

The State of Black Male Literacy Research, 1999–2020

Literacy Research: Theory,
Method, and Practice
Vol. XX, 1-23
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DOI: 10.1177/23813377211038368
journals.sagepub.com/home/lrx



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Abstract

In this report, the authors describe the scope and scale of Black male literacy research; discuss theories, conceptual frames, and groundings informing the research on Black male literacy education in grades preK–12; and offer insights on Black male literacy research based on the current state of research. Each is based on an extensive review of quantitative and qualitative literacy research studies from 1999 to 2020 with primary or secondary data analysis solely or predominantly focused on Black males in grades preK–12. Four directions for future research are offered to nurture a scientific culture on Black male literacy education to address the methodological possibilities to capture the complexities of the literacy education of Black males across multiple contexts (e.g., in school, out of school), multiple locations (e.g., urban, rural, and suburban), and school types (traditional public, private, parochial, charter, home, boarding).

Keywords

Black males, research methods, theoretical frames, literature review

In this report, we write about the state of Black male literacy research. Initially, we wanted to examine how literacy development and advancement at home and in

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schools are being framed in literacy research across the developmental continuum; if there is research evidence that Black males are receiving a strong literacy foundation in U.S. schools to fulfill their aspirations and achieve their short-term and long-term goals; how literacy research positions Black males to sustain, empower, and protect themselves and their communities within and across social and scientific disciplines and technical and nontechnical fields; and how literacy research aims to address some of the more intractable dimensions of Black male lives in the United States. However, we found that there was a paucity of research studies focused on the literacy development of Black male students that could be used to discuss each question across the developmental levels independently. Therefore, we write about the state of Black male literacy research more broadly.

Why the State of Black Male Literacy Research

We accepted the invitation from the Literacy Research Association to write about the state of Black male literacy research because intuitively, we knew there was a need for this report. We also believed that a national research status might reveal findings or add explanatory power and implications for conducting literacy research focused on or involving Black male students. Additionally, we are personal witnesses to the absence or negligible presence of Black males across professional fields, disciplines, and in higher education with full recognition that this could be an outgrowth of literacy experiences in grades preK–12.

At the onset of this report, we simply did not know the scale or scope of the existing Black male literacy research across multiple contexts (i.e., in school, out of school, online), multiple locations (e.g., urban, rural, and suburban), and school types (i.e., traditional public, private, parochial, charter, home, boarding). We did know, however, from ongoing data reporting that many Black males, both high and low academically performing readers, are underserved during literacy instruction and in schools more broadly (Harper & Wood, 2016; Noguera, 2003; Polite & Davis, 1999; H. Stevenson, 2014; Warren, 2017; Wright & Counsell, 2018). It is significant that the research and its gaps are identified to address what some scholars have referred to as a “troubling state of affairs” (Howard, 2014) or “damage-centric” literacy development of Black males (Nasir et al., 2018).

Second, we accepted the invitation because national data indicate that no state had more than 19% of Black eighth-grade males reading at a proficient level in 2018. The 2019 National Assessment of Education Progress data also highlighted that only 6% of 12th-grade Black males were reading at the proficient level and only 1% were reading at the advanced level. We believe a focus on Black male literacy research is significant to move more Black males to advanced levels of reading and writing in elementary and high schools. Moreover, a research focus is needed to restore the Black male literate tradition while examining how literacy research is being conceptualized, planned, and conducted.

Black Male Literate Tradition

A Black male literate tradition has flourished throughout every region of the United States. Black males have been reading, writing, and using language for their personal and collective advancement for more than four centuries. They have created and maintained a rich literate tradition despite policies and practices aimed at their suppression, oppression, silence, and exile (Blain et al., 2018; Burrell, 2009; Douglass, 1845/1997; Dunbar, 2000; Dyson, 2004; Gibbs, 1988; Haley & Malcolm X, 1965; Hine & Jenkins, 1999; Kunjufu, 1983; Manning, 1983; Porter, 1995; Scales-Trent, 2016; Sowell, 2000; Thomas, 2007; Upchurch, 1996; C. Williams, 1987; H. Williams, 2005; Woodson, 1933). There are thousands of artifacts that create a marvel of the literate tradition of Black males in every field of study and across local, national, and global contexts (Baldwin, 1985; Hughes, 1967; Parks, 1963; Porter, 1995; Reid, 2002; West, 1999).

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s literacy artifact is just one illustrative example. As a 19-year-old teenager from a southern region of the United States who lived under the weight of *de jure* segregation, he wrote the following:

Not until 1948, when I entered Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, did I begin a serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil. I turned to serious study of the social and ethical theories of the great philosophers, from Plato and Aristotle down to Rousseau, Hobbs, Bentham, Mill, and Locke. All of these matters stimulated my thinking—such as it was—and, while finding things to question in each of them, I nevertheless learned a great deal from their study. (Carson, 1998, p. 16)

Reading a wide range of texts allowed him to engage in serious study. Similar to Dr. King's autobiographical description of his relationship with texts, the early reading and writing experiences in homes, schools, and communities are commonly mentioned in autobiographies and biographies of Black males. We highlight eight depictions of Black males' connections with reading and writing in Table 1.

