



# Research to Practice

## What Should All Adults Know?

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For 18 years, I worked with Black, Asian, Native American, and Latino parents of children in impoverished inner-city and rural schools. Parents shared stories of dropping out of school, being “passed on” from grade to grade, and using strategies to hide their limited literacy skills. Many of the parents with whom I had the honor to work had the courage to share their difficulty in reading notes sent home by teachers, helping their children with homework, and reading the school newsletter. When I inquired about what adults wanted to learn, the responses were twofold; adults who immigrated to the United States from Mexico, Brazil, Columbia, Guatemala, Venezuela, and Honduras wanted to learn how to read to survive (e.g., signs, menus, bills, employment notices, grocery items, receipts, contracts); these same adults wanted to know about American history. Adults born and raised in the United States had quite different interests. They wanted to know “what they needed to know” to pass the GED. These adults emphasized the need to “jump through hoops” noting such “hoops” were aligned with what certain people wanted them to know, not what they wanted to know. Despite the “hoop realities,” these adults were interested in reading about their cultural communities and the historical cultural voices left unheard throughout their educational experiences.



This article focuses on deepening our understanding of how to consider the lived realities of adult learners, especially for adults from culturally diverse backgrounds. The article begins with a brief review of how scholars in the field of adult literacy consider culture and community as essential components to determining what adults should know. The article concludes with questions to ask of ourselves, colleagues, and adult students in order to reconsider the role of culture in adult literacy.

Eric Donald Hirsch wrote a book entitled, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1988). Hirsch is a literary critic best known for his contribution to promoting what he calls cultural literacy. Hirsch makes the case that people should be encouraged to develop their potential and run their own courses with consideration given to cultural context. Hirsch claims adult literacy is

more than acquiring just a specific linguistic skill set. He argues cultural context matters. For example, adults might know phonics or be able to decode readings, and might be able to identify the meaning behind vocabulary terms presented throughout the text. However, cultural literacy demands more than adults learning specific linguistic skills. Hirsch contends cultural literacy encourages adults to actively participate in a process of not only acquiring new knowledge, but understanding the cultural context for the knowledge. Knowledge such as American history and writing is assumed, yet many adults do not possess this kind of knowledge. Hirsch argues that teaching cultural literacy is not easy. There is no national consensus regarding a shared body of knowledge, nor is there any discussion regarding the influence of culture on a shared body of knowledge. Hirsch contends that raising the level of adult literacy

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requires educators to reconsider, envision, and evaluate what every adult should know. He emphasizes that once those who promote adult literacy reach consensus regarding cultural content, only then will cultural literacy for adults be achieved.

Carol Alabaster (2002) shared her 20-year consensus regarding a shared body of knowledge in *Developing an Outstanding Core Collection*. She stressed the need for educators to consider cultural contexts and the needs of the community in selecting books. Another scholar who emphasized the importance of considering cultural contexts was Paulo Freire (2004). He was a Brazilian scholar who fought to provide native populations with opportunities to read and write. Freire emphasized the need for adults to become politically literate, which encouraged adults to understand how race, class, and gender affect oppression. Freire sought to encourage adults to have the knowledge to question what was presented as truth. He believed such knowledge would inspire adults to envision a more humane society.

Hirsch, Alabaster, and Freire emphasize the need to reconsider to what extent educators consider cultural contexts in adult literacy. Each author proposes we reconsider cultural contexts, but Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant (2009) provide us with a way to rethink such work. They offer a visionary approach to creating a dialogue in which educators consider the influence of cultural contexts (gender, class, race, and sexual identity) in student learning. I adapted their framework by posing questions to promote cultural competence in adult literacy. Sleeter and Grant's work provides those who teach adult literacy with a way to reconsider to what extent adults are provided ways to constructively work towards cultural literacy.

Below is a list of questions adapted from Sleeter and Grant's multicultural social justice education model. These questions could be used to guide a discussion during a staff meeting, a dialogue with adult students, or as an assessment to deepen understanding regarding educational practices towards cultural literacy.

- To what extent does your program promote equality? How do your practices align with this finding?
- To what extent does your program promote cultural identity? How do your practices align with this finding?
- To what extent do your program's practices center on issues involving racism, classism, sexism, sexual identity, and global perspectives?

- How are adults' lived experiences used as a starting point for understanding the role of human oppression?
- How are adults' lived experiences incorporated to teach critical thinking skills?
- How are adults' lived experiences incorporated into analyzing alternative viewpoints?
- How are adults' lived experiences utilized to teach social activism?
- To what extent are adults involved in the decision-making process regarding curriculum and curricular activities?
- To what extent are adults involved in making programmatic decisions that influence their adult literacy experiences?

This approach strives to integrate concerns related to understanding connections between cultural literacy, considering contexts in adult learning communities, and recognizing concerns related to race, gender, class, sexual identity, and other forms of oppression faced by adult learners. The assumption here is that if we change adults' worlds significantly, then changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and actions will follow. Although adult literacy educators may not advocate for exactly the same things (i.e., some may focus on class and less on race), the goals are similar. What's most important is the process by which educators look within both professionally and programmatically. Having the desire to work towards approaches that take into consideration the relationship between oppression, power, and learning is essential to cultural literacy.

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