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Yes, We Can!

Addressing Personal and Cultural Connections Within Evidence-Based Reading Instruction

By Jennifer S. Beal and Davinique Small

As part of her teacher preparation program, Davinique Small helped a student make cultural and personal connections between her reading and her own life, thus enhancing reading instruction and the student's reading skills.

Georgia*, an 8-year-old African American student in the third grade, can decode printed English into spoken language but struggles with reading comprehension. She wears cochlear implants, uses primarily speech to communicate, and is in the process of learning American Sign Language (ASL). Every day she receives five hours of educational services in a general education setting and 120 minutes of services with a teacher of the deaf, who works with her on reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension is a skill included in Georgia's Individualized Education Program. Davinique Small, an African American graduate student in a teacher preparation program at Valdosta State University who is co-author of this article as well as an educational interpreter, developed a reading project that would focus on this objective. Small worked with Georgia for two hours per week, providing instruction that included reading aloud in spoken English and sign-supported English. Small and Georgia would read a book together, and Small would use evidence-based teaching strategies and embedded assessments to improve Georgia's reading skills.

Still, Small planned to do more. First, she wanted the content of the reading to reflect the African American culture that she and Georgia shared. This would increase Georgia's interest and perhaps boost her attention, and, therefore, hopefully improve her comprehension. When Small learned that Georgia loved princess stories and that one of her favorite stories was *Sleeping Beauty*, she remembered a book from her own childhood, *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* by John Steptoe (1987). She had read the book—a princess tale of two sisters who lived in Zimbabwe—as had her friends, teachers, and parents. Small considered the book a staple in the African American community.

Photos courtesy of Davinique Small

Left: Small helps a student make cultural and personal connections between reading and the child's own life as they read and discuss the story *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale*.

Small also wanted to tap into and build on Georgia's relationship with the Deaf community. While Georgia had always described herself as "deaf," she had previously had limited interaction with the Deaf community. When she entered her new school, however, she found herself surrounded by a large population of deaf and hard of hearing students and a hub of Deaf community activities. She was able to experience ASL, Deaf Santa, and the steady presence of interpreters. Small saw an increased willingness in Georgia to communicate with deaf schoolmates, the interpreters, and teachers of the deaf through ASL. Georgia also expressed a desire to acquire more sign language to chat with a deaf schoolmate who communicates solely in ASL.

Small planned that she and Georgia would read the book together and build on Georgia's relationship to the two cultures that were her heritage. She developed reading lessons with Jennifer Beal, a professor for the reading project and co-author of this article, as part of a course requirement in Valdosta State University's deaf education master's degree program. Beal would help Small flesh out the project and provide feedback. Small would do the following with consistent feedback from Beal:

- Administer two reading assessments
- Develop data-based reading objectives
- Create and implement four reading lesson plans that focused on the book and reading objectives
- Embed pre- and post-tests in each lesson
- Use evidence-based instructional strategies (see Beal, 2018, for a comprehensive review of the project)

Small began by administering the grade-level word lists and reading passages of the Basic Reading Inventory Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve and Early Literacy Assessments (Johns, Elish-Piper, & Johns, 2017) to assess Georgia's decoding abilities and her reading comprehension level. The results showed that Georgia's vocabulary was at an independent level of second grade, her instructional level was third to fifth grade, and her frustration level was sixth grade. In relation to her reading comprehension, Georgia performed slightly above grade level, scoring an independent level of second grade, an instructional level of third grade, and a frustration level of fourth grade. Small also used the Signed Reading Fluency

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Rubric (Easterbrooks & Huston, 2008) that allows assessment of a student's ability to render printed text into sign language across 13 indicators and five ability levels to determine Georgia's skills in ASL and know which reading objectives to address through sign language. The results showed that out of the 13 sign language components (e.g., facial expression, role taking, and eye gaze), Georgia was struggling with her palm orientation when fingerspelling as well as use of body shifts to show turn taking in conversation. Using this information, Small developed four objectives based on the suggestions of the National Reading Panel (2000): 1) phonemic awareness, 2) vocabulary, 3) fluency, and 4) comprehension. She also included accurate use of palm orientation when fingerspelling based on the Signed Reading Fluency Rubric results. Small and Beal followed the recommendation of Salend (2015) and developed lesson plans that were individualized and personalized for Georgia and contained multicultural components.

