

## UNC Scandal & Literacy Levels: Racism, Relationships and Reading Instruction

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In a [recent opinion piece](#), Mary Carey, the founder of a volunteer group representing children who can't read, points to the low literacy rates of black males as the cause of the UNC academic scandal. She raises important issues about race, literacy, and our education system. Unfortunately, Ms. Cary oversimplifies aspects of both student achievement and reading instruction that we as literacy educators need to correct and explain.

**Above all, we want to point out that the UNC Scandal is about adults cheating, it is not about young black males who cannot read.** Young black males were a small percentage of those implicated in the cheating scandal, which was perpetrated by many non-athletes and many non-Black students, and many women. To use the UNC scandal as segue to talk about black males' reading achievement is disingenuous at best and racist at the worst.

However, there are some important points that we feel need to be addressed. As experienced educators and literacy scholars, our classroom experiences and scholarly research address many of the issues that are related to this topic. So, while we feel that Mary Carey conflates issues when she uses her commentary about the UNC cheating scandal to focus on literacy rates of black males, we believe that there are many important issues that should be addressed. Our intention is to bring up some issues from her commentary, provide research-based understandings, and suggest some possible solutions.

### **Race**

Certainly, race is an issue and understanding how race impacts literacy rates is paramount to literacy levels of black males. We cannot effectively focus on low levels of literacy rates without addressing the larger issue of race and education. Achievement in public schools reflects systemic issues that affect achievement for many minorities. While some research demonstrates that after background characteristics are controlled, African American and White students enter school with equal reading readiness, research almost unanimously demonstrates that reading achievement gaps widen for African American students as they progress through school. Research has also demonstrated a discrepancy in participation of programs that support future opportunities for African American students, such as advanced placement programs, high school graduation rates, and admittance to college programs. All of this points to the idea that schools may sustain or add to racial disparities and thus create achievement gaps.

We believe that a key answer is to recruit more diverse teachers into education and specifically the teaching force, which is predominantly white and female (n=83%). Teachers must help African American students develop healthy racial identities and show students that academically successful people are part of all racial and ethnic groups. Also, it's important to incorporate diverse perspectives into the curriculum in the way of curriculum materials, texts, and approaches to learning. For many students who may be struggling with reading, the ways in which students respond to reading instruction can reflect larger issues, including what it means to be a reader and whose ideas or perspectives are accepted in school settings. We need more

diverse participation in education so that we hear from multiple perspectives and voices so children have role models.

### **Reading Intervention and Remediation**

In her article, Carey suggests that the Orton-Gillingham system was the “secret sauce” to literacy instruction, especially underachieving readers that include African American males. However, there is no recipe for working with struggling readers or a “secret sauce” of reading instruction. Orton-Gillingham is no panacea; this particular intervention is designed to increase word recognition skills, which is only one component of the reading process. As an aside, while Orton-Gillingham programs are used in public schools, frequently in special education programs, they are less commonly used in private schools than cited in the article. There is a reason for this. Orton-Gillingham is an effective program for certain students who need support with phonemic awareness and decoding and works well with children who have been diagnosed as dyslexic. However, many students who struggle with reading actually need different interventions that address issues such as comprehension, motivation, and engagement. Using Orton-Gillingham as a blanket intervention for all struggling readers is the wrong approach.

In order for students to develop their reading skills and abilities they need time to practice using effective reading strategies. Too often struggling readers receive subpar instruction that focuses on “the basics” through repetition, rote memorization, and worksheet completion, rather than instruction that fits the needs of the child. Students often experience more time on isolated skills instruction and extensive repetition, which can cause disengagement and frustration. However, remediation is not the key to reading instruction for any learners. Consequently, while students are getting “remediation” and using Orton-Gillingham, they are often removed from classroom discussion, reading high-quality books, and otherwise engaging with the big ideas and concepts that would build their knowledge for reading and comprehension in the content areas. The bottom line is that students need to have appropriate reading instruction and one approach will not work for all students.

We would like to propose one “secret sauce” for supporting struggling students: developing teacher content knowledge about reading assessment and instruction. The best way to do this is to encourage teachers to become certified reading specialists through a master’s degree in reading. Reading specialists are trained to work with children by understanding the components of reading and how they should be taught to students, learning to assess and instruct based on the learning factors that contribute to the achievement gap in literacy, and utilizing knowledge of psychological, sociological, and linguistic features of reading and writing. Unfortunately, in July 2013, the state legislature passed a bill that eliminated pay raises for teachers with advanced degrees in North Carolina. The result is a [decline in the number teachers](#) who are pursuing this option. This is a travesty that will have a direct impact on literacy rates for all children in North Carolina. Teachers who have a masters in reading often work specifically with students who need intervention in reading as well as act as coaches for other teachers on ways to improve reading instruction and reach all students.

