

FAILING AT LITERACY

Why we are not teaching all students to read and what we must do about it

Right now in the United States, we are failing to teach our children how to read. In 2015, the Nation’s Report Card published that only 36% of fourth grade students scored at or above “proficient” in reading¹ on the National Assessment of Educational Progress². Statistics show that if you are not reading at the age appropriate grade level by fourth grade, you are four times more likely to drop out of high school³. But literacy is about much more than succeeding in school. Teaching our children to read is about preparing them to navigate society's key institutions, advocate for themselves and their loved ones, and become active participants in their communities and in their futures.

1 | [“2015 Mathematics & Reading Assessments”](#) Nations Report Card.
 2 | The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas.
 3 | [“National Achievement Level Results”](#) The Nation’s Report Card, 2015.



Opening the Book on the Literacy Crisis in the United States

Reading Partners is a nonprofit organization (and longtime service partner of Repair the World) which helps children become lifelong readers by empowering communities to provide individualized instruction with measurable results. Reading Partners does this by training volunteer tutors to work one on one with K-4 students, using a structured curriculum to teach skills needed to transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.”

Instructions

In one lesson from the Reading Partners’ curriculum, tutors teach students to identify the “author’s message”; something the author wants to teach readers or make them think about. This crucial skill allows the reader to understand the author’s reason for writing the text and to analyze how the text fits with their own perspectives. We invite you to put yourselves back in the process of learning to read and to think critically and independently. Step into the role of a Reading Partners' student and use the following framework to unpack this excerpt of an article Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote when he was a student at Morehouse College.



As you read through the text, ask yourself:

- What did the introduction tell us?
- What does the author seem to think about education so far?
- What did you learn from the part you just read?
- What was this section about?
- What does the conclusion tell us? How does that go with the introduction?

Excerpts from “The Purpose Of Education,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1947 ⁴

...I...often find that most college men have a misconception of the purpose of education...It seems to me that education has a two-fold function to perform in the life of man and in society: the one is utility and the other is culture. Education must enable a man to become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of his life.

The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically...The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals...

We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character— that is the goal of true education...

After Reading:

Come back together as a larger group and talk about what you think the author’s message is and give some examples from the text that support it. Discuss the following questions:

- How/where did you develop the tools or skills to follow this lesson?
- What might be some barriers to accessing these skills?
- How might the same skills that you used in this lesson be applicable to your everyday life?

4 | King, Martin Luther, Jr. “The Purpose of Education.” The Maroon Tiger January-February 1947. 10. Print

Reading the Book: How Racism Impacts Literacy

Framing

Now, let’s delve deeper into the data about the literacy crisis. According to the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 18% of Black fourth graders and 21% of Latinx fourth graders in public schools were proficient or above in reading, compared to the national average of 46% of white students. ⁵

Nationally, 78% of all low-income students in public schools are below proficient in reading. ⁶ **What is happening in our schools and in our institutions that students are not learning how to read proficiently? What is happening that we are disproportionately failing poor students, students of color, and especially poor students of color?**

Data is only one piece to begin to understand this fundamental failure in the US education system. Reading disparities around race and class call us to look deeper into the complicated and destructive ways in which institutionalized racism manifests in our school system and impact, students, parents, and teachers. The following texts offer historical, personal, and Jewish context for the literacy crisis and challenge the reader to examine how race, class, and resource allocation interact and affect the ways children in the U.S. learn. Keep in mind that literacy rates are often used as a way to mark progress and measure success, which in turn affects which schools receive funding.

5 | “National Achievement Level Results.” The Nation’s Report Card, 2015.

6 | Based on eligibility for the National School Lunch Program.

Instructions

Find a partner and choose which texts you would like to delve into; it could be one, two, three or all of them. Read each source out loud together. Spend some time wondering about it out loud together before referring to the guiding questions. Allow space for each partner have the opportunity to share a response. This is a dialogue and a conversation. When you feel ready, come back together as a large group and share any takeaways.

Guiding Questions

- How do each of these texts illuminate the literacy crisis from different perspectives?
- According to the texts, what are the causes and consequences of the literacy crisis?
- How can we use literacy as a lens through which to view how racism exists in American educational system?
- How does school segregation relate to the racial discrepancies in reading scores?
- How does the Rambam text resonate with or challenge your experiences with the U.S. education system?
- What steps would we need to take as a country to fulfill this Jewish responsibility to teach all students?

Stanford University's Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project⁷

Stanford's Center for Education Policy Analysis created a project to research the causes of US educational inequality and design strategies for eliminating them. The Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project uses best available data to clarify patterns and trends in the equality of educational opportunities and outcomes.

