

# The Impact of the Literacy Gap on the Black Community

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## **Abstract**

The literacy gap is the gap between students and their ability to read and write. Many students who have difficulties in literacy will graduate with low literacy skills or drop out altogether. Literacy can determine household income and financial independence. The literacy gap impacts one's employment status and earnings. This paper asks the question: how does the literacy gap impact the Black community, and how will better policies improve literacy gap outcomes? This paper concludes that through better policies, the focus on educational attainment, and early childhood programs would help with the negative effects that the literacy gap has on the Black Community.

## **Introduction**

The literacy gap is the gap between students and their ability to read and write. Many believe the literacy gap is synonymous with the achievement gap, which is the gap in academic performance and educational attainment between students. The Literacy Lab states that reading is the foundation for educational success, and without necessary literacy skills, students can fall behind quickly (The Literacy Lab, 2020). Literacy levels affect dropout rates and increase the likelihood of incarceration, which are closely related. People who drop out of high school are 3.5 times more likely to be arrested than high school graduates (Hanson & Stipek, 2014). In California, only 20 percent of inmates display a basic level of literacy (Hanson & Stipek, 2014).

One's literacy levels have been shown to determine their household income and financial independence. Literacy can affect a person's wages, contributing to cycles of poverty.

### **Research Question**

How does the literacy gap impact the Black community, and how will better policies improve literacy gap outcomes?

### **Thesis Statement**

Better policies, the focus on educational attainment, and early childhood programs would help with the negative effects that the literacy gap has on the Black Community.

### **Methodology**

During the research process, I gathered sources from Proquest through the Duke Library database and Durham County Library's NC Live database. "Literacy gap" was another term I used as well as "functional literacy" to collect sources. The phrases "African American" and "Black" were also used when looking up the previous key terms. There has been a thorough review of research conducted on the topic of the achievement/ opportunity gap between Black and white children and the racial divide in academic spaces. Many of the studies briefly touch on the literacy gap, but only a few sources will talk about it in great detail. A Second Chance, INC., was a blog that was used to collect information about solutions to low literacy. When searching for sources about the literacy gap, other forms of literacy came up, like financial literacy and

health literacy. Within the sources on the educational literacy gap, only a small portion of them are about it within the Black community.

### **Terminology**

In this paper, literacy is defined as the ability to read and write to function in society. The literacy gap is defined as the gap in reading and writing proficiency between two groups of students. This paper is specifically focused on comparing Black and white students. Educational attainment is defined as the level of education a person completes, as well as post-grad outcomes, like an individual dropping out or becoming incarcerated. Socioeconomic status is defined as the class of an individual, which is based on their education, income, and profession.

### **Limitations of this Paper**

A limitation of this paper includes being a secondary research paper, meaning all data and information came from other articles, which may have limitations of their own. Many of the sources collected may be out of date, and or the results might have changed since the time of publication.

### **Synthesis of Findings**

#### *Policies Cosigning the Literacy Gap*

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was enacted in 2002. NCLB represented a significant step forward for our nation's children in many respects, particularly as it shined a

light on where students were making progress and where they needed additional support, regardless of race, income, zip code, disability, home language, or background.

The goal of the No Child Left Behind Act was to increase educational opportunities for low performing students and schools. However, the NCBL allowed states to exclude minority populations in their reports and set the minimum number of students that would be counted from the minority populations. School districts also excluded students' test scores who were expelled and decided that the minimum number of students from each subgroup had to be present to be counted. For example, in 2008, Texas excluded over 270,000 students from their data, while California excluded around 450,000 students (Walker-Carlson, 2016).

The law was scheduled for revision in 2007, and, over time, NCLB's prescriptive requirements became increasingly unworkable for schools and educators. Recognizing this fact, in 2010, the Obama administration joined a call from educators and families to create a better law that focused on the clear goal of adequately preparing all students for success in college and careers.

From the Department of Education, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015, and represents good news for our nation's schools. This bipartisan measure reauthorizes the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the nation's national education law, and longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students. The new law builds on key areas of progress in recent years, made possible by the efforts of educators, communities, parents, and students across the country.

The original Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965. The largest financial component of ESEA was Title I,

which provided financial assistance to local education agencies for the education of children from low-income families. Title I-eligible students were typically taught in “pull-out” classrooms. Also, Core decisions regarding curriculum, standards, and personnel matters remained mostly delegated to local government by the states.

### *Educational Attainment*

Many students who have difficulties in literacy will graduate with low literacy skills or drop out altogether. Along with low literacy, students may drop out to attend community college, or because of lack of engagement with school/peers, attendance issues, choice of work over school, and moving (Ford & Nicholas, 2019). James E. Ford and Nicholas Triplett conclude that Black students who were surveyed cited the reasons they drop out was because of discipline/ expulsion/ suspension, incarceration, or child care needs (Ford & Nicholas, 2019).

A study by The Annie E. Casey Foundation found that students not proficient in reading by the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school compared to more proficient students. In 2016, 15% of African Americans who were 25 and older who had not completed high school, compared to only 8% of white Americans (Ford & Triplett, 2016). Multiple researchers have connected incarceration and drop out rates. Sixty-eight percent of prison inmates do not have high school diplomas, and on average, prisoners read at an eighth-grade level (Keiser, 2011). Among those prisoners, people of color are the most represented in prison (Chaney, 2014). The Bureau of Justice Statistics published a graph that examines the incarceration rates in North Carolina by the 100,000s (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001). Per one hundred thousand, 1,612 Black people are incarcerated compared to only 265

white people and 395 Hispanic people (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001). The education level of an individual is also affected by their socioeconomic status.

