


September 2023

Toward a Theory of an Integrated Theoretical Approach of Literacy for Black Boys

Aaron M. Johnson
Wayne State University, amdj9265@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

 Part of the Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Elementary Education Commons, Language and Literacy Education Commons, Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Aaron M. (2023) "Toward a Theory of an Integrated Theoretical Approach of Literacy for Black Boys," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 56: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol56/iss1/9>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Toward a Theory of an Integrated Theoretical Approach of Literacy for Black Boys

Cover Page Footnote

This work is dedicated to the Black boys and Black men who continue to resist and rebel against an uncompromising system of antiblackness.

Toward a Theory of an Integrated Theoretical Approach of Literacy for Black Boys

by Dr. Aaron M. Johnson

“I am not illiterate,
No, not even a little bit,
Nothing like an idiot,
Get it!?”
~ The D.O.C. in “Funky Enough”

There is no panacea to “fix” the literacy practices of Black boys. In fact, Black boys’ literacy practices do not need to be fixed. In order for us to engage Black boys in school-expected literacy in more meaningful ways, it is incumbent upon us to divest ourselves of the notions that they do not lead literate lives in the first place and that their literacy lives are synonymous with paucity-framed conceptions of what literacy is. Thus far, the theoretical foundations employed in public school classrooms that are meant to frame and explicate the literate lives of Black boys have failed. This failure is evidenced by data from the most recent National Assessment of Education Progress [NAEP]. Although reading proficiency has been declining among every racial demographic group over the past decade (some may say because of the pandemic), the truth is that reading proficiency among every racial demographic group was on the decline before the onset of the pandemic (Tatum et al., 2021). For Black students, specifically Black boys, the statistics are even more dire. The 2022 NAEP indicated that, nationally, only 14% of Black 8th graders were proficient in reading, and in 2019 (the latest test data for this group), only 14% of Black 12th graders were proficient in reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In cities like Detroit, which is the home to Michigan’s largest public school system and has the highest percentage of Black children in a single district (77%), 4% of the students who attend Detroit Public Schools Community District, or a public school academy within the city limits, were leaving the 8th grade proficient in reading. Said differently, 96% of 8th graders in Detroit were not deemed proficient (Nation’s Report



Dr. Aaron M. Johnson

Card, 2022). The theoretical and pedagogical frameworks used in public schools are not working for Black children, or children of any race for that matter.

Accordingly, we must retheorize and reconceptualize what reading achievement means for these boys and use evidence-based data to decide which theoretical frameworks we should employ in public schools. Furthermore, we must explore previously unexplored conceptions of literacy, literacy instructional approaches, and the theoretical frameworks that underpin them, and we must appraise new and more practical approaches. These frameworks should be able to stand the test of ongoing scrutiny and be abandoned when they do not produce the desired results. With the literacy of Black boys in mind, it is imperative that educators sojourn down paths not frequently traveled: we must 1) get to know and understand the literate lives of the Black boys whose literacy we are intending to influence; 2) commit to sociopolitical, sociohistorical, and sociocultural understandings of the implications for Black people as a whole, and school-aged Black boys specifically; and 3) understand the theoretical approaches that are frequently used to engage Black boys in literacy as a means to dismantle, retheorize, and reconstruct them in ways that are meaningful for Black boys in schools.

Many teachers are most familiar with more established and broadly used theoretical conceptions and have even employed them either in whole scale fashion, or in disconnected parts. Theoretical frameworks such as social development theory, social cognitive theory, schema theory, and whole language theory are mainstays in the public school literacy instruction landscape. Furthermore, there is scholarship that supports employing the usage of evidence-based, sociocultural approaches to literacy, helping establish literacy practices as social acts (Johnson, 2018; Kucer, 2009; Lewis, 2001). Even though some of those approaches have proven to have some modicum of success, the proficiency data from the NAEP and M-STEP documents affirm that literacy proficiency is continuing to decline. Tatum et al. (2021) conducted an analysis of literacy studies that occurred over a twenty-year period that centered the literacy practices of Black boys and the instruction used for their literacy development. The findings suggested that singular theoretical approaches were unsuccessful in helping to move Black boys to proficient and advanced proficient levels of literacy. Furthermore, the findings pointed toward using a more integrative approach of theoretical applications. An integrative approach requires that multiple theoretical framings be applied simultaneously to both support and assess the literacy development of Black boys. Moreover, as Black boys' lives and identities are complex due to the racist ways in which society and schools operate and the sociopolitical contexts in which literacy exists (Greene, 2008), theoretical conceptions that are sociocultural in nature, such as the transactional theory of reading and writing (Rosenblatt, 1978), critical race theory (Bell, 2018) and the work of Gutierrez (2007) and Gutierrez (2008) on sociocritical literacy, have often been reframed and used in conjunction with multiple social, behavioral, and political theories for the education context.