There is evidence across the excerpts of each author's relationship with words, characters, passages, and books; his views of educators responsible for teaching reading; his multifaceted reading identities; his connection with fiction and nonfiction across disciplines; and his aspirations for the highest level of thought. The long-standing Black male literate tradition highlights the function of literacy across time and space (Banks, 1996; Belt-Beyan, 2004; Blain et al., 2018; Du Bois, 1903/1969; hooks & West, 2017; Oliver, 2018; Porter, 1995). The study of the emergence and expansion of Black male literate lives over the past 400 years in the United States warrants its own systematic, rigorous study to define the comprehensive nature of their literacy education and define the purposes of literacy among Black males as early as preschool and for society writ large.

As authors of this report, we each had different experiences that shaped our literacy development. Alfred Tatum owns more than 10,000 books and has been reading a

Table 1. Brief Depiction of Black Males' Reading and Writing Connections.

<p>... Dr. Washington had talked of grasping opportunity, but what Arthur couldn't see, for the moment, was where his opportunity was. His well-worn copy of <i>Up From Slavery</i> lay at his side.</p> <p>From Jenkins and Hines's <i>A.G. Gaston and the Making of a Black American Millionaire</i>.</p>	<p>I considered anyone my enemy who was not in sympathy with my aspiration to get an education</p> <p>From Benjamin Mays's <i>Born to Rebel: An Autobiography</i></p>	<p>[My teacher] gave me a page with forty multisyllabic words on one page. I was like, "Yo, Ms. Bonaparte, I love you." I gobbled up the four-and five-syllable words.</p> <p>From Rakim's <i>Sweat the Technique: Revelations of Creativity from the Lyrical Genius</i>.</p>	<p>Ernest as thirteen years old when he arrived at State College in the fall of 1896 . . . Ernest came to Dartmouth . . . to be introduced to the highest level of thought.</p> <p>From Kenneth Manning's <i>Black Apollo of Science: The Life of Ernest Everett Just</i></p>
<p>I got hold of a book entitled "The Columbian Orator." Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. . . .</p> <p>From Frederick Douglass's <i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave</i>.</p>	<p>It came to me as I sitting at my desk trying to keep myself interested as the teacher led the class, one listless word at a time, through the book I had read the first day of school, a book.</p> <p>From Ellis Cose's <i>The Envy of the World: On Being a Black Man in America</i>.</p>	<p>I met every protagonist, antagonist, and writer of all stories I ever read in first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade.</p> <p>From Kiese Laymon's <i>Heavy: An American Memoir</i></p>	<p>What made the difference for me was that I was no longer . . . living in a household of which I was the most literate member. Instead I was surrounded by well-educated people . . . I started reading in closer detail and with deeper understanding than ever before.</p> <p>From Clarence Thomas's <i>My Grandfather's Son: A Memoir</i></p>

minimum of five pounds of books per month since age 11. Aaron Johnson grew up in a home that was not text rich, but his mother would drop him off at the library and say, "Go do your homework and go read." David McMillon's experiences were shaped by the spiritual optimism and affirmations of the Black church, a father who carried him

through the house in celebration of reading his first booklet, and a mother who is an academic expert on the literacy education of African Americans.

Writing the Report: Our Approach

For this report, we reviewed and analyzed the extant quantitative and qualitative research from the past 2 decades to seek research-based evidence for advancing reading, writing, and language development of the more than 4 million Black boys in grades preK–12 in the United States across more than 13,000 school districts. We searched databases for peer-reviewed studies to identify topics, theoretical frames, methods, analyses, and findings for Black males across contexts (e.g., urban, rural, homes, schools, churches, communities, child welfare agencies, juvenile justice systems, online) and age and grade levels. We also searched for existing meta-analyses or comprehensive integrative reviews focused on Black male literacy research. Our secondary review focused on theoretical and conceptual papers, policy reports, task force reports, and commentary and opinion pieces that focused on the education of Black males in general.

Our initial search yielded very few research studies involving Black males in the southern region of the United States. Therefore, we specifically searched for research studies conducted in the southeastern and southwestern regions of the United States. This search yielded additional research studies including dissertations that we did not find during our initial review of the literature. We identified articles published in *Reading Research Quarterly* and the *Journal of Literacy Research*. We also searched *Urban Education* because of the overwhelming focus on Black males in urban areas in the research studies.

In all, we reviewed 266 publications written since 1999. We created a Black male literacy codebook that listed the title, author, year published, number of participants or sample size, methods, theoretical frames, location, grade levels, and findings. This allowed us to capture median sample size by method, method type by year, and research studies with primary data collection or secondary analysis. In total, we identified research studies ($n = 48$) that solely or predominantly focused (>40%) on Black male literacy development in grades preK–12 (see Table A1 in the Appendix).

