

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

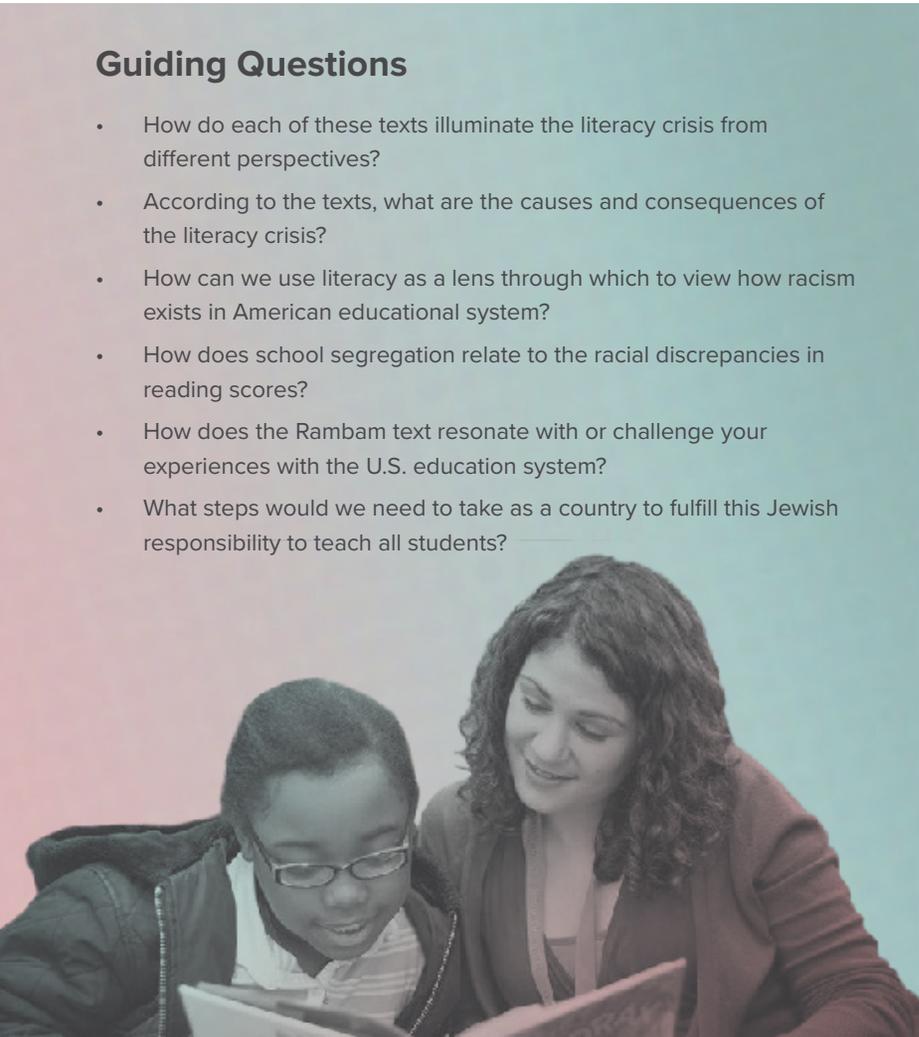
Stanford's Center for Education Policy Analysis created a project to research the causes of US educational inequality and design strategies for eliminating them. The Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project uses best available data to clarify patterns and trends in the equality of educational opportunities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

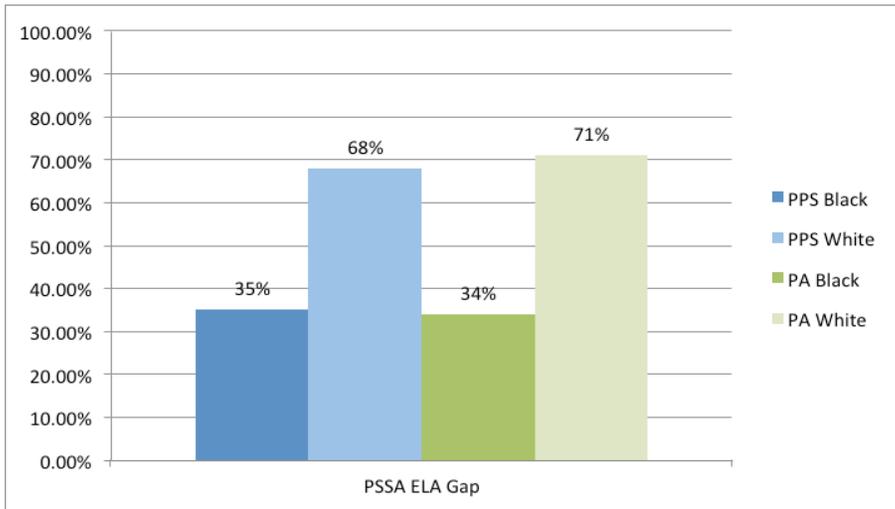
One potential explanation for racial achievement gaps is that they are largely due to socioeconomic disparities between white, black, and Hispanic families. Black and Hispanic children's parents typically have lower incomes and lower levels of educational attainment than white children's parents. Because 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



