

Literacy and Language: A Legacy of Cultivating Community

Dr. Patricia A. Edwards



LITERACY AND LANGUAGE: A LEGACY OF CULTIVATING COMMUNITY

The teaching of literacy and reading comprehension is among the most fundamental pillars of education. **Dr. Patricia Edwards** of Michigan State University is an internationally recognized leader in this field. By drawing on a lifetime experience teaching her community and students how to read, Dr. Edwards has advanced not only educational practice but also social justice and civil rights. We look here at how her inspiring work continues to enrich communities around the world.

Language: Key to Cultural Experience and Identity

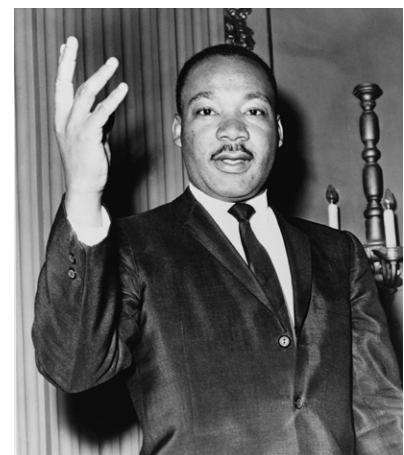
Language is the primary medium by which we inherit and transmit our culture – it is key to both our cultural experience and cultural identity. As such, the study and support of literacy and reading comprehension can be understood as critical to accessibility and equity; an endeavor to acquaint all members of a culture with the critical tools required for navigating within it. It is this understanding of language's poignant, vital significance that underpins Dr. Patricia Edwards' career.

Early Experiences Shape and Later Aspirations

Even during her early childhood in Albany, Georgia, Dr. Edwards was passionate about education and community outreach. At the tender age of 9 years old, Dr. Edwards tutored boys who came to her father's backyard barbershop. She shares that she '... was an excellent recruiter and got my captive audience every Saturday. I read books and I taught the alphabet and how to count; I had a full curriculum.'

As a child of color growing up in the mid-20th century, Dr. Edwards' work as an educator has been irrevocably shaped by her lived experience of America's Civil Rights movement. She sees providing education for her community as a radical act of social justice in defiance of systemic oppression. As is arguably still the case, she notes that the American government was determined to keep Black people undereducated, over-policed, and mired in generational poverty.

A major component of the Civil Rights movement, owing to Black culture's long, historical connection between music, cultural identity and resistance, was organized through communal song and prayer. Indeed, Dr Edwards' hometown of Albany was a focal point for this element. She recalls that singing '...galvanized protestors, kept energy and morale high, and presented a very non-threatening form of nonviolent protest ... These songs, along with testimonials, gave the mass of people involved in the movement the strength they needed to go out into the community and face the mobs of people



who had decided that African Americans did not deserve the same rights as White people ... These songs gave the participants of the movement a medium through which to tell their stories.'

On 15 December 1961, Dr. Martin Luther King addressed a major rally in Albany, where he delivered a speech to over 1,000 protesters. He then led 250 people to march to Albany City Hall and, later that evening, spoke at a mass meeting at Shiloh Baptist Church. Shiloh is now a historical site, remembered for being where the 1961 Albany Civil Rights Movement began. It was in this context that Dr. Edwards developed her



talent and passion for community involvement, as well as her convictions concerning the role of educators in the struggle for justice.

Sharing Knowledge and Developing Collaborations

As part of her dedicated work to put her convictions into tangible actions, Dr Edwards has served as an author for National Geographic's 'Reach for Reading', the Frog Street Pre-K 'Celebrating the Joy of Learning', and the Savvas Learning Company Three Cheers for PreK programs. She also hosted a Cengage Training session for National Geographic sales representatives in 2015 in a session aptly titled, 'Big Ideas and Essential Questions: How these Relate to Student's Lives'.

In 2016, Dr. Edwards was part of work in the Flint Community Schools for the 2016–2017 school year and in 2023 with the Flint and Genesee Literacy Network. In 2014, she served as a consultant to support the ongoing literacy activities within the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan. Also in 2014, she worked with the American Civil Liberties Union on a Literacy Roadmap Leadership Team Meeting. The Michigan chapter had recently filed a lawsuit on behalf of eight students, alleging that inadequate teaching had failed children in the need to obtain basic literacy skills and reading proficiency, as required by the state. The group was charged with developing recommendations and a strategy for teachers, schools and organizations responsible for underserved youth – namely, students of color and those living in poverty.