We met weekly or biweekly over a 4-month period to check our understandings of the data to:

1. describe the scope and scale of studies of Black male literacy;
2. discuss theories, conceptual frames, and groundings informing the research on Black male literacy education in grades preK–12;
3. discuss key findings on what shapes the literacy development of Black males in grades preK–12; and
4. offer insights on Black male literacy research based on the current state.

Scope and Scale of Research

Most studies in which Black males are the sole focus were conducted in urban areas involving later elementary students and adolescents with 20 or fewer participants. More than 60% of the studies are qualitative with a relatively small sample size. These are usually brief studies ranging in time from 1 hr to 4 weeks. This research yields a portrait of Black male literacy education in individual classrooms, community outreach initiatives, and reading and writing clubs to name a few.

On average, 2.2 research publications per year have been published since 1999 across all areas of literacy and developmental ranges for Black males in preK–12. Over the past 2 decades, one research study focusing specifically on the literacy education of Black males was published in *Reading Research Quarterly* and two were published in the *Journal of Literacy Research*. There were two research studies that focused on the literacy education of Black males published in *Urban Education* since 1999.

The presence of Black males in literacy research is dismal and almost nonexistent in the southern region of the United States, rural schools, alternative school settings, early elementary classrooms, and in the area of writing. This was shocking considering the multiple calls reflected in policy reports, task forces, research reports, and school district plans to provide solutions for Black male achievement; identify predictors, promising practices, and interventions; fix or disrupt systems or develop curricular models; examine factors that foreclose or stall the literacy development of Black boys on a wide range of formative and summative assessments; or nurture the resilience and agency of Black males in schools and through their life course (Council of Great City Schools, 2012; Graham et al., 2018; Husband, 2012; Meier, 2015; National Urban League & Jones, 2007; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015; Wood & Jocius, 2013).

Overall, 20% of studies employed a longitudinal design, limiting our understanding about the trajectories of Black male literacy development or the long-term impact of research interventions or recommended practices. Sixty-five percent of the studies involved 30 or fewer participants, and 78% involved 80 or fewer participants. Qualitative studies had a median sample size of four participants. In multiple instances, these studies highlighted only one participant. Given the prevalence and strength of the qualitative studies, more attention toward transferability to other contexts, school types, and locations is warranted. Examining who is noticeably absent from the qualitative studies, including high academically performing Black male readers and writers, incarcerated youth (particularly in light of the school to prison pipeline), and homeschooled, requires attention to expand the scope of Black male literacy research.

We also sought out literacy research involving Black males using randomized control trials (RCTs), particularly looking for intervention studies to gauge if causal claims can be made about the literacy development of Black males. We did not identify one research study using an RCT with a long-term follow-up that specifically focuses on the reading, writing, or language development of Black males. This

prevented us from reporting information about interventions that lead to persistent effects among studies specifically focused on Black male readers and writers.

As part of our analysis, we devised categories and maps of the existing research based on the abstracts, research questions, purposes of the studies, and findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The existing research studies cohere around eight focal areas: understanding Black male literacy development; theorizing Black male literacy development; legitimizing Black male literacies; describing contexts, curricula, and pedagogical practices that engage Black males during literacy instruction; evaluating and explaining Black male literacy outcomes; challenging dominant frames of Black male literacy development; providing rich narratives of Black male literacy development; and assessing interventions and correlates of reading achievement.

The challenge appears to be moving from these eight focal areas toward a more comprehensive, collective, and defined research agenda that extends beyond individual cases or small-scale studies. The vision for research on Black male literacy acquisition, development, and practices in the aggregate remains elusive. There does not appear to be a collective research urgency to respond to the Black male literacy crisis narrative.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frames on Black Male Literacy Research in Grades PreK–12

The literacy education of Black males in grades preK–12 has been reconceptualized and retheorized for different stages of development (i.e., emergent literacy, early literacy, and adolescent literacy) and different populations (e.g., special education, incarcerated youth, digital natives, youth who experience trauma, gifted and talented youth, and youth expressing their sexual identity) multiple times over the past 2 decades. Concepts and theories have emerged to move toward decolonizing methodologies; make race more visible in literacy research (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003); embrace critical perspectives on language, learning, and community (Kinloch, 2009); give greater attention to defining masculinity to situate the literacy education of Black males more fully (Kirkland, 2013; Young, 2007); capture the brilliance of Black boys; and challenge deficit views (Wright & Counsell, 2018). We identified as many theoretical frames, conceptual groundings, and approaches as we did studies. Studies had single or multiple framings.

Table 2 lists 48 theoretical frames mentioned across the 48 quantitative and qualitative studies reviewed. While researchers emphasized the significance of the theoretical frames to address the complex literacy needs of Black males, it was difficult to discern which theories are connected to effective instructional practices, reading, writing, language development and achievement, or identity development.