To further support the need for an integrated approach, schools and districts *must* scrutinize the theoretical foundations and instructional frameworks that they utilize. In Tatum et al. (2021), 266 articles and studies were reviewed that had been published since 1999. Among those articles, 48 theoretical frames were documented, and of the 48 studies that grounded their work in a theoretical conception, only five main

themes emerged that used sociocultural or ecological approaches. Sociocultural approaches consider the cultures, languages, and societies in which literacy events exist for Black boys while ecological approaches begin with the understanding that there are several factors that comprise and impact the human experience (e.g., economics, family structure, race, racism, etc.). Tatum et al. (2021) also found that only nine full-length books had been written in the last twenty-one years that specifically addressed the literacy of Black boys in schools. At the time of the article, two of those books were written by Tatum (2009) and Tatum and Haddix (2013), and one was written by Johnson (2018).

Thus, the recently emerged theoretical framings about literacy have sought to retheorize literacy in ways that include more ecological conceptions, those that integrate learning theory with the theoretical conceptions of race, class, and sociolinguistics. These new theoretical framings are crucial to understanding how Black boys navigate the literacy landscapes in the broader context of society, and how they navigate the multiple literacies that they are required to master in schools. A new era is upon us where we are duty-bound as educators to consider how new literacies are borne out of the human experience. Accordingly, these new literacies may not fit neatly into a single, or even into multiple theoretical frameworks. In this vein, among the findings in the Tatum et al. (2021) article was scholarship that suggested that mastery of the vocabulary and academic language of the dominant culture prove to be key factors in engaging Black boys in school-based literacy. Baker-Bell (2020) compels us to consider that the language that these boys already use when they enter classrooms be considered texts in and of themselves, and her scholarship further compels us to reject racist conceptions that literacy that centralizes Black Language is invalid. Furthermore, Baker-Bell (2020) presented practical classroom applications that centered the works of Black authors and the use of Black language as a viable and valuable text, with all its nuances, to help Black children connect to literacy.

The socioculturalists' view in this context supports that the cultural influences in Black boys' lives should be

considered in their literacy instruction. This is not to say that all texts presented to Black boys have to be so-called culturally relevant, as the term culturally relevant is often misperceived to mean that educators only provide texts that are *racially* relevant. Cultural relevancy and cultural responsiveness are more connected to *how* the teacher responds to the learner's lexicon, interests, and social experiences rather than just providing instruction and materials related to his or her cultural or racial background (Hammond, 2015). Teachers must recognize that Black boys' view of the world is heavily influenced by social media, music, YouTube, video games, and socialization with other Black boys, much of which is not valued in schools. Thus, we would be remiss as practitioners, theorists, and researchers if we did not participate in collaborative inquiry about how schools have historically held perceptions of these Black boys, how those perceptions about them have been barriers to their literacy growth, and how the racialization of literacy has abated Black boys' lived experiences. Furthermore, we must consider how the movement to only provide culturally relevant texts for Black boys may be a limiting factor. People who participate in advanced literacy practices read and write across all genres and disciplines and all forms of texts are available to them (Tatum et al., 2021). A framework that includes multiple integrated theoretical approaches is required to provide for the space to make all texts available to Black boys.

The cultures of Black boys (although not monolithic) are textured by the human experience and those textures are layered upon one another in ways that allow them to experience the world much differently than any other cultural group. The ways that Black boys are treated in society, particularly in schools, add to the narrative about how American society has sought to destroy them, their identities, and their futures (Kunjufu, 1982; Tatum et al., 2021). To cope with and resist these types of erasures, Black boys develop multiple vocabularies, use their racial histories, rely on their religious faiths, participate in family traditions, and allow themselves to connect to the physical and spiritual affiliations to ancestral lands. Black boys' identities exist on multiple parallel planes that help them regularly construct and morph those identities.

