

A Critical Call for Research about the Literacy Access of Black Incarcerated Youth

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“Black youth are more than 4 times as likely as their White peers to be held in juvenile facilities.” -The Sentencing Project

There are countless research articles and texts in the field of education pertaining to: (a) The pushout of Black girls (Morris, 2015); (b) the school to prison pipeline (Kim, et al. 2010); and (c) the criminalization of Black youth, with increased police presence in schools (Suddler, 2019). These issues often show up in research related to urban education, equity, and educational studies. There are also studies on the literacy problems, ‘literacies’ of prisoners, and tutoring programs for incarcerated youth within literacy research (Gavigan & Albright, 2015). However, access and advocacy to literacy, books, and daily instruction in reading and writing for incarcerated youth has been largely ignored within the literacy research literature. These issues are of grave importance due to the changes in prison policies and the sanctioning of building adult prisons by the federal government. In the past 25 years, there have been more youth prisons built than at any other time in the history of the United States. There are 50 states within the United States. However, there are 1,510 detention centers, residential treatment centers, group homes, and youth prisons (Rovner, 2021). In fact, the age of those prisoners is as young as age 10 (a child in 4th or 5th grades) and as old as 18 (the age of a high school senior). Once a child reaches age 18, they are sent to an adult facility. This practice can create a scenario where youth detention centers become a pipeline for prisons. We should be wary of this practice and policy decision considering the increased funding for multimillion dollar facilities being built to house youth offenders. If more prisons are built, those facilities will need occupants to fill those cells. The question then becomes which children will end up in those cells? The current racial disparities in arrest rates creates a racial disparity in incarceration and a racial disparity in sentencing. Dr. Michelle Alexander terms the increasing number of prisons and the

disparate rates of incarceration as the new Jim Crow in the age of mass incarceration (2010). As the rates of incarceration increase, colleges of education will undoubtedly have to begin training literacy professionals to become teachers in these facilities in the 21st century. As the children begin to shift to these facilities, educators will have to re-envision what teaching means beyond a school building.

A Call to Action

As educators and literacy professionals, we must begin to do more than concern ourselves with the theoretical literacy experiences of incarcerated youth. We need to consider how Black youth ended up behind bars at such a young age. What were their schooling experiences and did those experiences negatively impact their lives? What were their experiences with literacy prior to incarceration and after they were incarcerated? Our role as literacy advocates and researchers should be multifaceted to write, advocate, and teach future teachers the realities of what the age of mass incarceration will bring to their classrooms and experiences as educators.

The first call to action is to be vocal as academics regarding the current or proposed legislation about failure in 3rd grade due to reading scores. In the past, states have considered or passed legislation regarding failure at 4th and 7th grade based on reading scores as well. This legislation should be challenged considering that when a child is retained, the dropout rates increase for children in high school. Understanding the research is key to voicing concern over the critical research in this area. Does a child dropping out of school contribute to incarceration rates?

The second call to action comes into play when we consider that Black students are more likely to reside in book deserts due to a lack of school and library funding. At the same time, states are passing laws to build multi-million-dollar youth detention facilities in those same states. The lack of accountability and the cognitive dissonance regarding these stark realities is real. It is as real as the silence from the field of literacy pertaining to the harsh realities of these issues. As academics and literacy professionals, we should be writing against the grain of these inequitable policies and requiring doctoral seminars on education policy within colleges of education across the United States.

The third call to action is a charge as literacy professionals to challenge our colleagues in the field when unethical behavior regarding standardized tests and pressure to do well on those measures overrides professional standards for instruction and care of students. For example, I attended the Georgia State University Sources Conference on Urban Educational Excellence during 2020 as a virtual field trip with my students. During one of the presentations by two of the faculty members, they discussed the international issue of the recess movement, noting during their presentation that American schools have the worst recess policies in the developing world. Further, they discussed the casual overmedication of American children. This brings me to our fourth and fifth calls to action.