Five main theoretical frameworks or groundings emerged during our review of studies: sociocultural theory (e.g., Enriquez, 2013; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; A. Stevenson & Ross, 2015; Tatum & Gue, 2012), various critical frames or groundings (e.g., Alberti, 2010; Bryan, 2020; Dutro, 2003; Everett, 2016; Johnson, 2017), critical

Table 2. Theories, Conceptual Frames, Groundings, Centerings, Approaches, Situatedness Used in Research on Black Male Literacy Education.

Anti-Blackness	Practice of race theory
Anti-deficit achievement framework	Projects in humanization and critical race
Anti-racist Black language pedagogy	Racial/ethnic identity development theory
African-centered pedagogy	Racial socialization theory
BlackCrit	Reader response theory
Black male studies	Science identity
Consciousness and scholar identity critical discourse analysis frameworks	Self-concept theory
Critical language pedagogy	Self-efficacy theory
Critical narrative analysis	Self-regulated strategy development
Critical race theory	Social capital
Cultural capital theory	Sociocultural theory
Culturally relevant pedagogy	Social reproduction theory
Cultural sustaining pedagogies	Sociocritical theory
Developmental ecological model	Sociohistorical theory
Disidentification explanation	Symbology
Ecological family-centered approach	Symbolic interaction and stage–environment
Fit theories	Test-wiseness
Flower and Hayes writing model	Theory of Black masculine literacies
Hermeneutical framework	
Intersectionality	
Language acquisition	
Motivational systems theory	
Multiliteracies	
Neo-normative	
Neighborhood negative social climate	
Oppositional culture theory	
Posthumanism	
Postmodernity	

race theory (e.g., Rumble, 2013; Staples, 2012; Vasudevan, 2006; Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020), culturally responsive or sustaining pedagogies (e.g., Gray et al., 2019; Johnson, 2017; Scurba, 2014; Scullen, 2020), and cultural–ecological theories (e.g., Anderson & Sadler, 2009; Baker et al., 2012; Harris & Graves, 2010; Joe & Davis, 2009). These theoretical frameworks primarily grounded qualitative research studies focused on counter-storytelling, narrating the Black male literate identity in racially and culturally appropriate ways, and reframing literacies, curriculum, pedagogy, and literate environments to support and nurture the literacy development of Black males and honor their masculinities and identities.

Quantitative studies were grounded, for the most part, in cognitive and linguistic aspects focused on reading achievement and growth or predictors of later reading achievement. Several studies were framed in language acquisition (e.g., Craig et al., 2005; Dexter et al., 2019), oral reading fluency (e.g., Washington et al., 2019), or

predictors of school readiness and correlates of later reading achievement among Black males (Baker et al., 2012; Matthews et al., 2010).

Multiple theoretical frames were often applied simultaneously to capture and understand how the literacy development and associated literacy outcomes (e.g., Beucher & Seglem, 2019; Everett, 2016; Kirkland, & Jackson, 2009; Scurba, 2014; A. Stevenson & Ross, 2015; Vasudevan, 2006) are complex due to structural and systemic racism, teachers' bias, and other forms of anti-Blackness that shape how schools and society operate and the sociopolitical contexts in which literacy exists (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). Other frames examined multiple social, behavioral, and political theories for the education context (Gutiérrez, 2008).

Key Research Findings

We haltingly provide the results in this section because of the glaring absence of studies across contexts, grade levels, and the underwhelming representation of Black males in literacy research. The overall findings are based on approximately 0.0005% of the Black male average annual student population in the United States. The results for each individual category are smaller. We discuss key findings from the research studies we reviewed. However, we raise caution, as it was difficult to find consistent patterns, given the tremendous heterogeneity in focus, quality, length, and methodological approaches across studies. In general, the research findings had three linkages. The results were linked to (1) reading achievement and growth, (2) texts and curriculum, and (3) masculinities, literacies, and identities.

Reading Achievement and Growth

The research indicates that Black males benefit from instruction and interventions focused on discrete reading skills, supplemental reading instruction, and research-based practices found to have a positive effect size on reading, writing, and language development (Anderson & Sadler, 2009; Gallant & Moore, 2008; Gibson et al., 2011; Graham et al., 2018). These include the beneficial effects of supplemental instruction in oral reading fluency and oral language skills support. However, studies can yield statistically significant results for Black males, but Black males still may underperform when examining percentile ranks on reading and writing assessments. We raise a caution about results of studies that indicate growth, particularly in instances when Black males move from a low range to average range on reading assessments, but still are one to two standard deviations below the mean on the standardized assessments.

Matthews et al. (2010) examined the racial and achievement gap between African American and White children, tracing academic trajectories of more than 1,000 Black boys. Their findings indicated that Black boys experienced more growth in literacy through first grade. By the end of third grade, however, their growth was slightly behind. The reading gaps increased by the end of fifth grade. However, the research

did not indicate why this occurs. This study indicates the need for longitudinal research to examine the literacy development of Black boys across the developmental trajectory.