A+ Schools PPS Data

According to A+ Schools 2017 Report to the Community, 3rd grade reading scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) increased district wide by 8 points. While this is certainly something to celebrate, it is important to realize that only 55% of 3rd graders in Pittsburgh Public Schools were reading on grade level during the 2016-17 year. Even more troubling is the large racial disparity between black and white students. Below is a graph that illustrates the English Language Arts achievement gap between black and white students both within the district and Pennsylvania.



Data provided by Pittsburgh Public Schools and Pennsylvania Department of Education

Drilling down even further, we see that these disparities are even starker when comparing schools within Pittsburgh Public Schools. The chart below shows the size of the grade 3-5 ELA achievement gap in PPS K-5s and K-8s for the 2016-17 school year.

Size of Gap	0-5	6-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51+
2015	0	0	5	10	8	9	2
2016	0	1	4	8	7	12	2
2017	0	2	5	7	8	8	4

Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Torah Study 1:2⁸

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)



Race, Children, and Literacy

Dr. Aisha White, Director, The P.R.I.D.E. Program

These days, being literate means being able to gain knowledge, communicate, solve math problems, and understand and use the dominant symbol systems of a culture. While not technically a ‘literacy’ effort, the P.R.I.D.E. Program nonetheless has used literature in all of its interactions with children, adults, and community partners. Our goals are to:

- Support the development of young African American children’s positive racial identity.
- Increase adult knowledge and skills in building young African American children’s positive racial identity and socialization.
- Increase awareness of the significance of race in the lives of young African American children.

We believe there are clear connections between positive racial identity and young children’s literacy experiences.

In a 2016 article *Reading Your Way to a Culturally Responsive Classroom*, P.R.I.D.E. Principal Investigator Shannon Wanless describes books as “mirrors in which children see and savor images and representations similar to their own lives and experiences” and as “windows that enable young readers to gain new cultural perspectives by peering into others’ worlds.” To encourage and engage them in the reading process, children need access to books that reflect their own race, culture, experiences, and context. Literature should include representations of different aspects of daily life within a culture, with particular attention given to aspects of setting and racial relevance. (Reading your way to a culturally responsive classroom, Shannon B. Wanless and Patricia A. Crawford, *Young Children*, Vol. 71, No. 2.)

In her article about race representation in children’s picture books, Jenna Wilson writes: at the time children are reading picture books, studies show that they are also developing their own racial identities, as well as racial attitudes. Therefore, the stories and illustrations within picture books that depict diverse racial populations are likely to have an influence in shaping children’s racial attitudes towards others, and their own racial identities. (Race representations in children’s picture books and its impact on the development on racial identity and attitudes, Jenna Wilson, *American Cultural Studies*, 499, Research and Writing, March 18th, 2014.)

Bell and Clark’s study of reading, comprehension, and recall showed that reading comprehension among African American children is significantly more efficient for stories depicting Black imagery and culturally related themes. Their work also found strong support for their hypothesis that comprehension would be greater when children are exposed to relevant sociocultural experiences in stories. (*Culturally relevant reading material as related to comprehension and recall in African American Children*, Yvonne R. Bell and Tangela R. Clark, *Journal of Black Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 4, November 1998 455-475.)

Additionally, motivation has been found to be a key determinant of reading success, with research suggesting that children prefer and are more likely to engage with literature that reflects their own personal experiences. (*Promoting equity in children’s literacy instruction: using a critical race theory framework to examine transitional books*. Sandra Hughes-Hassell, Heather A. Barkley, and Elizabeth Koehler; *School library media research* Volume 12, 2009.)

