

# LITERACY PRACTICES FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE ADOLESCENTS

By Alfred W. Tatum

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### THE EDITORS, *STUDENTS AT THE CENTER* SERIES

Millions of American young people struggle with reading and writing, despite substantial efforts to increase literacy. Although their struggles with reading are not unique, a higher percentage of African-American male adolescents fail to perform at a proficient level when responding to assessment questions on similar passages, according to trend data.

Alfred W. Tatum takes a fresh, cross-disciplinary approach to advancing the reading and writing development of these students. He suggests that efforts to improve achievement through assessment and accountability measures, while useful, underestimate the depths of student needs. He also finds that student-centered approaches to learning have great potential to advance the literacy of African-American male adolescents. Addressing internal and external factors particular to this group—and absorbing lessons from the historical reading and writing practices of African-American writers and leaders—can build resiliency and other critical resources that African-American male adolescents must have in order to succeed in school and in life.

Tatum shows that:

- > Many urban school districts responding to federal mandates have adopted a literacy-sanction hierarchy that has failed to yield meaningful improvement in the reading achievement of young African-American males.
- > There is virtually no empirical evidence of proven practices that significantly increase the reading achievement of African-American male adolescents.
- > Neither the research literature on African-American males nor that on adolescent literacy specifically address the reading achievement of African-American males.
- > An appropriate approach takes into account that instructional, sociocultural, and personal factors likely combine to determine success or failure.

- > Student-centered approaches to learning are a promising pathway for advancing African-American male literacy development because they have the potential to boost internal and external protective resources.
- > Understanding the roles reading and writing played for African-American males historically serves as a productive starting point for conceptualizing teaching practices, selecting texts, and structuring instructional contexts.
- > An alternative framework of literacy curriculum and instruction for African-American males, based on four “vital signs of literacy development,” begins with developing student identities rather than the goal of raising test scores.

## INEFFECTIVE FEDERAL SANCTIONS

Broadening the focus of educational reform from equity to both excellence and equity would appear to be promising, yet efforts to ensure high-quality instruction as well as equal resources for the nation's 50 million students in grades 5 to 12 have not improved reading outcomes for African-American male adolescents. Reviewing the research literature, Tatum did not find a single urban school district where 40 percent or more of African-American males read at a proficient level on the grade 8 or grade 12 NAEP. This fact is all the more alarming given that reading comprehension forms the foundation for all learning beyond fourth grade—and for adult functioning in society.

Federal policies and mandates, while warranted, can unintentionally make it more difficult to provide high-quality literacy instruction to young African-American males. For example, teachers in an urban school district can be in full compliance with school-level mandates, principals can be in full compliance with district mandates, districts can be in full compliance with state mandates, and the state can be in full compliance with federal mandates—and yet we see only small upticks in reading achievement. These minor gains, usually associated with more (though not necessarily better) reading

instruction, will fall short of preparing all students for college and careers.

## **FEW PROVEN INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES**

The use of accountability assessments in secondary schools increases incentives for schools to push out failing or marginal students before graduation. Researchers on multilayered systems of accountability have shown how district leaders use “checklisting”—that is, determining if certain practices are in place—as a tool of accountability. A closer look reveals how this practice fails to lead to higher reading achievement in urban high schools.

It has been relatively easy to take several important steps in accountability systems: monitor the achievement gap; establish school-based expectations; set priorities to help struggling readers at the high school level. However, it has proven much more difficult to identify strategies that help struggling readers at the high school level. There is virtually no empirical evidence of a critical piece: the identification of proven practices that significantly boost the reading achievement of a high percentage of African-American male adolescents who enter urban high schools as struggling readers.

Moreover, the reading lessons offered to African-American male adolescents are often based on assessment scores framed within the context of data-driven instruction that place them in remedial reading classes. In these classes, they commonly receive less demanding or poorly conceptualized reading instruction. Remedial classes often require students to read less than peers in regular classes and students suffer from underexposure to quality texts. These less-demanding academic pathways for struggling African-American male readers result in permanently low levels of literacy and thus reify social inequality.

## **FACTORS AFFECTING READING ACHIEVEMENT**

The research literature on reading does not address the reading achievement of African-American males specifically. The broad contexts in which the literacy development of these young men should be developed sits at the intersections of reading research, urban school reform, and a wide array of social, economic, and political forces. Fortunately, the past decade has seen a large body of research on both in-school and out-of-school factors that contribute to the general academic performance of African-American males.

Drawing on these resources, three types of factors may affect the reading achievement of African-American male adolescents: instructional, sociocultural, and personal.

Instructional research has identified essential elements of teaching reading comprehension, such as differentiating instruction, building subject-matter knowledge, expanding vocabulary, integrating reading and writing, encouraging classroom discussion, and providing exposure to a volume and range of motivating texts.

Sociocultural research provides evidence that many variables—such as culture, social class, home literacy and language experiences, family background, and environmental factors—work together to interrupt reading achievement. For example, far too many African-American male youth come from homes without the rich language experiences—such as frequent engaged reading and vocabulary knowledge—common in more affluent, white homes.

Research into personal factors shows that certain individual experiences and behaviors contribute to reading achievement. These include effort, time, and persistence, as well as positive attitudes toward school and connection with long-term goals. Moreover, embracing an ethnic group identity may enhance school engagement for African-American males, which in turn will increase achievement. This contradicts the notion of oppositional identity and rejects the idea that African-American students do not want to be viewed as smart to avoid “acting white.”