Researchers also found a positive relationship between home literacy practices and reading achievement of Black boys. Knight (2015) found that the home-to-school connection positively impacted the reading scores of third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade boys. Parental practices of social and cultural capital influenced reading achievement. Social and cultural capital had a meaningful association with reading achievement despite economic capital (Dixon-Roman, 2012). Parental transmission of cultural capital had a positive impact on reading achievement in elementary school. Transmission of cultural capital occurred during visits to museums, libraries, and zoos (Harris & Graves, 2010). With regard to writing, researchers found that planning, revising, self-regulation, sentence construction, handwriting, and spelling positively impacted Black boys' writing (Graham et al., 2018).

Texts and Curriculum

In a 2014 study, Tatum found that too few Black male adolescents were having meaningful literacy exchanges with texts. This was occurring in part because there is a need to bridge distance and dissonance with curricular and pedagogical moves because Black male adolescents use texts to understand themselves (Kirkland, 2011). Gender identity more than racial identity is at the tension of book selection for Black boys, and research suggests designing a curriculum that affirms Black male subjectivities and literacies within school contexts (Beucher & Seglem, 2019; Dutro, 2003).

The reading achievement of Black boys in the elementary grades is positively impacted when they engage in analytical and critical literacies (Beucher & Seglem, 2019) and when they discuss science topics, read books, and discuss family racial and ethnic heritage (Joe & Davis, 2009). Curriculum that allows boys to narrate science identities offers opportunities to see how boys develop for themselves a place in science (Kane, 2016). Research also highlights the importance of play as part of the curriculum for Black boys because denying Black boys' time to play exacerbates the achievement gap in reading (Bryan, 2020; Sherbine, 2019).

Masculinities, Literacies, and Identities

Several research studies focused on masculinities and literacies have been conducted over the past 2 decades, and there has been a call to theorize Black masculine literacies in ways that move beyond traditional understandings of texts. These studies have primarily involved adolescents, although there is an emerging call for more research on teaching reading strategies that connect the multiple Black masculine literacies to success in formal school environments among young boys as early as 7 years old (A. Stevenson & Ross, 2015). Stevenson and Ross found that only some expressions of Black male literacy were linked to academic achievement. Black boys who expressed hegemonic expressions of Black masculinity (i.e., excessive

competitiveness, aggressive teasing and name-calling, and repetitive masculine posturing) in their literacy practices often got in trouble. At times, the boys' misbehavior even resulted in isolation to avoid what was recognized as "misbehavior epidemics," ultimately impacting their literacy achievement.

Researchers found that Black boys have different ways of performing masculinities and Black boys enact Blackness and masculinity through coolness (Dutro, 2003; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). Black male students' ways of knowing themselves were informed by cultural and school discourses related to Black masculinity and multiliteracies (Beucher & Seglem, 2019). The focus on Black masculine literacies was discussed in relation to resilience, agency, intellectual consciousness of literate abilities, and rejection of school-sanctioned reading and instruction and their effects on struggling, nonstruggling, and voracious readers (Enriquez, 2013; Staples, 2012). Studies of culturally sustaining practices illuminate how complexities of Black male experiences and boys' attitudes toward writing and their perceptions of their skills lead to frustration (Johnson, 2017; Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020).

Resolutions and Concluding Thoughts

Our identities as Black men seeped into our conversations and analysis as we were writing this report. We were not simply writing a report; we were writing our lives. The assault on the lives and education of Black men was not lost on us as we penned individual resolutions to extend the storied lineage of resolutions in the historical archives. For example, the following resolutions were offered at the Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church held in New York in 1834 (Porter, 1995):

Resolved, That it shall be the duty of every member of this Conference, to do all in his power to promote and establish these useful institutions among our people. (p. 185)

Resolved, That as the subject of education is one that highly interests all people, and especially the coloured people of this country, it shall be the duty of every minister who has the charge of circuit or stations, to use every exertion to establish schools whenever convenient . . . and it shall be the duty of all such ministers to make returns yearly of the number of schools, the amount of scholars, the branches thoughts, and the places in which they are located. (p. 193)

These resolutions often appeared at the end of the conference report. We offer the following individual resolutions in this tradition before offering our final recommendations.

Resolved

There are no Saturday sirens—Aaron Johnson

Every Saturday at 1:00 p.m. in my Detroit neighborhood, a tornado siren sounds. I get startled by the sudden and raucous alarm. In essence, that is the purpose. This siren gets tested once a week to (1) familiarize ourselves with it and (2) to send the message that if this sound is heard at any time other than Saturday at 1:00 p.m., it is not a test.

When I look upon the landscape of literacy research involving Black boys and listen for alarms, I hear very few. Considering there are an estimated 1,200 colleges of education in the United States and several thousand researchers that make up those institutions, I ask, where is the compelling research that has *improved* the literate lives of Black boys?