Lastly, Wanless suggests that literature can also be used as an entry point to discussions about race with books serving as springboards for teachable moments and meaningful conversations reflecting the teacher’s color awareness. She adds that educators should begin thinking more about Racially Responsive Teaching Practices*, building students Race Relate Skills**, and recommends that the early childhood field generate more examples of ways to use materials, including children’s literature, to bring the subject of race into the classroom. Because the P.R.I.D.E. program already utilizes the literacy-based practices advised here, it is a great example for parents, teachers, and other educators in building children’s positive racial identity and at the same time supporting their literacy development.



*Racially-Responsive Teaching Practices (PPTP)

Shannon Wanless, PhD

Low: Color-Blind.

In this low level of RRTP adults adopt the policy of not seeing or being influenced by their students' race. In this approach, teachers do not engage in direct conversations or discussions with children about race. However, the absence of any messages about race still sends a message to children about race: 1. For students of color, their experiences can become invisible in the classroom. 2. Because there is no intentional talk about race, there are no positive acknowledgements of race either, even when classroom books and other materials may reflect diverse families. 3. Children are left to develop their own understandings about race, and if they ask questions, they are met with adults who are not willing or able to adequately talk about race in the school setting.

Medium: Color-Aware.

An improvement on the color-blind approach, teachers who practice being color-aware intentionally celebrate children's racial differences as an important part of who they are and teach children about race in direct and honest ways. Adults in color-aware classrooms find ways to incorporate positive discussions of race into the curriculum, and take advantage of teachable moments related to race. Teachers utilizing this approach respond to children's questions and race-related interactions in ways that help children know talking about race is okay. These teachers also furnish additional books and activities to keep the conversation going.

High: Social Justice.

This RRTP category is considered ideal and encompasses actively empowering young children to recognize and act on race-related injustices. This means involving them in projects that allow real participation in the process of change such as the popular early childhood Band-Aid company experience*. At the social justice level, teachers show children that although there are many societal problems, there are people and organizations invested in positive change and that even young children can help make that change.

* **One** day, while attending to a minor scrape, early childhood teacher Louise Derman-Sparks said to the children, "Look at this—it says on the box that these bandages are flesh-colored. That means they are the same color as our skin. Let's see if it really is true." Each child then received a bandage on his or her arm, and they noticed that the bandages matched very few of the students' skin tones. The next day, they invited members of other classrooms to participate in the experiment. Noticing that the bandages were, indeed, not a universal skin color, they opted to write a letter to the company. The children dictated what they wanted, Derman-Sparks added a description of their experiment, and the letter was mailed to the company. They also got parents involved, sending letters home about what they were doing. A few weeks later the class received a box of bandages from the company with a polite note reading, "Enclosed find some transparent strips which are more flesh-colored." (Derman-Sparks, 2006)

While teachers build their RRTPs, they can at the same time support students/children's development of **Race Related Skills (RRS). These skills describe abilities that support and reflect positive racial identity development among young ALANA (African-American, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American) children. They are listed in continuum format since #1 — positive personal/group identity — is important to children's ability to fully embrace the remaining four skills.

1. Being aware of and embracing your own racial/ethnic group completely; building a positive sense of personal and group identity.
2. Being aware of other races; fostering consideration for other races.
3. Understanding how race may influence others' perspectives; having respect and appreciation for other racial/cultural groups.
4. Having an ability to form relationships across races; being open to people and elements of other cultures.
5. Recognizing and standing up to race-related injustices; having a desire to eliminate all forms of prejudice, discrimination, and inequity.

One thing to keep in mind is, reading is a skill typically taught in the school setting. It's important to be aware of the ways positive racial identity is linked to academic achievement. Study after study of both pre-k, elementary, middle, high school, and college students has shown that when children have a positive racial identity, they are more likely to do better in school. These positive outcomes show up in a variety of ways, from improved grades and test scores, to recalling information, and improved behavior. Getting quality, engaging, and relevant picture books into the classroom and into the hands of young children is an important first step to both reading success and positive identity.

For more information about the program and to read the P.R.I.D.E. report visit: <http://www.oed.pitt.edu/Files/Publications/RaceScan-FullReport12.pdf>.