The fourth call to action is to determine how many schools are deciding to cut or eliminate recess to ‘increase’ time for literacy instruction. Our field is often used negatively within the field of education to explain why children are cut off from important developmental activities like recess, art, music, and language instruction. Where are literacy professionals in the fight for recess and a more balanced and developmentally appropriate approach to education?

The fifth call to action is to come up with ethical standards for literacy which state that the unethical labeling of children as having disabilities in grades 1-3 due to underachievement in reading is not a view based in research or fact. Literacy professionals know that most children who struggle with learning to read may not have a disability. There are many different factors which contribute to children struggling to read. I have yet to read a study which identifies that most children who struggle with reading have a disability. Yet, there is no national call to end this practice of labeling children due to reading scores in the field. In fact, there is no call to end the mass medication of children in the field who are identified because they won’t sit still during reading instruction either.

Literacy professors are not taking the necessary and definitive stands needed to protect children from unethical practices based on literacy scores. However, we do know that Black children are the ones most impacted by this silence and lack of action. In fact, the issues within the field of education focus solely on high stakes testing discourse. Yet, the devil is in the details. Standardized tests are a problem, because of how test scores are used by professionals inside and outside of the field.

Standardized tests are supposed to be used to make instructional decisions. However, when it comes to literacy, test scores are used as indicators of disabilities, to eliminate recess, and to grade schools which influence real estate values. Our stance of indifference and silence toward these issues must change.

Developing New Focus

In the past, my work with a youth detention center helped me understand how unnecessary and punitive policies are regarding truancy, school suspensions, arrests for joy riding, and city curfews. After talking with children in a facility, it was heartbreaking to hear children being locked up for minor offenses, because they could not afford an attorney. If they could, they would be sentenced to community service, good school attendance, and getting better grades. The children who are being arrested and placed in detention facilities are often living horrific experiences. They are being searched, placed in solitary confinement, and kept in small prison cells and rooms all day. The reality that there are disproportionately more Black children in these spaces speaks to a continuing trend with no end in sight. In this age of mass incarceration, we must envision a new way to reach children who are incarcerated and without access to literacy. The ability to access literacy behind bars will undoubtedly give the children we are advocating for more choices than are currently available.

Service to the Field

In my own work, I previously planned African American Read-In's, several literature projects with elementary students, and a buddy readers program for preschools. I am currently working on the #EliminatingBookDeserts project at three partner schools surrounding the GSU community. However, after working collaboratively to focus on book clubs with incarcerated youth, I learned that the work I am doing is just not enough. I am currently answering the call from the youth incarcerated in the state prison to fill the library with books they need. What I found most interesting in this process, is that books are not a funded line item in the budget. To build the state prison library, the only thing they accept are book donations. Therefore, I am working on building the library with my students. I have a crowdsourced campaign to focus on #booksforincarceratedyouthinga. We donate about 200-500 books per

semester. I urge everyone who reads this work to consider starting your own long-term project and refocusing both your service and research efforts on investigating children's access, or lack thereof, to books.

Final Thoughts

I often think about the pivotal work I read that inspired my own work, from Dr. Jawanzaa Kunjufu to Dr. Lisa Delpit. Dr. Kunjufu spent his life working to improve the lives of Black students through reforming school leaders and really getting through to Black children during his lectures. I also think about the first time I read Dr. Delpit's work and how her calls to edify the profession to ensure that no one ever thinks of the children they teach as someone else's problem, is needed more than ever right now. My call as a literacy professional is to use any influence and power, I must create access to literacy for as many children as I can. I think about how the children I advocate for are often silenced, criminalized, made invisible, and denied access to books. I hope the work that we do continues to be focused on Black students and their need to access books.

Because their voices matter...

How they are treated matters...

How they are researched matters...

Their schooling experiences matter...

Whether they are helped matters...

What they read matters...

Their access to books matters...

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