### **Testing and Reading Instruction**

Carey addresses the NAEP scores in her opinion piece, which indicate a major problem with literacy rates with black males. While we recognize that the NAEP scores pinpoint a serious problem, we also want to voice our concerns for an overemphasis on testing, testing, testing.

Standardized tests have led to a narrowing of the curriculum and independent skills are being taught in a fragmented manner. Students are being taught to the test and in the process they are not learning problem solving skills or ways to fully engage with reading. High stakes testing affects how teachers utilize instructional time in the classroom. The End of Grade tests have become the main focus in a majority of public schools across the nation and the pressure from NCLB legislation passed down to school administrators has impacted our schools to the point they are stressful environments of “learning.” Richard Rothstein, an education expert at the Economic Policy Institute, addressed the problematic focus on test scores by stating that, “Standardized tests have led to a narrowing of the curriculum and independent skills are being taught in a fragmented manner. Students are being taught to the test and in the process they are not learning problem solving skills or ways to fully engage with reading.” The scores on the test do not accurately measure a student’s intelligence because they are limited to closed-ended answers that limit self-expression and creativity. Students are being subjected to recite information rather than learn through experiencing and creating, which does not properly prepare them for higher education or life after school.

Teachers now have to make difficult decisions in the classroom because of demands regarding student success on the extensive testing requirements placed upon them. These requirements produce undue stress and result in decisions that are not conducive to educating our children. Instructional time in subjects like art and music are being cut to make room for test-taking practices in math and reading. However, authentic instruction calls for real-life learning experiences that connect skill learning to real life situations (rather than fragmented skill and drill) and students and teachers making the decisions about what students should learn (rather than someone outside of the classroom such as test-makers or standards-creators).

We would like to propose that educators ask important questions about any form of assessment administered in the classroom (and thanks to Alfie Kohn, an advocate for education and children, for his [insightful ideas](#)). First, what is the purpose and does it assess what it claims to assess? Does it paint a picture of the learner beyond “just numbers”? Does it allow children and teachers to co-construct understanding and meaning? Is the priority to support students’ learning and development? If the answer is no to any of these questions, we should not use that form of assessment.

### **Expectations and Relationships**

In the Ted Talk entitled “[Every Child Needs a Champion](#)”, the late Rita Pierson explained the power of the relationship for each and every student. She shared stories of educators, including herself and her mother, who made even the smallest achievement in a student’s academic work an important point on the map to success. Consequently, the students began believing in themselves. High expectations for students were upheld and students were challenged to be the best they could be in school and as citizens of society. Gloria Ladson-Billings stated that teachers need to have expectations that all students can learn.<sup>1</sup> Teachers of black males, as well as all other types of students, need to hold these high expectations for their

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<sup>1</sup> Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

students beginning even in the early elementary grades to foster a positive school experience. Furthermore, what students need is a sense of belonging, to know that someone cares about them and their achievement, and a role model with a positive life journey. One teacher can make all the difference in a student's life.

We suggest that if readers who want to know why so many black boys struggle in school, they should refer to Lisa Delpit's most recent book, published in 2012, *"Multiplication is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People's Children"*. According to Delpit, tracking of students begins in elementary school where students are categorized into low, average, and high achievement groups. From experience, we would like to point out that the focus in the curriculum for low and average students is usually so "basic" and boring that it guarantees that these students will rarely experience promotion to a higher track. In addition, the most experienced and often the most creative and innovative teachers tend to be those who teach the high or advanced track. Delpit suggests that because students in the low groups never move out of these tracks, they don't believe they can achieve, especially when most of their friends, and more importantly, those belonging to their race, aren't achieving either. She also points out that there is a significant lack of black male role models that are both academic achievers and cool enough to garner adolescent respect. In addition, students don't make the connection between academics and financial gain, because teachers, who have devoted their entire lives to academics, do not appear to be financially successful.

It must also be noted that schools attempt to inspire a 'culture of achievement' through an awards day celebration once each grading period, while sports achievement receives almost daily attention, praise, and even financial backing, starting as early as middle school. College scouts begin looking at athletes in middle school, but no one ever scouts middle or high school campuses looking for those who achieve high grades.

In conclusion, we have raised several points for legislators, policy makers, and administrators to consider for our children's sake. As educators who are in institutions of public and higher education, we were appalled that someone would shift the focus of the UNC scandal to literacy levels of black males when we clearly believe that this is an issue tied to administrative decisions and cover-ups from the university. However, the need to focus on quality literacy instruction is crucial. We propose that this begins with informed, research-based practices in classrooms. We hope that those who work with struggling readers will start by advocating for opportunities for all students to learn, encouraging more diverse perspectives and involvement in education, supporting educators who understand effective reading interventions based on assessment and diagnosis, and recognizing the impact of high stakes testing. Above all, we advocate for developing high expectations for all students and nurturing positive relationships within the schools.

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Thank you to Julie Justice for getting our ideas started for this paper.