Accordingly, as educational anthropologists, it is irresponsible for us to demand that Black boys only bring fragments of those cultural identities to school. We must support identities that Black boys build for themselves, and it behooves us to conduct deep inquiries into their lives to help us consider the multiple discourses in which they participate. These discourses can be intersectional or disparate and are connected to their multi-faceted identities. Since Black boys' identities are textured and layered in such ways, no single theoretical framework or conceptual model will be successful, no matter the fidelity of its implementation. Once we accept that fact, we must reject esoteric notions of what literacy is and what strategies work specifically for Black boys, and we must lift the limitations on the texts that should be made available to them. Reading is one of the most complex activities that humans engage in, and humans learn to read, decode, and comprehend the signs in language in similar ways. So, when I hear "teach me how to teach Black boys to read," what I essentially hear is "teach me how to teach children to read." Or, more specifically, "I do not know how to relate to the cultural lives of Black boys." I have yet to hear someone say, "teach me how to teach White boys to read" or "teach me how to teach White girls to read." The mechanics of teaching children to read are the same for every child. What is frequently not considered for Black boys is how their identities, language, bias of their literacy instructors, pedagogy, and the school environments diminish their souls, impacting their access to texts and literacy events that bring them to advanced levels of literacy.

As we begin to construct a theoretical framework that best supports effective literacy instruction for Black boys, we look to previous theories. However, some theoretical frameworks used for instruction of Black boys and to aid their literacy development involve notions that texts must be culturally relevant for Black boys to connect with them. While there is some merit to these types of approaches, the connotation of introducing and using so-called culturally relevant texts uses a deficit framing, implying that the deficits in the literacy development for these boys are linked to how their "cultures" perceive literacy events. Furthermore, it is frequently perceived that Black boys alone need culturally relevant

texts, insinuating that the issue is that Black boys' cultures are not connected to the school environment, rather than assuming that school environments do not value, accept, and acknowledge Black boys' identities and their engagement in literacy events. Using culturally relevant texts as a singular solution also suggests that Black boys are a monolith, whose language, literacy practices, and literacy development must fit a pattern subscribed to by the very schools that fail at helping them to participate in literacy events in the first place (Gonzalez et al., 2005).

Black men, who were once Black boys, are lauded in other genres for their literacy practices in national and world arenas, sometimes to their detriment and the detriment of Black culture. However, the Black literary culture has a longstanding history in forming and shaping American culture. A prime example of this are the literary geniuses that emerged during the Harlem Renaissance. Writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Arna Bontemps, and Claude McKay wrote about Black life, culture, and American politics.

In 2018, Kendrick Lamar, poet, rapper, and street journalist, won the *Pulitzer Prize for Music* for his album *Damn*. The Pulitzer Prize committee called Lamar's *Damn*. "a virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African American life" (The Pulitzer Prizes, 2018). While schools often assign monolithic identities and experiences to Black boys by introducing them to one-dimensional texts for their oftentimes complex lives and identities, Black boys are at the ground level of architecting new lexicons, using the figurative language of the dominant cultural frame as chief cornerstones, and archotyping new literacies. No current singular theoretical frame addresses this truth, nor should it have to.

Theories that do not include or consider Black people's participation in literacy events that they create for themselves must be examined for their theoretical and cultural validity. Black people, particularly Black boys, are fervent participants in literacy events, including

but not limited to reading and writing in all genres, such as hip hop, poetry slams, and academic games. In fact, two of the outstanding seniors of 2020 and 2022 chosen by the Academic Games League of America were an African American boy from New Orleans, LA, and an African American boy from Detroit, MI (Academic Games Leagues of America, 2023). Academic games include contests that test students' math and linguistic skills and knowledge of historical facts.

Literacy events exist across multiple domains and cannot be treated as one-dimensional acts that have one-dimensional applications (Kucer, 2009). If literacy events are all at once cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, and developmental, then teachers, schools, and research scholars need to move beyond simple technical and mechanistic interventions for literacy development. To add to the complexity, Black students enter America's classrooms surrounded by intersecting ecological elements along with carrying society's burden of antiblackness. Black boys have obliterated the monoliths and megaliths of the racist assumptions against them; therefore, reconceived literacy theoretical frameworks must include new knowledge about how race exists as a sociopolitical and sociohistorical element of how literacy is situated in American society.