Dr. Edwards also took a trip to the University of Nairobi in 2014 that resulted in a long and fruitful collaboration. Dr. Edwards invited Dr. Hellen Nasimiyuh Inyega, Professor of Language Education, to participate in her International Literacy Association Presidential Project titled 'How does the world read?'. Dr. Edwards felt strongly that there was a need to develop an international data bank to extend knowledge and insights into how teacher educators prepare teachers to teach reading. In conjunction with the Director of International Development, councils and national affiliates were asked to share data concerning the state of education in their countries, with a particular emphasis on literacy development and achievement. They were also tasked with gathering materials such as stories, audio and video clips of administrators, teachers, parents, and students discussing literacy and how it is used and taught in their countries.

The materials that Dr. Inyega submitted as part of this project impressed Dr. Edwards so much that she reached out to discuss further collaboration. At the time, Dr. Edwards was teaching a master's level course on language diversity and literacy instruction, which Dr. Inyega became involved with, exploring the teaching of reading in multilingual classrooms and reflecting on how cultural practices and beliefs influence teachers' language use and literacy instruction. Dr. Inyega's colleague, Dr. Paul Odundo, later sought out Dr. Edwards to discuss ways to develop links between the Department of Educational Communication and Technology of the University of Nairobi and Michigan State University.

Meet the researcher



Dr. Patricia A. Edwards
Department of Teacher Education
Michigan State University
Michigan, MI
USA

Dr. Patricia A. Edwards, an internationally recognized literacy scholar, was named a Michigan State University Distinguished Professor in June 2023. The honor is one of high distinction at the university, and is only given to select faculty members to recognize distinguished achievement in teaching, research and public service. Dr. Edwards earned her PhD in Reading education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1979 and, since then, achieved many accolades and awards. Edwards joined the MSU College of Education in 1989 and was promoted to full professor in 1994. She served as a member of the Board of Directors from 1998 to 2001 of the International Literacy Association (formally the International Reading Association), from 2006 to 2007 as the first African American President of the Literacy Research Association, and as the 2010–2011 President of the International Literacy Association. In addition to this historic achievement, in 2020, she was the first African American in the history of the organization to receive the Oscar S. Causey Award, in recognition of her outstanding contribution to research in reading. In 2022, Dr Edwards was selected as a member of *The HistoryMakers*, the foremost digital repository of the Black Experience; a collection housed permanently at the Library of Congress which contains over 11,000 hours of testimonies. Her areas of expertise include early childhood, family, intergenerational, and multicultural literacy; parental involvement; and community partnerships, with a special focus on minority or marginalized communities who face socioeconomic barriers to literacy.

CONTACT

E: edwards6@msu.edu

W: <https://education.msu.edu/people/edwards-patricia/>
<https://drpatriciaedwards.com/>

T: [@PatEdwardsMSU](https://twitter.com/PatEdwardsMSU)

KEY COLLABORATORS

Dr. Lori Bruner, University of Alabama
Dr. Ann Castle, Michigan State University
Dr. Lucia Cardenas Curiel, Michigan State University
Dr. Catherine Compton-Lilly, University of South Carolina
Dr. Lisa Domke, Georgia State University
Dr. Tracy Donohue, Central Michigan University
Dr. Laura Hopkins, LIFE International School, Spain
Dr. Jungmin Kwon, Michigan State University

Dr. Guofang Li, University of British Columbia, Canada
Dr. Gwendolyn Thompson McMillon, Oakland University, Rochester
Dr. Jonda McNair, The Ohio State University
Dr. Jeanne Paratore, Professor Emerita, Boston University
Dr. Marliese R. Peltier, Ball State University, Indiana
Dr. Susan Piazza, Western Michigan University
Dr. Heather Reichmuth, University of Southern Maine
Dr. Darreth Rice, Michigan State University
Dr. Patriann Smith, University of South Florida
Dr. Rand Spiro, Michigan State University
Dr. Jacquelyn Sweeney, Bowie State University
Dr. Jennifer Danridge Turner, University of Maryland-College Park
Dr. Kristen White, Northern Michigan University

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FURTHER READING

PA Edwards, et al., *Teaching with Literacy Programs: Equitable Instruction for All*, 2023, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

PA Edwards, et al., *Partnering with families for student success: 24 scenarios for problem solving with parents*, 2019, New York: Teachers College Press.

PA Edwards, *New ways to engage parents: Strategies and tools for teachers and leaders, K–12*, 2016, New York: Teachers College Press.

For a full list of books and other publications, please see: <https://drpatriciaedwards.com/>

