



ISSUES WITH THE LITERACY GAP

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 27th March, 2021
Received in revised form
15th April, 2021
Accepted 20th May, 2021
Published online 30th June, 2021

Key Words:

Antibiofilm, Bacteria,
Antibacterial, Activity, Copper.

ABSTRACT

Research shows that the literacy gap affects achievement and there is a gap between several groups of students including wealthy and poor students, white and minority students, and girls and boys. Typically, wealthy students score higher in literacy because of the resources that they have available such as books at home and access to nutritional breakfast. Throughout American history there has been a gap between white students and minority students because early in American history minorities were not allowed to read. Content area vocabulary and lack of access to books increases the gap between white and minority students. Around the world there is a gap between boys and girls in reading. Studies have found that boys do not perform as well as girls in literacy. There are many solutions that can help narrow the literacy gap between all groups of students. Common Core State Standards are a start towards narrowing the gap. Excellent teachers are necessary in helping boys, minorities, and poor students become better readers. Vocabulary instruction, healthy breakfast, physical activity, access to books, text interest, and text choices are factors that will improve achievement and therefore narrow the literacy gap. Because literacy is a basic necessity in education, narrowing the gap will increase achievement in all subject areas.

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Citation: Abeer Alotaibi. "Issues with the literacy gap", 2021. International Journal of Current Research, 13, (06), 17881-17883.

INTRODUCTION

Strong literacy skills are necessary to be successful in school and in life. According to Paulo Freire, literacy is the ability to read and write intertwined with knowledge of the world (Freire and Macedo, 2005, 20). Unfortunately, many groups of students continuously underachieve in reading. Underachievement is a lower performance compared to another group of students. High-poverty students, boys, and minority students fall behind low-poverty students, girls, and white students, causing low scores in other subject areas, test performance, and lower graduation rates. The literacy gap has a direct affect on the achievement gap and it is necessary to narrow the gap for all students to be successful. Literacy skills are essential for many reasons.

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Lower literacy and numeracy scores are a strong predictor of risky health behaviors, higher unemployment rates, and lower participation in school (O'Dea and Mugridge, 2012, 1). Literacy is a predictor of achievement. The better a student's literacy skills, the more successful they will be in their educational career. This is because students with low literacy scores have a hard time keeping up with the demand of high school vocabulary and standards (Johnson). Reading develops important skills such as imagination, critical thinking, vocabulary, and the ability to discover new things (Massoud and Sudic, 2014, 12). Reading can be used to learn new information in any area and it is necessary for success in the world today. It is an obvious that reading is a necessary survival skill in today's society. There are four approaches to teaching reading (Freire and Macedo, 2005, 101). The Academic Approach to Reading involves teaching elites classical and intellectual readings. In this approach it is thought that the working class would not be able to handle the demands of these texts. The working class is considered inferior (101).

This is similar to neoliberalism, where elites have all the power and make decisions for the working class. The Utilitarian Approach to Reading aims to teach just the basic requirements of reading to be functional in society. The goal is to create more productive citizens, so this approach focuses on reading skills necessary in college and work. This approach is the reason many packaged reading programs exist (102). The Cognitive Development Approach to Reading focuses on the processes used to analyze the text rather than text content. This approach does not consider students' cultural experiences. The Romantic Approach to Reading requires the reader to make meaning outside of interactions with the text. This approach also ignores cultural background, but focuses on reading being a joyful experience (103). None of these approaches seem to be good approaches to teaching reading because they fail to consider cultural beliefs and stereotype against certain groups of people. Fortunately, there are many strategies to help students become better readers outside of these four approaches.

According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the literacy gap between rich and poor students has grown in recent years (Haskins, Murnane, Sawhill, Snow, 2012). New Common Core assessments will show a bigger gap between rich and poor students. A study conducted by Jennifer A. O'Dea and Anna C. Mugridge on 824 students in Australia found that socioeconomic status (SES) is the greatest predictor of students' literacy scores. They included a combination of boys and girls, and multiple grade levels, SES, and races in the study. They also studied the quality of the breakfast students eat, number of hours of sleep each night, and hours of physical activity each week. Students with higher SES generally get more sleep and physical activity and ate more nutritious breakfasts. These healthy behaviors have a small impact on literacy scores, but SES has a significant impact. In the United States, SES is also a predictor of literacy scores and achievement. It is likely that a similar study in the United States would have results similar to those found in the Australian study. The academic approach can be applied to the impact SES has on literacy. Wealthy students may get more challenging reading assignments because in many schools they are better readers.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are more demanding than reading standards in many states previously were. Holding the high expectations of the CCSS for all students could help to narrow the gap between high and low poverty students. High expectations can make students work harder because all students want to be successful and want to make their teachers proud. Throughout American history minority students have received lower quality education than white students. For example, it was illegal for African American slaves to read (Spring, 2007, 52). Slaves caught reading might be killed or lose a limb. Even after the Civil War, freed slaves were not allowed to go to school (55). Schools for African Americans were poorly funded and therefore lower quality. In the 1900s, there was improvement, but it took many decades of fighting for equal educational opportunities before minority schools could compare to white schools. Today, there is still a significant difference in the education minority students receive compared to white students. Examples of this can be seen in the charter school system in Chicago. Charter schools often have a high population of black and Hispanic students. The education is not always equal to public schools because the teachers do not have to be certified and the schools are able