One key set of measures of racial educational equality are racial achievement gaps—differences in the average standardized test scores of white and black or white and Hispanic students. Achievement gaps are one way of monitoring the equality of educational outcomes.

White-black and white-Hispanic achievement gaps have, in general, narrowed substantially since the 1970s in all grades and in both math and reading. The gaps narrowed sharply in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, but then progress stalled. In fact, some of the achievement gaps grew larger in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Since the 1990s, however, achievement gaps in every grade and subject have been declining. As of 2012, the white-black and white-Hispanic achievement gaps were 30-40% smaller than they were in the 1970s. Nonetheless, the gaps are still very large, ranging from 0.5 to 0.9 standard deviations.

One potential explanation for racial achievement gaps is that they are largely due to socioeconomic disparities between white, black, and Hispanic families. Black and Hispanic children's parents typically have lower incomes and lower levels of educational attainment than white children's parents. Because higher-income and more-educated families typically can provide more educational opportunities for their children, family socioeconomic resources are strongly related to educational outcomes. If racial socioeconomic disparities are the primary explanation for racial achievement gaps, we would expect achievement gaps to be largest in places where racial socioeconomic disparities are largest, and we would expect them to be zero in places where there is no racial socioeconomic inequality... Nonetheless, even in states where the racial socioeconomic disparities are near zero (typically states with small black or Hispanic populations), achievement gaps are still present. This suggests that socioeconomic disparities are not the sole cause of racial achievement gaps.

7 | ["Racial and Ethnic Achievement Gaps,"](#) The Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project, Stanford CEPA

Improving Reading Outcomes for Young Black Males, B. Denise Hawkins⁸

In the following article, B. Denise Hawkins explores different initiatives to support and encourage Black and Latino male students to read. Rather than put the burden and blame on students, educators are changing required reading to reflect the lived experiences of their students of color.

Educators and parents alike know that when students do not read and write, progressing through school will be difficult. But what Alfred Tatum, Ph.D., Dean of the College of Education at the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC), also finds troublesome is how this national reading report card data for Black male students has “framed a pernicious discourse” which concludes that these students who are underperforming in reading are likewise “disengaged from learning, lacking motivation, don’t like to read, and are doomed academically and in life if they are not reading proficiently by fourth grade.” It’s complicated, adds Tatum and untangling “these things become major challenges for us as educators and parents.”

Instead, what should matter, adds Tatum, an expert on the literacy of African-American males in K–12 and a former Chicago middle school teacher, is “Black boys’ access to and relationships with text. It’s where teachers should focus.”

Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Torah Study 1:2⁹

The Mishneh Torah is a Jewish legal code compiled by Maimonides (Rambam) in the 12th century during his time in Egypt. It was intended to be sufficiently complete enough that it would serve as a stand-alone guide to Jewish law, including the Oral Law, without its reader having to resort to outside sources.

In the same way that a man is obligated to teach his son, he is obligated to teach his son’s son, as it says, “And make them known to your children, and to your children’s children” (Deut 4:9). And not just his son and his grandson: rather, there is a command upon each and every Jewish wise man to teach all students, even though they are not his sons. As it says, “And you shall teach them to your children” (Deut 6:7)



⁸ Hawkins, Denise. “[Improving Reading Outcomes for Young Black Males](#)” NEA Today, 26 February 2016.

⁹ Sefaria Translation

How the Systemic Segregation of Schools is Maintained by Individual Choices, **Nikole Hannah-Jones**¹⁰

Nikole Hannah-Jones is an investigative reporter, author, and MacArthur Fellow. In her essay, "Choosing a School for my Daughter in a Segregated City", published in the NY Times in 2016, Hannah-Jones discusses fighting against school segregation. The following text is an excerpt from an interview discussing this piece where Hannah-Jones decides between sending her daughter to a majority-white, affluent, and overcrowded school or a low-income, Black and Latino, and under-enrolled school. We highly encourage you to take a listen to the full interview in your free time.

TERRY GROSS:

Let me quote something you say in your *New York Times* [piece.] You write, "true integration, true equality requires a surrendering of advantage. And when it comes to our own children, that can feel almost unnatural."

So what's the feeling that - a natural feeling part of the equation for you? Do you feel like it's unnatural to surrender the advantage that your child has?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES:

[I] worked to get where I am so that I could provide things for my child that my parents couldn't. And one of the few advantages that my parents were able to provide for me was to enroll me in a bussing program that got me out of my segregated schools and into high-achieving, more affluent white schools. And I am not doing that for my own child. So I think it is the most natural thing in the world for parents to try to secure advantage for their own children. And to try to give up that advantage or tell people to give up that advantage is a hard ask. I understand.

