usually depict middle income, suburban stories. These stories are irrelevant to African American children, in urban schools and living in poverty, and the meaning is lost since much of the vocabulary and story situations are not what the children experience at home or in their neighbourhoods (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). In this section as a theoretical framework, using children's literature books, reading strategies (i.e., read-aloud) and assessment strategies are reviewed as main factors for improving literacy skills for urban low achieving learners.

### ***Culturally and Developmentally Relevant Read-Aloud as an Effective Reading Strategy***

Excellent reading teachers know and use a variety of strategies to teach reading that include learning each child's experiences, and cultural backgrounds, and make reading materials and instruction meaningful, based on each child's needs, prior knowledge, and life experiences. They know how to combine strategies to create effective and successful reading programs for all children (IRA, 2000). Reading aloud to children is one strategy that helps children develop literacy skills. Children need teachers to model fluent and independent reading when sharing books during a classroom read-aloud (Davis, 2000).

Children need to hear a variety of materials read aloud, including real and fantasy stories, poems, jokes and recipes. A discussion about the relation of the content of what was read to everyday life should follow. By reading aloud this information and then discussing how it will be used, children learn the importance of reading and are motivated to read for their own information and enjoyment (Reutzel, 2001). Not only is the event of reading aloud important to children who have not had much experience with being read to, but also the verbal interaction between adult and child during the experience is important in building vocabulary and comprehension skills (Morrow, 1996). No single activity is regarded as more important in learning to read as is the shared book experience between a teacher or caregiver and a child (Neuman, 1999). Other things to remember during a classroom read-aloud include preparing the materials that reflect the interests of the children, reading only while children are paying attention, making sure the materials match the comprehension level of the children, and reading to small groups as well as the whole class (Reutzel, 2001; Trelease, 2001).

Working in classrooms with struggling readers, researchers found that children need explicit instruction to broaden their understanding of the meaning in the material that is being read. It is not appropriate to assume previous experiences with the content of the material for all children in the classroom, especially for those from diverse backgrounds (Delpit, 1988). Along with explicit instruction about what was read and its use, children need to spend time reading and to have access to books from which to make their own selections. The amount of time spent reading is the best predictor of growth in reading for children (Primeaux, 2000). Children, however, only spend about seven minutes during the school day engaged in independent reading (Cooter, et al., 1999). Only 40% of kindergartners in poor urban neighbourhoods owned a book (Neuman, 1999). The children only average 25 hours of being read to at home prior to entering school, whereas children from middle-income families, in suburban settings, enter school with an average of 1,000 hours of being read to at home (Adams, 1990). An effective reading program needs to include in-class reading time and read-aloud as part of the curriculum.

### ***Teachers' use of Assessment Strategies***

Effective teachers of reading also understand and use a variety of assessment tools to determine the progress of the children in their classrooms. Both formal standardized test scores and informal observations are used to determine how children are progressing in reading (IRA, 2000). Along with observation, informal assessment includes conferencing with children, taking work samples of reading and writing, taking running records, and keeping anecdotal notes about a child's reading progress (IRA, 2000). Oral fluency screenings allow teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching strategies they are using to teach reading. The process of oral fluency screenings requires the child to read aloud from grade-level materials for one minute, while the teacher records the number of words that were read correctly (Davidson & Myhre, 2000). This method of assessment allows the teacher to choose the high-interest content text, tracks the child's progress, and generates a score that measures the child's automaticity, fluency, and prosody. A running record can be used to determine a child's word recognition ability. The child's ability to process words is a key factor in determining reading proficiency. Some words should be automatically recognized to leave cognitive space for more complex thinking that applies what is being read to previous experience with the content and vocabulary of the passage (Davidson & Myhre, 2000).

To determine the correct-words-per-minute, the teacher counts the number of words read in the minute, and subtracts only substitutions and mispronunciations to get the score. This numeric score is easy to track and update, showing the child's progress over a period of time. Children who do not have word attack skills need to work on letter recognition, and a letter-naming frequency test can be given regularly to measure their progress (Davidson & Myhre, 2000).

