

CHANGING THE LITERACY LANDSCAPE: LOOKING BACK TO MOVE AHEAD

By Alfred W. Tatum

The racial reading achievement gap has received a great deal of attention in the United States since the Coleman Report was commissioned by the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1966 to assess the availability of equal educational opportunities to children of different race, color, religion, and national origin.¹ This study was conducted in response to provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. James Coleman, a sociologist from Johns Hopkins University, concluded that family backgrounds of students accounted for most of the difference in achievement, and approximated that two-thirds of the variation in student achievement is related to students' family characteristics. This finding was interpreted as "schools don't make a difference."² The culpability for educating African American children shifted away from schools toward families and communities. Schools were let off the hook for several decades following the 1966 report as measures were made to create social service programs to address poverty-related variables that were believed to affect students' educational outcomes. The educational fates of many students were based on the luck of the draw – they were either fortunate to be assigned to an effective teacher or not. This was problematic for many students who relied on schooling because of their lack of community or family resources.

For more than thirty years following the Coleman report, schools were not held accountable for the reading achievement of African American adolescents. White flight from America's urban centers and the onset of urban blight related to joblessness indirectly contributed to the formation America's high school dropout factories of the 1990s.³ These were high schools in which a large percentage African Americans failed to earn high school diplomas. Holding schools and teachers accountability was not ushered in until the passage of No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB) in 2001 under President George W Bush. Two key signatures of the legislation were: 1) measuring students' progress in reading and math annually in grades 3 through 8 and at least once during high school using standardized assessments; and 2) using assessment data to make decisions on instruction and curriculum. These measures led to a frenzy of educational experimentation in middle and high schools. This frenzy included test preparation to improve reading scores, teacher professional development

and professional learning communities focused on helping all disciplinary teachers (e.g., history and science teachers) become reading teachers, policies to close and re-open underperforming schools, and the emergence of charter schools to name a few. These practices missed the mark to accelerate high academic achievement in large part because they were ahistorical, apolitical, and asexual. Each had little effect on reversing the academic hierarchy that found African American adolescents, namely African American males, near or at the bottom of the reading queue.

Policymakers currently have a strong foothold on the direction of reading instruction in the United States. Members of the U.S. Congress assembled a National Reading Panel to provide scientifically research-based recommendations to improve the reading achievement of all of America's children, including those considered perennial underperformers on standardized reading assessments. The panel's recommendations led to million-dollar initiatives such as *Reading First* that focused on reading achievement of students in the primary grades and *Reading Next* that focused on middle and high school students. More recently, there has been a shift to adopt Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The National Governor's Association (NGA) influenced the adoption of CCSS because too many students were graduating from high school without workforce or college readiness skills. NGA argued that the vitality of the American economy was directly connected to the literacy abilities of students graduating for America's high schools.



Unfortunately, however, far too many African American teens are still being underserved by the schools they attend. The reading achievement gap has not been shattered. A very small percentage of African American students are reading at or above proficient level according to the data from the National Assessment of Education Progress. Thirty-eight percent of all twelfth-graders performed at or above a proficient level in reading in 2009. The percentage for African American twelfth-grade students was significantly lower.⁴ I share this information because this is the ongoing crisis narrative that pollutes the imagination of what is possible for African American students who experience meaningful reading and writing experiences. Educators often ignore or are unaware of the literacy practices constructed by African Americans that benefitted and elevated several generations of African American students and holds the potential to do the same. There is a tendency to deny that literacy among African Americans existed prior to the scientific machinery of testing that has been used by social scientists to perpetuate racist ideologies of intellectual superiority and inferiority.⁵

Despite racial and economic challenges, African Americans have always managed to rescue the significance of literacy teaching to protect their lives and the lives of their posterity. Reading and writing have been at the center of these efforts. Sadly, there are far too few African American scholars who specifically focusing on reading and writing research to tell the story and shape current educational practices. Increasing the number of African American literacy scholars and those who focus on the literacy development of African American youth has the potential to impact a large number of middle and high school students. This is why the authors of the articles in this special issue - emerging scholars in the field literacy education - took delight in revisiting specific literacy practices that have made a difference in the lives of African Americans who repositioned themselves in America's landscape. At times, this landscape has been morally dark and hostile toward African Americans. These emerging scholars refuse to allow their voices to be marginalized or wait for others to give them permission to reconceptualize the roles of reading and writing for African American students within English Language Arts and disciplinary classrooms and outside the boundaries of schools. In the spirit of these emerging scholars, I offer that it is time to march forward without apology, to rethink literacy practices inside and outside of schools, and to protect the lives of young folks who deserve nothing less than our best efforts to protect their rights to quality literacy instruction and quality lives.

Notes

1. James S. Coleman, Equality of Educational Opportunity (COLEMAN Study EEOS, 1966). [Computer file]. ICPSR06389-v3. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2007-04-27. doi:10.3886/ICPSR06389.v3
2. Richard Rothstein, Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap (Washington, D.C., Economic Policy Institute, 2004).
3. Alliance for Excellent Education. Who's counted? Who's counting? Understanding high school graduation rates (Washington, DC: Author, 2006).
4. National Center for Education Statistics, The nation's report card: Grade 12 reading and mathematics 2009 national and pilot state results (NCES 2011-455) (National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., 2010).
5. Richard Herrnstein & Charles Murray, Bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life (New York: Free Press Paperback, 1996).



Alfred W. Tatum is a professor of Literacy Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago where he also serves as director of the UIC Reading Clinic and coordinates the Literacy, Language, & Culture Ph.D. program. He is the author of two books: *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap* and *Reading for Their Life: (Re) building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males*.