The Black literary tradition, of which Black students are descendants, involved engaging several of the senses at once. Reading, writing, dancing, music, and storytelling have been used to engage Black people in literacy events. The tradition of storytelling has existed in Black communities for the past four centuries. In fact, Kucer (2009) made a distinction between written and oral language, "Written language extends and builds on the oral language systems but does not replicate it" (p. 48). Thus, if we assume for a moment that Black students descend from cultures that value and prioritize oral language over written language, then we must recognize the possibility of a chasm between oral and written language that needs to be explored if we want to appeal to the cultural identities of Black boys. While this chasm only specifies a difference between the two literacy conceptions, there should not be any higher value on one over the other. To make connections to the ways that

literacy is conceived in many Black communities, educators should consider the ways that the oral tradition of literacy is used in many Black students' communities. While this approach is not a panacea, it adds to teachers' repertoire of considering cultural responsiveness to the Black boys in their classes.

Thus, the application of multiple theoretical frameworks operating at once to enhance Black boys' connection to literacy is even more important. If we look at literacy as a process by which to construct, deconstruct, and design language, then we can denude theoretical conceptions of literacy that are devoid of cultural, historical, and racial implications. In that sense, the question emerges, although Kendrick Lamar won the *Pulitzer Prize* for music, would his written lyrics have been given the same accolades as his oral and musical transcriptions? This question, among others, should lead us down multiple paths of inquiry that constrain us to reconceptualize what literacy is, and what constitutes participating in literacy practices, particularly for Black boys in schools.

Lastly, literacy assessments that test for assimilation into the dominant cultural and sociopolitical worldview often lead to assumptions that Black boys are not successful readers, and as such must be changed and expanded. If we are to expand the theoretical models that we use for instruction, we must also expand the ways that students are assessed. The pencil and paper model (and more recently the similar computerized versions) of assessing literacy development and literacy proficiency is outdated and rooted in the dominant cultural perspective of what literacy is. Literacy events are social acts (Johnson, 2018; Kucer, 2009; Lewis, 2001) and as such, they should be assessed in ways that align with this research-proven fact. Although not perfect, teachers can use more qualitative-focused formative and summative reading assessments to account for the more nuanced ways that literacy is developed. For more formative reading assessments, teachers can assess student reading growth through writing samples, recorded conversations that monitor comprehension of word usage, and verbal and written decoding. For more summative reading assessments, teachers can use instruments such as the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) that tests

for fluency, decoding, and comprehension through conversations with students. While strategies such as these are time-consuming, they more accurately literacy in the ways that students connect with verbal and written language. If our literacy assessments were more sociocultural and culturally responsive, used qualitative conceptions, assessed the nuanced ways that literacy is developed and conceived, and if they assessed other funds of knowledge that Black boys possessed, would they yield the same results?

References

- Academic Games League of America. (2023). *Outstanding seniors*. <http://www.agloa.org/outstanding-seniors/>
- Bell, D. (2018). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.
- Gonzalez, N., Moll, L. C., Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Routledge.
- Greene, S. (Ed.) (2008). *Literacy as a civil right: Reclaiming social justice in literacy teaching and learning*. Peter Lang.
- Johnson, A. M. (2018). *A walk in their kicks: Literacy, identity, and the schooling of young Black males*. Teachers College Press.
- Lamar, K. (2017). *Damn* [Album]. Aftermath Entertainment; Interscope Records; Top Dawg Entertainment.
- Kunjufu, J. (1982). *Countering the conspiracy to destroy black boys* (Vol. 1). African-American Images.
- National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. (2019). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_RDA.asp
- Nation's Report Card. (2022). *National average reading scores and district average scores (Detroit)*. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/groups/?grade=12>
- Rosenblatt, L. M. *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of literacy work*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- The D.O.C. (1989). It's funky enough [Song]. On *No One Can Do It Better*. Warner Strategic Marketing.
- The Pulitzer Prizes. (2018). *2018 Pulitzer prizes*. <https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-year/2018>
- Tatum, A. W. (2009). *Reading for their life:(Re) building the textual lineages of African American adolescent males*. Heinemann.
- Tatum, A. W., & Haddix, M. (2013). *Fearless voices: Engaging a new generation of African American adolescent male writers*. Scholastic Teaching Resources.
- Tatum, A. W., Johnson, A., & McMillon, D. (2021). The state of black male literacy research, 1999–2020. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 70(1), 129-151.

Author Biography

Dr. Aaron M. Johnson is a writer, teacher, and equity consultant. He currently works as the lead consultant for Archetype Consulting and is an adjunct lecturer at Wayne State University in Language, Literacy, and Literature. He can be reached at amdj9265@gmail.com.