### Objectives

The purpose of the project was to provide preservice teachers authentic experiences working with urban children to improve their reading skills by individualized reading and assessment strategies incorporated with diverse reading materials. Three research questions were asked to meet the purpose:

1. Will African American children, living in poverty and attending urban schools, improve their reading comprehension skills if preservice teachers use developmentally appropriate teaching and assessment strategies?
2. When offered a choice of books to read, will the African American children choose books that reflect themselves and their lives?
3. Through their reflections, will preservice teachers recognize the value of using explicit teaching and assessment strategies to teach literacy skills when working with the African American children?

### Method

#### Setting and Participants

The subjects participating in this study were 6 preservice teachers and 12 children. The six preservice teachers were enrolled in a Special Topics in Early Childhood Education course at the University of Missouri-St. Louis in the United States of America in the winter semester, 2002. The six preservice teachers had similar demographic characteristics; White, living in a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri and middle-income. The 12 children were identified as reading below their assigned grade level as measured by the state mandated standardized test of communication arts. The children were African American, living in poverty, in an urban area, and were between six- and eight-years-old.

#### Procedures of Data Collection

Preservice teachers were assigned to accomplish four things during the semester. First, they were to identify culturally diverse and traditional children's

literature books to be used in read-aloud with the children. They were then to conduct an assessment of children's vocabulary recognition skills and support them in increasing their skills with vocabulary-based activities. Third, they were to help children write their own picture books, which were to reflect the children's lives and use words from the vocabulary-based activities. Finally, they were required to reflect on the authentic experience each week after they had worked with the children. Each preservice teacher was assigned two children to work with once a week, for twelve weeks.

*Selection of Materials* One challenge that preservice teachers faced was selecting reading materials that would be of interest to a child and be of an appropriate reading level. (Chamberlain & Leal, 1999). The school was participating in Reading Recovery and required the preservice teachers to use the levelled books, as identified by that system, to work with the children (Schwartz, 2005). The preservice teachers developed a list of appropriate children's literature books based on the Reading Recovery levelled books and using information they gained through their Children Literature course on high-interest books for children ages six through eight.

The list had two groups of books; one group of books would be categorized as those with diverse characters or set in an urban area. Examples of books in this category included Jordan's *Salt in His Shoes* and Barrowes' *Everybody Wears Braids*. The other group would be categorized as general children's literature representing a variety of genres. Examples of books in this category included Lionni's *Fish is Fish* and Bloome's *Piggy Monday*. The lists included books at higher grade levels if they were of high interest to the children. For example, Jordan's *Salt in His Shoes* is a book that is levelled for a 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grader, however, the content and character of the book was of high interest to the children. The book was not used to support the children reading independently, it was used as a read-aloud. The preservice teachers selected two books from the list, to read to the children each week, one with an urban setting and diverse characters, and the other a "favourite" children's literature book. The books selected had to reflect the books that would commonly be found in classrooms. After hearing each book, the children were asked to pick their favourite and tell why they selected it.

*Assessment Strategies* First, the preservice teachers reviewed the results of the state mandated standardized test on Communication Arts to determine what types of questions the children were being asked. They also were given the scores on the test for the children in their group. Next, the preservice teachers use a running record assessment on each child to determine the child's word recognition skills. Finally,

the school selected and required the preservice teachers to use Fry's Instant Word Test to determine mastery of vocabulary words by calculating the vocabulary recognition level of each child (Fry, 1994). The first 300 words on the list are so common that a child who cannot recognize most of the words will not be able to make sense of any written mater-

ial. Each child was given an individualized vocabulary list based on the assessment. See Table 1 for an example of one child's Instant Word Test results, both pre- and post-tests. Based on the results of the pre-test, preservice teachers prepared vocabulary cards from the word lists indicated on the assessment for each child.