But at the same time, I don't think that she is going to be harmed by this. I think that it is only a sacrifice if you really believe that those kids are less than yours. And I don't think that that's true. With that said, one of the main reasons I write so much about segregation is because we do know that our country's education system was built on a racial caste and that once we isolate black and Latino children or poor children away from white and middle-class

HANNAH-JONES CONT:

children, we often don't give them the same resources. They often don't have the same level of instruction. They often don't have strong principals. They often don't have the same technology. I mean, federal data shows that. So my daughter's school is rare in that way, and I think where we see...

GROSS:

In that it does have better resources than the average...

HANNAH-JONES:

It does.

GROSS:

...Low-income, racially segregated school.

HANNAH-JONES:

Right. But almost entirely because of a principal who was there named Roberta Davenport. And when you look at these schools, it is – if they are high-functioning, it is almost always because of a single charismatic principal. And that's just not a way to get systemic equality. So I think that is – the problem is school integration and integration in neighborhoods is not about some feel-good notion.

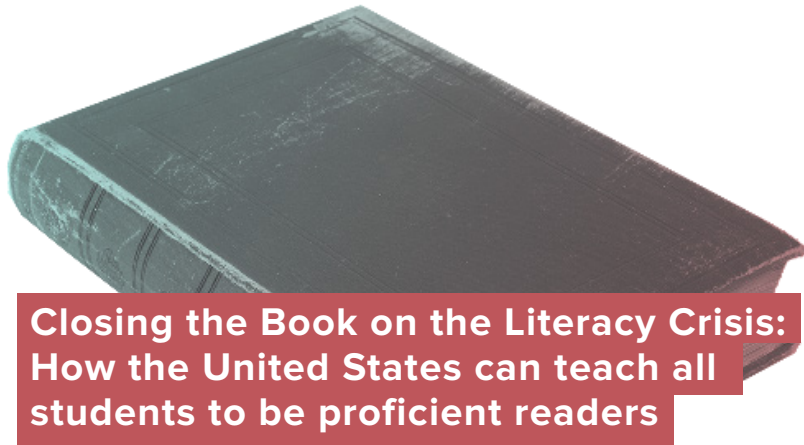
It really is about – there's never been a moment in the history of this country where black people who have been isolated from white people have gotten the same resources, not in schools, not in communities. And, you know, Dr. King understood that in a visceral way that integration was about the sharing of power and it was about full citizenship. And I believe that.

DEFINITION

School Segregation:

The institutional separation of an ethnic or racial group from the dominant majority in the school system

¹⁰ | David Bianculli, host. "[How The Systemic Segregation Of Schools Is Maintained By 'Individual Choices'](#)" Fresh Air, NPR, 2017.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. writes “Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?’”

As we take in what we've read and discussed above, we need to turn to our own communities and consider the following questions:

- How do racial disparities inform the literacy crisis where you live?
- What can you do about it?

As you begin to address the needs in your communities, there are some things you should keep in mind.

Attach yourself to a cause that matters to you -

Find organizations in your neighborhood that are committed to effecting change through literacy in disparate communities.

Reading Partners intentionally chooses schools and communities with children who qualify for reduced lunch or receive title funding. We believe that one of the best ways to close the achievement gap is to tutor children using key foundational skills, decoding, skill building and critical thinking. We live in a time when technology and access to resources are plentiful, but those tools by themselves don't overcome the gap in literacy rates. As a volunteer, you can be a resource to communities in your neighborhood.

Don't be surprised if your volunteering leads to advocacy -

Once you find the right cause and you enjoy the experience, you may decide to take a more prominent role in the work.

You can become a community ambassador and gain support for education justice in many different ways. This may include participating in local campaigns, contacting your legislators, or making others aware of the inequities in their communities. At Reading Partners we encourage all of our volunteers to participate beyond volunteering. Last year, through the mobilization of our volunteers, we conducted a books and school supplies campaign and were able to restock much need books and supplies to all of our schools.

Learning about other communities can lead to learning more about yourself -

The great part about volunteering is that you see how your work improves the larger community in a small way.

Reading Partners programs mobilized 11,422 volunteers across the country to tutor children for one to two hours a week per school year. Our model gives each student up to 35 additional hours of academic assistance in one school year. Of the 92% of the children who receive free or reduced lunch, 83% met their literacy growth goal. Although the volunteer experience may feel singular, when those experiences are calculated over a year in one neighborhood, the impact is insurmountable.

Together we are better -

We believe that everyone has a role to play in closing the achievement gap.

Reading Partners has seen the impact of working together. In fact, the organization believes so much in "Together We are Better" that it is one of our core values. We believe that everyone has a part to play in closing the achievement gap, and that collaborative efforts create unlimited potential for students and communities.