### *Socioeconomic Status*

There are many negative social implications of illiteracy, precisely their socio-economic and employment status. Literacy can determine household income. In 2007, the median annual income of a high school dropout was \$23,000, compared with \$48,000 for someone who obtained a Bachelor's degree or higher (Fiester, 2010). Additionally, data from the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy discovered that 52% of households that make \$20,000 or less test below necessary literacy skills (BarbaraBushFdn, 2019). As literacy proficiency increases, the likelihood of a household earning less than \$20,000 decreases to only 8% (BarbaraBushFdn, 2019).

Higher literacy can also lead to financial independence. Nine percent of adults who test below basic literacy receive public financial assistance like WIC (Women, Infants, and Children), TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), SSI (Supplemental Security Income), and food stamps. Yet as literacy increases, the percentage of financial assistance decreases (BarbaraBushFdn, 2019). For example, less than 3% of adults who are literacy proficient receive public financial assistance (BarbaraBushFdn, 2019).

In 2009, the federal minimum wage gap was raised to \$7.25 (Kiger, 2019). At the beginning of 2020, twenty-one states have raised their minimum wage based on the cost of living (Brainerd, 2020). Another fourteen states have higher wages because of approved legislation (Brainerd, 2020). In January of 2019, Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Bobby Scott

announced that they would introduce the Raise the Wage Act of 2019 (Cooper, 2019). The Raise the Wage Act would raise the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour, benefiting 39.7 million workers (Cooper, 2019). This Act would benefit Black and Hispanic workers, workers at or below the poverty line, along with workers leading single-parent households (Cooper, 2019). Raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 would provide tens of millions of Americans the means to escape poverty and an improvement to the standard of living (Cooper, 2019).

### *Employment*

Along with socioeconomic status, the literacy gap impacts one's employment status. Low levels of formal education have been linked to employment in low wage-earning jobs. Retail sales, cooking and food preparation, building cleaning, food, and beverage serving, and personal care and service (like child care workers and patient care assistants) are occupations that are dominated by low-wage workers (Ross & Bateman, 2019). Proficiency in writing can determine "graduation eligibility, grade retention, and promotion" (Walker-Carlors, 2016). Outside of high school, students' writing is used to measure their potential in college, and in the workforce, whereas insufficient writing skills can affect employment and promotion negatively (Walker-Carlors, 2016).

Students who are good readers do better in school and have a greater likelihood of graduating from high school and obtaining meaningful employment after graduating (Walker-Carlors, 2016). Along with the connection between low levels of educational attainment, low wages have been linked to subsistence living, which can create a cycle of poverty (Walker-Carlors, 2016). Literacy also has sizable implications in society. The National Council

for Adult Learning determined that low literacy costs the U.S. at least \$225 billion each year in non-productivity in the workforce, crime, and loss of tax revenue due to unemployment (Proliteracy, 2015).

## **Solutions**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) suggests that programs that include support for families can have a lasting impact on children as they progress through school and into adulthood. Homewood Children's Village (HCV) in Pittsburgh is an example of this. This organization provides children support through mentoring, tutoring, case management, job training programs, college guidance, and many other resources. HCV also provides support for parents with continuing education, job training, and anti-poverty programs. Walter Lewis, the President, and CEO of HVC in Pittsburgh explains the importance of early education for children of color to combat institutional racism within the education system. "Literacy is critical because it's one of those skills where you learn to read, and then you read to learn," Walter Lewis says. "If you struggle with reading, in fluency and comprehension, and some of those things, it's very difficult to learn later in life. If our kids struggle with reading and literacy early on, it's just setting them back at later stages [in life]."

He also suggests, in early childhood, Black children should see themselves represented in books they are reading. Many times Black students do not have access to fiction and non-fiction texts that reflect their families and their culture. Summer Wood and Robin Jocius suggest that a teacher's class library should reflect their students' culture and experiences (Wood & Jocius, 2013). Classroom libraries are important because it gives students the freedom to read for



pleasure. “Classroom libraries are an important component of any classroom; they allow students choice and freedom in selecting texts for pleasure reading” (Wood & Jocius, 2013).

Lastly, focusing on educational attainment and achievement can help the Black-white literacy gap. Dale J. Cohen and the other authors of an analysis of the historical inequities of the literacy gap conclude that Black literacy increases as educational attainment/achievement increases (Cohen, et al., 2012). They claim that literacy and educational attainment are connected, and helping the achievement of Black students could help close the literacy gap.

Policies focusing on the literacy gap should also be created to help establish rules and methods that can create a fair education system that benefits all students.

## **Conclusion**

Literacy is an important skill that affects all aspects of a person’s life, which is why it is a critical issue to avoid the negative influences low literacy can produce. It impacts how much education a person may achieve and one’s likelihood to drop out of high school or become incarcerated. It can influence how much money a person is able to make and their level of employment. In conclusion, low literacy can cause significant implications to not just a single individual, but to a whole community.

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