**Table 1: One Child's Instant Word Test Results**

Instant Word Test: First 300 Words	Pre-test Results	Post-test Results
1. are	1	1
2. but	1	1
3. which	X	1
4. so	X	1
5. see	X stop	1
6. now		X
7. only		X
8. just		X stop
9. too		
10. small		
11. why		
12. again		
13. study		
14. last		
15. story		
16. beginning		
17. feet		
18. book		
19. almost		
20. family		

Note: On the pre-test, the child could identify up to the word numbered 3. Using the formula, 3 multiplied by 15 (45), the child needs to start with the vocabulary list with the words 41-45. The preservice teacher would develop a list of words that included words 41-50 to begin working with the child. On the post-test, the child could identify up to word number 5. Using the formula, 5 multiplied by 15 (75), this child increased his or her reading vocabulary by 30 words (75-45).

<sup>1</sup> Indicates a word the child could identify and X Indicates a word the child could not identify.

The assessment required that the child read words from the list of 1,000 words. When a child missed a word, the teacher used a computational formula to determine where to begin vocabulary instruction using the *1,000 Instant Words* (Fry, 1994). See Table 2 for an example of one child's vocabulary list. Each child's reading list had 10 vocabulary words identified. During the project, some children had as many as 30 vocabulary cards if they were working on the very basic word lists. Throughout the project, all the children were able to quickly learn the first 20 words

(1-20) of the *1,000 Instant Words* and moved on to the next 10 words on the list (21-30) (Fry, 1994). Preservice teachers worked with the children each week to practice identifying and using the words in context. They found as many corresponding pictures as they could to glue to the back of the cards to help the children work independently with the cards. Preservice teachers worked with children who were at the pre-reading level by first using teacher-made alphabet cards to teach the children the letter recog-

...nition and letter sounds. Then, they used the vocabulary cards to develop word recognition skills.

**Table 2: Example of Vocabulary List**

Beginning Word List	Next Word List	Challenge Words
41. there	51. will	61. some
42. use	52. up	62. her
43. an	53. other	63. would
44. each	54. about	64. make
45. which	55. out	65. like
46. she	56. many	66. him
47. do	57. then	67. into
48. how	58. them	68. time
49. their	59. these	69. has
50. if	60. so	70. look

Note: The above vocabulary list was developed for a child whose vocabulary score was 43 on the Fry's Instant Word Test (Fry, 1994). The preservice teacher gives the child a list of 300 words to identify. The number of the word that the child cannot identify is multiplied by 15 to determine where on the list 1,000 the child needs to begin vocabulary development. Each list of vocabulary words is grouped into five words. The preservice teacher developed a 10-word list for each child and moved each child into the next list of 10 words as soon as the child had mastered that list. The preservice teacher would go over the Challenge Word List to help motivate the child to move ahead.

*Student Product: Children as Authors* After read-aloud the selected books based on the assessment results, the preservice teachers provided individualized literacy lessons to the children. They gave each child a disposable camera to make pictures of friends, their neighbourhood, their school, and anything else important in their lives. The photographs and descriptions that the child wrote were used to create a book. The preservice teachers supported the children in reviewing the vocabulary cards and using as many vocabulary words as possible as they wrote a story to go with their pictures. Children took pictures of family members, relatives, and community members. The preservice teachers scanned the pictures in the Technology and Learning Centre at the university where they learned to use software to print out the pages of each child's book with photos and the descriptive sentences. Once completed, each child read his/her book to the preservice teacher while she used the text as a running record to assess the child's ability to read the vocabulary words, using the pictures as cues. The children received the completed book and pictures at the end of the project.

*Preservice Teachers' Reflections* Preservice teachers were, then, required to reflect on their experiences during the weekly read-aloud and vocabulary activities with the children. They posted their reflections to online course software, BlackBoard. The university faculty reviewed the reflections to determine the progress the preservice teachers were making

and to answer and questions that came up during the activities with the children.

## Result

The following results answer the three research questions for this study.

*Research Question 1.* Will the participating children improve their reading comprehension skills when the preservice teachers use developmentally appropriate teaching and assessment?