These factors do not act independently; it is their overlap—the multifactor impact—that determines pathways of success or failure.

## **ADVANTAGES OF STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACHES**

Student-centered approaches to learning have great potential to advance the literacy of African-American male adolescents by helping students build resiliency and other critical protective resources they need to address the above factors.

Researchers have identified both internal and external sources of these protective resources. Internal factors include a person’s academic skills, a strong self-concept, and community supports. Specific external factors that promote resilience include the involvement of a consistently caring adult, positive expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation—all priorities of student-centered approaches.

Quality teaching and quality texts are also essential. To provide these, educators need a clear concept of the roles of literacy instruction, a sincere interest in contributing to the personal development of African-American males, and knowledge of a wide range of texts across disciplines that can help prepare African-American males for engaged citizenship at local, national, and international levels.

## **HISTORICAL LITERACY ROLES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES**

Understanding the roles reading and writing played for African-American males historically serves as a productive starting point for conceptualizing quality teaching practices, selecting texts, and structuring instructional contexts that align with student-centered approaches.

A socio-historical perspective provides insight into the wide range of reasons that African-American males of the past practiced literacy. In the 19th-century educational movement of the urban North, for example, African Americans practiced literacy, among other reasons, in order to improve their social and economic status; strive for racial uplift; advance the economic, social, and political aims of the community; tear down the walls of discrimination; and advance human liberty.

Other historical accounts indicate a focus on the development of self identity, personal engagement, and transformation. For example, African-American males formed literary societies in Northern cities in the early 1800s not only to improve their reading and writing skills but also to cultivate a scholarly way of life.

Today's emphasis on standards, rigor, and assessments is a radical departure from the historical roles of literacy development for African-American young men. Most federal, state, district, and school efforts lack a focus on helping these young males strengthen their identities and embrace reading as a cultural practice in meaningful contexts, often ignoring or suppressing their need for intellectual development.

## AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE ADOLESCENTS

One way to reconnect young African Americans with their historical traditions of reading and writing—and to improve their achievement and meet their out-of-school needs—is to focus on multiple facets of literacy development, rather than only building foundation skills. Tatum proposes a broad framework that shifts the focal point from raising standardized test scores to developing student identities. The new framework, which emerges from the intersection of several bodies of literature, is based on his work on four vital signs of literacy development (see box). Ultimately, it is designed to help practitioners provide literacy instruction to increase the number of African-American male high school graduates who are prepared for advanced postsecondary academic studies.

Central to this framework is providing quality instruction and rich texts with multiple entry points—personal, economic, and community; social, cultural, and gender; local, national and international. This has implications not just for instructional and professional preparation strands but also for theoretical strands.

Instructional strands focus on knowledge of effective reading and writing research practices, strategies for mediating texts, and developing a useful comprehensive assessment profile. Professional development strands focus on initial teacher preparation and ongoing professional development to provide additional support that even knowledgeable teachers may require to lead African-American male adolescents to high achievement.

The theoretical strands should be considered when planning how best to provide literacy instruction and professional development. They address one's conceptualization of the role of literacy instruction and one's approach to teaching. This must include an idea of improving the life circumstances of African-American males. And it could include a dual focus on both college and career readiness, with a long-term aim of increasing earnings, as well helping African-American males to become good men and to restore their confidence in reading and writing as tools of human development.

Tatum's socio-historical approach suggests that student-centered learning is conceptually sound for advancing the literacy development of African-American male adolescents. For this group, he says, student-centered learning has to be essentially race-based and gender-based.

This approach will encounter resistance from those who believe that all students are the same and that there is no need to honor students' differences. It is crucial for new strategies to be well thought out to avoid becoming just another failed experiment. The current political landscape affecting schools, policies, and curricula can lead to a symbolic, piecemeal approach to student-centered strategies rather than a substantive change.

### VITAL SIGNS OF LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

**Vital signs of reading:** These are designed to improve reading and writing skills and nurture language development. They constitute a necessary minimum for all literacy efforts. The working tools are decoding, self-questioning, using language, monitoring comprehension, summarizing, and other strategies students need to handle and produce text independently. The other vital signs also affect reading outcomes.

**Vital signs of readers and educators:** These pay attention to students' lived experiences, both in school and outside of school, and are useful for considering ways to improve the human condition.

**Vital signs of reading and writing instruction:** These are useful for conceptualizing the rationale for literacy teaching. They are intimately related to rescuing and refining the significance of literacy instruction and helping us conceptualize the rationale for providing it. Educators must focus on quality support, appropriate texts, assessments, and potential uses of technology in order to maximize opportunities to shape rigorous adolescent literacy.

**Vital signs of educators' approaches:** Teachers need a strong foundational background for teaching geared to the vital signs of reading. Educational contexts must be characterized by competence, commitment, caring, and culpability. Adolescents benefit when they know they belong in the learning community and feel that they are in the presence of an adult advocate who is not going to give up on them.

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**Students at the Center** synthesizes existing research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning. The papers that launch this project renew attention to the importance of engaging each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for success in college and a career. *Students at the Center* is supported generously by funds from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

To download *Literacy Practices for African-American Male Adolescents* and all papers in the *Students at the Center* series, go to the project website: [www.studentsatthecenter.org](http://www.studentsatthecenter.org)



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