Issue Analysis (1250-1500 words)

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English 486

March 4, 2025

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Although all children possess the ability to learn to read and write, we continue to see a worrisome decline in U.S. literacy rates, especially among students of color. While this trend is often seen as a failure to learn on the child's part, it overlooks an important achievement: Students of color are literate, and they're developing their own forms of highly functional literacy. Though different from "traditional" and "academic" literacies, these differing forms of literacy are valuable in their own ways. Whether through specific verbal practices and cultural expressions, these alternative literacies operate under very specific rules and structures, much like how the "proper" literacy practices are taught in academic settings. This raises a critical question: *If these students are capable of developing meaningful forms of literacy, why do the stats say they're struggling with literacy?*

A key factor in literacy development begins at home. Community, family, and the influence of "literacy sponsors." are crucial. These sponsors—who can be both individuals or institutions—have a huge role in shaping a student's journey with reading and writing. Deborah Brandt, a prominent theorist of literacy, introduces the label "literacy sponsors" to highlight the influence of figures and institutions on the literacy journey. This idea closely connects with the

work of Vivian L. Gadsden, who investigates the vital role that home life plays in literacy growth.

In her research, Gadsden examines the experiences and beliefs of African American parents and students regarding the importance of reading and writing, exposing that many families do not view literacy solely as a technical skill but as a tool for empowerment. This contradicts the untrue but widespread belief that black families place less value on literacy than white families do. In fact, black families may place an even greater emphasis on the importance of literacy. For many participants in Gadsden's study, literacy isn't just reading and writing—it is a necessary skill for survival. Contrary to popular belief, Gadsden found that students of color do indeed have access to literacy sponsors, which raises the same question: Why do the statistics indicate that they're struggling with literacy?

Gadsden's investigation suggests that the hurdles students of color face in traditional academic settings are not due to a misalliance between capability and expectation, but rather come from a separation between literacy practices they have learned from home and the standards imposed by the Eurocentric formal education system. Put another way, students of color usually excel in practices they have learned from cultural traditions, but these practices are not recognized or valued within most academic spaces. And even though these practices are often functional, they are not seen as such. By finding this, we are able to identify that the disconnect is not occurring dur to students' abilities or potential.

We now know that students of color often have community and familial support backing them, and we know these children are both intelligent and capable. By our closely examining at the individual level, we have the ability to step back and look at the broader educational system.

Upon doing this, we can see the narrow and biased definitions of literacy that dominate education systems and recognize how they fail to account for the diverse ways that children of color engage with language and meaning. Now we've uncovered the root of the issue: Current literacy standards do not make space for or recognize the rich literacy practices of so many.

The U.S.' schoooling system has long perpertrated systemic inequities that overly affect our students of color. The current crisis is a result of systemic oppression, with many schools relying only on outdated reading and writing methods that fail to meet the needs of some POC learners. These "standard" methods overlook the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of many students, which in turn results in many being assessed using tools that fail to accurately reflect their true literacy abilities. Standardized tests and evaluation scales are usuallu biased, leading to low scores that do not illustrate a child's full potential (EdTrust). This representatiton keeps students of color from being recognized as literate, even though they are often very proficient in their own literacy practices. As a consequence, these students can be placed in educational environments that set them up for failure.

So, the question we originally asked—why do the statistics indicate that students of color are struggling to become literate?—has two answers. First: Students of color *are* already literate, but in ways that don't look like school-based models. Second: Their cultural literacy practices are not recognized or valued within the U.S. education system. With this, we can consider the necessary course of action, which I believe is to broaden our definition of literacy by creating educational environments that value all literacy practices.

To make progress, we as a society need to recognize that literacy is not defined by "academic" reading and writing skills but by the larger ability to communicate, interpret, and

create across different contexts. If a student shows exceptional skill in these areas—through storytelling, cultural expressions, or other forms of communication—they should be celebrated, encouraged, and given space to continue developing these abilities. By acknowledging that literacy is a wide array of practices, we can support students' growth, helping them realize that their specific strengths are valid and worthy of recognition.

Supporting every aspect of a student's identity is imperative to their overall development. When children don't see themselves reflected in their curriculum, or when their literacy practices are disregarded, they may begin to feel that their contributions are neither valued nor "right" (EdTrust). This exclusion can lead to disengagement and a belief that their educational efforts are not worthwhile. It is necessary to create inclusive environments where every student feels seen and appreciated. To achieve this, students must be shown role models, significant cultural and historical figures who reflect their personal experiences. When students see people who look like them succeeding in various fields, it helps them believe in their potential (EdTrust). Representation matters.

Lastly, and perhaps most critically, teachers will benefit from being given the tools, resources, and knowledge to see and accommodate diversity in their classrooms. Educators should be shown how to not only teach the conventional academic literacies but also to understand and appreciate the importance of their students' cultural diversity.

By embracing the diversity of their students' literacy practices, educators can create spaces where people of all backgrounds can share, ultimately to the benefit of all students. By creating safe spaces, ensuring representation, and giving educators the tools to engage with

diversity, we will hopefully break the cycle of misrepresentation and underappreciated literacy, allowing all students, regardless of race, to thrive and succeed on their own terms.

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