*Result 1.* The answer to this question is yes; after they were offered individualized learning opportunities, children were able to increase their reading comprehension through increased word recognition. Using Fry's Instant Word Test (1994), preservice teachers reported that 100% of the children were able to recognize an increased number of words at the end of the project. Three of the twelve children were at a pre-reading level and could not identify any of the vocabulary words during the pre-evaluation. The children improved their vocabulary scores by at least 50%, identifying the vocabulary of at least 50 words beyond the level where they started. The three children with pre-reading skills could identify all the alphabet cards by the end of the project and had developed recognition of a minimum of 25 vocabulary words by the end of the project. In producing the "children as author" book project, the children were able to use the grade appropriate words and were



able to read their books to their parents and to the class.

*Research Question 2.* When offered a choice of books to read, will the African American children select books that reflect themselves and their lives?

*Result 2.* The answer to this question is no; children do not choose reading materials that reflect themselves and their lives when offered a choice. Preservice teachers reported that when offered a choice of books, the majority of the children preferred books that were either fantasy (85%), such as, *Just the Way You Are* by Pfister or about animals (81%), such as *Chewy Louie* by Schneider. Less than 20% of the children selected books identified as diverse, urban literature as their favourite book unless the book also fell into the fantasy or animal category. Books in the category of diverse, urban literature included *Loose Tooth* by Phinney and *My Man Blue* by Grimes (a book of poetry). Books that were in urban settings but also featured either animals or fantasy topics included *Piggy Monday* by Bloome (diverse children turn into pigs because of their poor manners) and *Can You Top That?* by Nikola-Lisa (diverse children challenge each other to top feats that become more fantastic each time).

*Research Question 3.* Through their reflections, will preservice teachers recognize the value of using developmentally appropriate teaching and assessment strategies to teach literacy skills to the urban low achieving African American children?

*Result 3.* Review of the online reflections indicate that all of the six preservice teachers commented that the project gave them the opportunity to assess children for word recognition using tools such as Fry's Instant Word Test (Fry, 1994) and a running record. Both were easy and quick to use and could be used in their future classroom settings. They also commented that they learned the importance of introducing and supporting vocabulary learning as an individual activity as well as part of reading comprehension instruction. Five of six preservice teachers noted the importance of not only offering children experiences in recognizing vocabulary words that match their current reading level and those specified for their grade level, but also introducing words that are above

level and provide a challenge. All of the preservice teachers recognized the importance of using the vocabulary words within the context of literature. They also commented that giving children an opportunity to write their own books put the vocabulary into a realistic context.

Periodic meetings and ongoing discussions with the preservice teachers allowed the researchers to stress the importance of supporting children's writing books that are relevant to them, not books that represent ideas solely developed by the teacher. For example, telling children to write a book about the weather to go with a unit of study about the weather is not going to support word recognition or allow the children to see themselves in the literature. Asking children to create a book about how the weather affects their lives will accomplish this goal. All of the preservice teachers commented that the project gave them insight into meeting the individual needs of children learning to read and it helped them develop a list of quality early childhood literature books that they would want to add to their classroom library when they began teaching. Preservice teachers also used technology in new ways, and commented that they would be comfortable using scanners and graphics software in the future.

The preservice teachers reported on what happened when they presented the books that the children had written to the children at the end of the project. The children were asked to read the books to the preservice teacher when the books were finished. Then, the children asked the classroom teachers if they could read the picture books aloud to the entire class. The preservice teachers reported that all of the children read the books fluently without help after the initial reading. The children were excited and proud to share their books with the class. The vocabulary they used for the picture books was at a level at least 50 words higher than where they started. See Table 3 for an example from one of the books. Children took the book home to share with their families. The feedback from the classroom teacher indicated that 100% of the families were pleased with the book and continued to read it at home.

**Table 3: An Example Writing from Children's Book**

This is Dr. Smith (*This is not a real name of the principal.*). *She* is our principal. *Some* people said that *she* has a mean *look*. I like when *she* has time to come to each class.