Very few of the studies we reviewed sounded even the faintest signal. We heard a deafening silence regarding research specifically aimed at moving Black boys to advanced levels of literacy. However, among the research, we found noise. We found a myriad of theoretical frameworks. We came across calls to deconstruct Whiteness, reject notions and practices of anti-Blackness, and decolonize texts and curriculums. Calling for the decolonization of texts is noble in gesture, but what does it profit to decolonize texts that exist within a colonial system of education? One might argue that the decolonization or disruption of *texts* is not necessarily the goal but the decolonization of *minds*. As the 19th century closed and the 20th century began for the formerly enslaved, literacy among African American people was at an all-time high. African American literacy rates did not necessarily increase because the texts were decolonized; rather, there was a cadre of teachers, thinkers, and learners who put their lives on the line to apprentice them in reading and writing.

Preparing this report revealed that there is no national agenda to move Black boys to high levels of literacy, and no national alarms are being sounded indicating that many Black boys' literate lives, thus their futures, are in jeopardy.

Resolved

Every ounce of possibility—Alfred W. Tatum

In 1992, my sister-in-law was murdered. The shooter was a young male I tutored in reading while he was in elementary school. I carried the burden of missing the mark with this young man for years. I became more committed than ever to become smart about teaching reading and writing. That led me to graduate school. During my graduate studies, my family was the victim of a home invasion at the hands of two young men. This was my fifth time being placed at gunpoint. In frustration, I walked the streets of Chicago looking to seek revenge. My commitment to teach Black boys waned in that moment. However, God spoke to me and I began to use a phrase that I have ended every research talk with since 2005—"It's not just about their literacy development; it's about their lives!" As a result, I began to squeeze teaching and text for every ounce of possibility with the aim to move Black boys toward exponential growth in reading and writing.

My research and teaching are grounded in a stubborn refusal to allow Black boys to fail. This refusal leads me to interrogate research, teaching, and text practices that

potentially suppress the literacy development of Black boys. As literacy researchers, we must do a better job to protect these boys' right to be in literacy classrooms. We must embrace the notion that literacy instruction is theoretical and practical. We must embrace confidence in restoring the rich literate tradition of Black males so that they embrace literacy as a tool of protection. I end on a theological note with Chapter 5, verses 17–19 from the Book of Job:

17. Consider yourself fortunate
if God All-Powerful
chooses to correct you.
18. He may cause injury and pain,
but he will bandage and heal
your cuts and bruises.
19. God will protect you from harm,
no matter how often
trouble may strike.

I have learned that there is healing power in literacy to protect Black boys from harm no matter how often trouble strikes. There is also beauty in texts across the disciplines for Black males. Our research should lead us toward the healing and the beauty—the healing and beauty that may have saved my sister-in-law and the murderous hands that took her life.

Resolved

Scientific justice—David McMillon

In the midst of a tumultuous local environment, my childhood was never devoid of love, affirmation, and encouragement, in no small part due to my family, church, and surrounding community. My father carried me through the house in joyous song when I read my first booklet and has called me “doctor” for 30 years. My personal story is made more unique because my mother is an expert on improving the literacy of Black children. I was afforded the opportunity to freely explore all matters of scientific inquiry while effectively ignoring stereotype threat. All Black boys deserve this, but few win the ecological lottery that would allow it. Therefore, the resolutions I offer below are based on my privileged intellectual journey.

After centuries of systemic social, economic, political, psychological, and academic injustices, it takes very little to harm Black boys. Doing absolutely nothing will suffice. Irresponsibly applied research methods will suffice. Making causal claims based on correlational evidence will suffice. The wholesale adoption of practices based on sample sizes of less than 30 boys will suffice. Failure to invest in longitudinal or follow-up studies that demonstrate long-run impacts will suffice.

Yet, there is no amount of wallowing in self-assured anti-racism that will ensure the kind of rigorous scientific research that is necessary, yet still not sufficient, to achieve racial equity in American literacy. Whether we apply quantitative methods in such a way that reinforces the notion that Black boys are principally responsible for their own demise or exclusively rely on qualitative work that fights so furiously against deficit thinking that we altogether shun quantifiable academic well-being, harming Black boys is as simple as breaking a glass jar.

If one throws a glass jar with a force that causes it to shatter, good intention will not fix the glass. Methodological disagreements will not fix the glass. Putting together a few pieces in isolation without follow-up will not fix the glass. Critically evaluating how one has contributed to the broken glass will not fix the glass. Approaches that are not scientifically verified will not fix the glass. Nor will the glass fix itself.

In the case of the shattered glass jar, one would require nothing short of a bold, comprehensive program in which collaborators systematically test new scientifically verified approaches to welding the glass together. It would require the vision of a theorist who can foresee how the components could come together to make the glass whole *and* the pragmatism of an empiricist who tests the theory. It would require the quantitative researcher who reduces rich information into simple generalizable ideas to work with the qualitative researcher who understands the unique chemical and physical properties of glass shards. Collaborators would need to see various methodological approaches as complements rather than substitutes. Only an ambitious, collaborative, systems approach of the highest moral *and* scientific standard would have any chance of fixing a systemic problem. Improving the literacy of Black boys is no different. Black male literacy requires more than *social* justice. It requires *scientific* justice.