Small observed the lessons taking place in Georgia's general education classroom and noted that students were tasked with identifying similarities and differences between fairytales and what has become known as *fractured fairytales*, fairytales that resemble a well-known tale but contain startling changes. Georgia and her peers were learning how to create Venn Diagrams comparing the original *Cinderella* story to fractured *Cinderella* fairytales. These fractured *Cinderella* stories, popular with teachers (We are Teachers, 2020) include examples of fractured storytelling in which, for example, Cinderella is represented as a cowgirl (Lowell, 2000), as a male prince (Cole, 1987), as an Algonquian Native American (Martin & Shannon, 1998), or as a penguin (Perlman, 1995).

Small also observed Georgia's social studies class and saw that the students were discussing and comparing multiple empires, including the Roman, Greek, and Mali empires. She decided to build on Georgia's knowledge about Mali, a country in Africa as well as an early African empire, and her love of princess stories to develop a lesson centered on identifying cultural parallels between *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* and Georgia's own Black culture and Deaf culture. She related fairytales and folklores to Deaf storytelling. Small also connected fingerspelling and explicit vocabulary instruction in ASL to the printed English in the text. Dialogue presented in print was interpreted into ASL, and each character in the story was given a name sign. The English names of the characters come from the Shona language and are related to their personal characteristics, which are revealed in the story: The father is called Mufaro, which means "happy man"; Nyasha, the kind sister, has a name that means "mercy"; and Manyara, the mean sister, has a name that means "ashamed" (Jeffries, 1992). Small pointed out how the names of the characters align with the Deaf community's use of name signs, which also may be based on the physical characteristics or personality traits of the bearer. Understanding quickly, Georgia gave Small a name sign, too, using the position and movement for *queen*, but with a D handshape to reflect *Davinique*, Small's first name. Small pointed out that nicknames are often given within the African American community. When Small was younger, her family referred to her as "SB" for Sleeping Beauty, her favorite princess. Using the book as a springboard, Small and Georgia discussed this and other parallels between the Deaf and African American communities.

Other materials were selected to reflect Georgia's interests and connections to American Black Deaf culture. Small mapped out which strategy would require which material and how each would be implemented into the instruction. For example, she planned to use visual supports such as storyboarding to illustrate the plot. (See Table 1.)

In working with Georgia, Small and Beal were in conformance with the laws (i.e., Every Student Succeeds Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act) that require that teachers use evidence-based strategies and individual student data to guide their instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, 2015). Most students who are deaf or hard of hearing receive the majority of their educational services as Georgia does—within the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). These students generally participate in either "push-in" environments, in which they experience their instruction in general education classrooms, or "pull-out" environments,

Table 1.
Small linked evidence-based strategies with materials and instruction. Below is the listing.

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGY, USE OF	MATERIAL(S)	INSTRUCTION AND CONNECTIONS
Explicit vocabulary instruction (Paul, 1996) **Modeling** (Rosenshine, 2012)	• *Disney Princess Phonics: Happy Magic* • *Disney Princess Phonics: Short Vowels Activity Book* • *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* by John Steptoe • Note cards • Unravel rubric • Highlighting tape • Video camera	• ASL vocabulary paired with printed English words • Expectations are modeled • Evidence in text is highlighted • Quotation marks are added to indicate dialogue
Visuals charts and visual supports (Easterbrooks & Baker, 2002)	• Story cards, storyboards • Venn diagram • Unravel rubric	• Storyboarding to illustrate the plot • Venn diagrams to compare the African American and Deaf communities
Guided reading (Schirmer, Therrien, Schaffer, & Schirmer, 2009)	• *Disney Princess Phonics: Happy Magic* • *Disney Princess Phonics: Short Vowels Activity Book* • *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* by John Steptoe	Georgia read the printed English while Small provided support (in signs)
Activating prior knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978) **Higher-order thinking skills** (Easterbrooks, & Beal-Alvarez, 2013)	• *Disney Princess Phonics: Happy Magic* • *Disney Princess Phonics: Short Vowels Activity Book* • *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* by John Steptoe • Note cards	• Multiple discussion questions related to general education • Emotions, problem solving, and arts in the Deaf, Zimbabwean, and American hearing communities
Dual coding theory (Paivio, 1991)	• *Disney Princess Phonics: Happy Magic* • *Disney Princess Phonics: Short Vowels Activity Book* • *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* by John Steptoe • Note cards	Simultaneous use of printed English and visual representations of the vocabulary words to make flash cards; Georgia fingerspelled, signed, and spoke each word
Self-monitoring (Gunter, Miller, & Venn, 2003)	• Checklist • Video recording of Georgia signing the story	Georgia assessed a recording of her productions of fingerspelled vocabulary and role shifting for accuracy related to palm orientation and clear role shifting
Active learning (Bonwell & Eison 1991)	• SMART Board® • Letter beads • String • Name tags • Crowns • Who Said It?" game	Game-based learning by stringing letter beads to spell vocabulary words—the activity related to the art of jewelry making in Zimbabwe; "Who Said It?" game, in which Georgia supports who said dialogue by finding evidence in the text