The above description was written for a picture taken of the school's principal by the child whose vocabulary list is identified in Table 2. The underlined words belong to those of challenge words (see Table 2). The child's reading level before this project was conducted belonged to the pre-reading level.

## Discussion

The study provided preservice teachers with authentic opportunities to work with children individually

and utilize a variety of teaching strategies to support the development of reading skills. The final project, a picture book, that used children's life experiences



through the photos and writing, helped the children improve their writing and reading skills. Children engaged in individualized vocabulary-building activities and writing their own books were able to successfully complete activities that indicated that they had improved their word recognition skills. Clearly, using developmentally appropriate strategies that include vocabulary building activities, read-aloud, book discussions, and writing books that depict familiar scenes of the child's life all contribute to building the literacy skills that support children learning to read.

Children were able to read more fluently when they were reading materials of their interest. After an initial reading with help from their preservice teachers, all the children could read their books without help. These books were relevant because they depicted scenes familiar to the children and the books reflected the children's own words along with the targeted level vocabulary words. Teachers should offer children the opportunity to write their own books on topics of interest to them. Teachers should combine the development of the book with the introduction of vocabulary words that support each child's assessed needs.

The participating children preferred stories that depicted fantasy or animals. When offered a choice of literature, some depicting children in low-income, urban settings and some well-known literature selections, children chose stories about animals and fantasy over topics that depict children in urban settings, unless those settings included fantasy or animals. When discussing why this was the result, preservice teachers suggested that sometimes the stories in books do not depict the reality of children's lives. The children participating in this study may not have had much experience reading books. It may be their

instinct to choose colourful fantasy books and animals they have seen on televised children's programs rather than choosing the books depicting their urban lives. The children may not be in a cognitive developmental stage of distinguishing if the content of the books is relevant to their cultural experiences or not. In order to increase children's awareness of their own culture, teachers need to understand children's cultural backgrounds. One way is to select books that contain similar cultural backgrounds of the children in the classroom. The content of these books may help the children reflect on their own cultural backgrounds before they lose their cultural identity.

The preservice teachers' reflection indicated that they believed the use of authentic experiences and word recognition activities helped the children whose reading levels were below their assigned grade-level to develop word recognition skills through individualized teaching strategies and by using materials that were meaningful to the children.

This study, although limited in its design, e.g., size of the sample, valid and reliable instruments, lack of control group and so forth, provides a valuable foundation for an expanded study that may contribute to improving reading comprehension skills of children, especially urban learners whose reading and writing skills are below their grade-levels. The study also supports the opportunity for preservice teachers to engage in authentic experiences with children that require the teachers to use assessments to monitor children's progress and to develop individualized, hands-on activities to support children's learning. This study may contribute to the urban teaching: It may not urban learners that may cause the achievement gap in the U.S., but the urban teachers who may not prepare their teaching to 'fit' into what their students need.

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## About the Authors

### *Dr. Kim Song*

Dr. Kim H. Song has taught social studies methods courses and research methods courses at University of Missouri—St. Louis, U. S. A. Kim's research interest includes closing urban students' achievement gap, backward instructional planning cycle, instructional technology and content learning, and international education. She presented numerous papers in national and international conferences and published several articles on conceptual framework of assessment, urban teachers' beliefs, multicultural educational techniques, purposefully designed teacher education courses, democratic education process: kids voting and a book on portfolio development. She is now working on two projects. One is to focus on how to help teachers improve their content teaching strategies using children's literature books. The other one is to examine how self-assessment of teaching performances can help teachers improve their teaching and student learning through the analysis of their own video taped presentations.

### *Dr Susan Catapano*

Susan Catapano, Ed.D. teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in early childhood education and early childhood special education. She prepares undergraduate students to earn Missouri State Teacher's Certification in Early Childhood Education, Birth through 3rd grade. She is a principle investigator on a US Department of Education Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant (\$3.2 million) that supports new teachers and student teachers learning to teach in urban settings. She is an active member of the local, state, and National Association for the Education of Young Children.

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