Directions for Future Research

It became clear as we created this report that the research on Black male literacy education lacks coordinated efforts to map out and strategically focus on optimal components with evidence-based approaches to advance the literacy development of Black males. The current research is an inadequate lever to provide direction and guidance to advance the literacy development of Black males in preK–12 at scale. However, it suggests the importance of reviewing and examining effective literacy practices from research involving very few Black male participants while creating a more robust research infrastructure to conduct large-scale research studies solely or predominantly focused on Black male students.

This work led us to recommend the following to nurture a culture of Black male literacy research:

1. establish a vision for Black male literacy development based on the strong Black male literate tradition and conduct research to move us toward the vision,
2. expand the scope of qualitative and quantitative research and place an increased focus on transferability and causal claims that link disparate results with long-term follow-up,
3. rally around a cohort of theoretical frames, and
4. conduct comprehensive, large-scale research that examines the literacy development of Black males across contexts, locations, and school types.

Research literature on Black male literacy education has been premised on intersecting cultural, economic, and gender defaults that have been and continue to be overgeneralized, overemphasized, overtheorized, underscrutinized, and underresearched. This may suggest the need to reexamine research that gives explanatory power, justifies, or legitimizes the literacy underperformance of Black males in the United States. This also suggests the need to reexamine research that advances practices or theories with scant research-based evidence on their effectiveness for moving a high percentage of Black boys to read and write at proficient and advanced levels using the lens of Black males with characteristically advanced levels of reading and writing as the guidepost. This, in our estimation, will lead us toward sounding the appropriate research sirens, squeezing teaching and texts for every ounce of possibility, and conducting research that yields social *and* scientific justice for Black males in grades preK–12 or other contexts in which they exist.

Appendix

Table A1. Forty-Eight Chronological Research Studies Reviewed for This Report.

1999

2000

2001

2002

2003

Craig, H., Connor, C., & Washington, J. (2003). Early positive predictors of later reading comprehension for African American students: A preliminary investigation. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 34*, 31–43.

Dutro, E. (2003). "US boys like to read football and boy stuff": Reading masculinities, performing boyhood. *Journal of Literacy Research, 34*(4), 465–500.

2004

(continued)

Table A1. (continued)

2005

Craig, H., Washington, J., & Thompson, C. (2005). Oral language expectations for African American children in grades 1 through 5. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, 14*, 119–130.

2006

Conner, C., & Craig, H. (2006). African American preschoolers' language, emergent literacy skills, and use of African American English: A complex relation. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 49*, 771–792.

Vasudevan, L. (2006). Making known differently: Engaging visual modalities as spaces to author new selves. *E-Learning, 3*(2), 2007–2015.

2007

Anderson, K. A., & Graham, H. A. (2007). Reading achievement, suspensions, and African American males in middle school. *Middle Grades Research Journal, 2*(2), 43–63.

2008

Gallant, D., & Moore, J. L. (2008). Equity for first-grade male students on a curriculum embedded performance assessment. *Urban Education, 43*(2), 172–188.

2009

Anderson, K. A., & Sadler, C. I. (2009). The effects of school-based curricula on reading achievement of African American males in special education. *Journal of Negro Education, 78*(3), 333–346.

Joe, E., & Davis, J. E. (2009). Parental influence, school readiness and early academic achievement of African American boys. *Journal of Negro Education, 78*(3), 26–276.

Kirkland, D. E., & Jackson, A. (2009). “We real cool”: Toward a theory of Black masculine literacies. *Reading Research Quarterly, 44*(3), 278–297.

Kirkland, D. E. (2009). The skin we ink: Tattoos, literacy, and a new English education. *English Education, 41*(4), 375–395.

2010

Alberti, J. (2010). *Third grade African American boys respond to representations of race, class, and gender in children's literature* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Pennsylvania.

Harris, T., & Graves, S. L. (2010). The influence of cultural capital transmission on reading achievement in African American fifth-grade boys. *The Journal of Negro Education, 79*(4), 447–457.

Matthews, J. S., Kizzie, K., Rowley, S. J., & Cortina, K. (2010). African Americans and boys: Understanding the literacy gap, tracing academic trajectories, and evaluating the role of learning-related skills. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 102*(3), 757–771.

2011

Collins, K. M. (2011). Discursive positioning in a fifth-grade writing lesson: The making of a “bad, bad boy.” *Urban Education, 46*(4), 741–785.

Gibson, L., Cartledge, G., & Keyes, S. (2011). A preliminary investigation of supplemental computer-assisted reading instruction on the oral reading fluency and comprehension of first-grade African American urban students. *Journal of Behavioral Education, 20*, 260–282.

Kirkland, D. E. (2011). Books like clothes: Engaging young Black men with reading. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 55*(3), 199–208.