to choose their own standards. The history of educational discrimination against minorities has caused a huge gap that continues to be difficult to close. This discrimination has caused a never-ending cycle of difficulties with success for many minority groups. Many minority students struggle with academic language due to lack of content area and general academic vocabulary (Johnson). Lack of academic vocabulary causes these students to have trouble with reading in content areas, especially in the higher-grade levels. According to the Reading is Fundamental website, "By 4th grade, African American and Hispanic students are, on average, nearly three academic years behind their white peers." This statistic shows how huge the literacy gap between white and minority students is and it is a problem. It is not fair that some students have such inferior reading skills. These low reading skills can prevent these children from ever being fully successful in American society. Minority students often start school behind their white peers in literacy because they do not have as much access to books at young ages and are not read to as frequently due to the lack of access to books. Once minority students enter school, they might lack motivation to read because of the lack of access to reading in their early years at home. This causes these students to continue to fall further behind, widening the literacy gap between minorities and their white peers. Early years are critical for developing beginning literacy skills and not having these skills when beginning school can be damaging.

The literacy gap between boys and girls is higher in low-income families (O'Dea and Mugridge, 2012, 2). Generally across the world boys have lower reading scores than girls. The Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) studies in many countries has confirmed this. In 19 countries tested by PISA, girls scored higher in reading. In addition, the girls had higher levels of reading enjoyment, time spent reading, and read more diverse topics (Brozo, Sulkunen, Shiel, Garbe, Pandian, and Valtin, 2014, 586 to 587). Enjoyment in reading and time spent in it are very important to become a good reader. The biggest factor in improving literacy scores is excellent teachers. Teachers education programs and professional development need to be improved to produce more highly effective teachers. Typically teachers at high poverty school are inexperienced and as they gain experience they take jobs at low-poverty schools, creating an endless cycle of inexperienced teachers at high-poverty schools. Another thing that can be done to narrow the literacy gap is implement breakfast and physical activity programs in all schools. According to the O'Dea and Mugridge study, eating healthy breakfast and being more physically active positively affects literacy scores. Explicit instruction in vocabulary is a necessity for low readers (Johnson). If students do not understand academic language, they will not be able to understand math, science, social studies, and language arts. Teachers need to teach specific content area vocabulary and also general academic vocabulary such as action words, transitions, and concepts. Often teachers remember to teach the content vocabulary, but forget to teach general academic vocabulary. Without knowledge of actions, transitions, and concepts students will not be successful in reading. Strong vocabulary instruction is a small step to narrowing the literacy gap. Reading engagement and motivation are the biggest reasons that boys underachieve in reading (Massoud and Sudic, 2014, 27). We can keep boys motivated and engaged by giving them many text choices that are interesting to them.

Boys should be given different genre options and topics. Keeping boys engaged in reading should be a constant goal for teachers (Brozo, Sulkunen, Shiel, Garbe, Pandian, and Valtin, 2014, 591). Motivation and engagement would also benefit low-income and minority students. Teachers can model good reading strategies by reading aloud. Kids think this makes content easier to understand and they like to hear their teacher's thinking (Massoud and Sudic, 2014, 30). The all teachers should know their students interests to make more text options available that are interesting and relevant to students lives (Massoud and Sudic, 2014, 32). People who work in education systems should help students to love reading by providing them books and giving them time to read every day. In addition, excellent teachers are very important to success in reading. The government should help low-income children by providing them with schooling tools and access to books. Literacy has become a basic of learning in every subject area. Narrowing the gap between wealthy and poor students, white and minority students, and boys and girls is very important to achieve a quality education system. Teachers should know the reasons certain groups of students underachieve in order to start to solve the issues and narrow the literacy gap. Clearly, excellent teachers, access to books, and strong vocabulary and reading instruction are necessary to help all students become good readers.

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