in which they experience their instruction in separate educational settings.

As part of the project, Georgia was asked to describe what was happening within a story using five story cards with illustrations from the story and matching each card with a dialogue strip. She was also video recorded using body shifts to indicate which person was talking and performed a self-evaluation in which she answered the following questions: *Can you tell who was speaking here? How do you know?* (Easterbrooks & Beal-Alvarez 2013). Small used the unravel strategy, in which students are asked to underline and highlight text, sometimes number paragraphs, pay attention to certain words, and predict content to support comprehension. Small prompted Georgia to break down the story into decipherable chunks and allowed her to go back to the story to find the answers to questions. Georgia was successful, going back within the text and finding dialogue as well as problems and solutions related to the plot. The post-assessments showed that Georgia was able to achieve her reading objectives and improve her overall reading comprehension. Small had successfully embedded cultural connections and personalized instruction into evidence-based instructional strategies for reading instruction.

About 15 percent of America's deaf and hard of hearing students are African American and about 25 percent are Hispanic/Latinix (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2011). Teachers who work with deaf or hard of hearing students can use the process documented here to meet the diverse and individualized needs of their students while using strategies that have evidence in support of their effectiveness. Personalized instruction and evidence-based instruction provide the surest path to effective teaching.

**Georgia is a pseudonym.*

Fragments of Conversation

A STUDENT, A TEACHER, AN AFRICAN PRINCESS, AND EVIDENCE-BASED TEACHING

Georgia is an 8-year-old student at a Title 1 elementary school with 69.3 percent free or discounted lunch recipients within a suburban area. With a total of 512 students, the student-to-teacher ratio is 13. The racial breakdown of the school is about 38.9 percent white, 38.7 percent African American, and 10.9 percent Hispanic. The school goes from kindergarten up to fifth grade. All deaf and hard of hearing elementary students within this school district are filtered through this elementary school. It acts as a hub school for these students primarily for its central location and teacher of the deaf who is not itinerant; thus, she can provide all day/daily services.

Georgia and teacher Davinique Small worked on reading skills by reading and discussing *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* (Steptoe, 1987). Small used several strategies to help Georgia understand the text, activating prior knowledge and getting Georgia to see parallels between her own life and the life of the fictional princess in the book and between Deaf culture and African American culture.

SMALL: How can we relate storytelling in Deaf culture to storytelling in Mali's [African] culture?
GEORGIA: Hmm … [the African people] did not have writing, so they talked.

SMALL: Do you and your siblings ever disagree? How do you solve that disagreement?
GEORGIA: "Siblings" means "brothers," right? My brothers can annoy me. Sometimes we fight because we both want to play Fortnite, but they don't share with me. I always just tell my grandma.

SMALL: What are the steps in the "unraveling method"? Why do we use it?
GEORGIA: We underline and number the paragraphs. I use it in Mrs. J's [general education] class.

SMALL: How can we use our bodies to show multiple people speaking?
GEORGIA: We move them side to side?

SMALL: Is signing the same as talking?
GEORGIA: No … I don't know … I think maybe. Talking, you use your mouth not hands.

SMALL: Remember how we discussed that black people in America are called African Americans? Do you think they are the same as Africans? Are we from the same culture? Same skin complexion? Both have the word *African* in our ethnicity label.
GEORGIA: Maybe they talk different, but they are brown, too, like me and you.

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