(continued)

Table A1. (continued)

2012

- Baker, C., Cameron, C., Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., & Grissmer, D. (2012). Family and sociodemographic predictors of school readiness among African American boys in kindergarten. *Early Education and Development, 23*, 833–854.
- Dixon-Roman, E. (2012). The forms of capital and the developed achievement of Black males. *Urban Education, 48*(6), 828–862.
- Gibson, L., & Cartledge, G. (2012). The effects of fluency instruction on the oral reading fluency and comprehension of first-grade African American males with reading risk. *Journal of Special Education Apprenticeship, 1*(2), 1–19.
- Staples, J. M. (2012). “Niggaz dyin’ don’t make no news”: Exploring the intellectual work of an African American urban adolescent boy in an after-school program. *Educational Action Research, 20*(1), 55–73.
- Tatum, A., & Gue, V. (2012). The sociocultural benefits of writing for African American males. *Reading and Writing Quarterly, 28*, 123–142.

2013

- Enriquez, G. (2013). “But they won’t let you read!”: A case study of an urban middle school male’s response to school reading. *Journal of Education, 193*(1), 35–46.
- Kirkland, D. E. (2013). *A search past silence: The literacy of young Black men*. Teachers College Press.
- Rumble, M. (2013). *I too have a voice: The literacy experiences of Black boys engaging with and responding to African American literature depicting Black males* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Western Connecticut State University.

2014

- Scuirba, K. (2014). Texts as mirrors, texts as windows: Black adolescent boys and the complexities of textual relevance. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 58*(4), 308–316.
- Tatum, A. W. (2014). Orienting African American males toward meaningful literacy exchanges with texts. *Journal of Education, 194*(1), 35–47.

2015

- Knight, P. (2015). *Reading achievement and family literacy behaviors of Black boys* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Missouri.
- Stevenson, A., & Ross, S. (2015). Starting young: Emergent Black masculinity and early literacy. *Journal of African American Males in Education, 6*(1), 75–90.

2016

- Everett, S. (2016). “I just started writing”: Toward addressing invisibility, silence, and mortality among academically high-achieving Black male secondary students. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice, 65*(1), 316–331.
- Kane, J. (2016) Young African American boys narrating identities in science. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 53*(1), 95–188.
- Mitchell, I., Nistor, N., Baltus, B., & Brown, M. (2016). Effect of vocabulary test preparation on low-income Black middle school students’ reading scores. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice, 6*(1), 105–118.

(continued)

Table A1. (continued)

2017

Johnson, L. (2017). The status that troubled me: Re-examining work with Black boys through a culturally sustaining pedagogical framework. *Urban Education*, 52(5), 561–584.

Keyes, S., Jacobs, J., Bornhorst, R., Gibson, L., & Vostal, B. (2017). Supplemental computerized reading instruction in oral reading fluency and its generalizable effects on at-risk urban second graders. *Reading Improvement*, 54(1), 9–18.

Sciurba, K. (2017). Journeys toward textual relevance: Male readers of color and the significance of Malcolm X and Harry Potter. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 49(3), 371–392.

Stormer, K. (2017). Why can't Tyrone write: Reconceptualizing Flower and Hayes for African-American adolescent male writers. *Middle Grades Review*, 3(3), 1–26.

2018

Gardner-Neblett, N., & Sideris, J. (2018). Different tales: The role of gender in the oral narrative-reading link among African American children. *Child Development*, 89(4), 1328–1342.

Graham, S., Harris, K., & Beard, K. (2018). Teaching writing to young African American students using evidence-based practices. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 35(1), 19–29.

2019

Beucher, B., & Seglem, R. (2019). Black male students negotiate ways of knowing themselves during digital storytelling. *Learning Landscapes*, 12, 47–62.

Dexter, C., Johnson, A., Bowman, M., & Barnett, D. (2019). Using kindergarten language, dialect variation, and child behavior to predict second grade reading ability in African American children. *Reading Psychology*, 39, 763–786.

Gray, P., Rule, A., & Gordon, M. (2019). Black fifth graders make dioramas of traditional African cultures to explore racial identity, cultural universals, and spatial thinking. *Urban Education*, 54(2), 274–308.

Russell, J. (2019). How does a metalinguistic phonological intervention impact the reading achievement and language of African American boys? *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 35(1), 4–18.

Sherbine, K. (2019). Wrestling with competency and everyday literacies in school. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 15(2), 1–22.

Washington, J., Branum-Martin, L., Lee-James, R., & Sun, C. (2019). Reading and language performance of low-income, African American boys in grades 1-5. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 35(1), 42–64.

2020

Bryan, N. (2020). Remembering Tamir Rice and other Black boy victims: Imagining Black playcrit literacies inside and outside urban literacy education. *Urban Education*, 1–28. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920902250>

Husband, T., & Kang, G. (2020). Identifying promising literacy practices for Black males in P-12 classrooms: An integrative review. *Journal of Language & Literacy Education*, 16(1), 1–34.

Scullen, B. (2020). "I can't find no Black books": Helping African American males find books they want to read. *Texas Journal of Literacy Education*, 8(1), 82–110.

Wynter-Hoyte, K., & Smith, M. (2020). "Hey, Black child. Do you know who you are?" Using African diaspora literacy to humanize Blackness in early childhood education. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 52(4), 406–431.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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