

The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Cannot Read this Title: The Multi-Generational Effect of Illiteracy in the Lives of Black American Women

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Problem Statement

In this commentary we will discuss the multi-generational effects of illiteracy for Black women and their children in the US, including financial and health literacy, intellectual challenges, social costs across generations, and the elements of discrimination that negatively impact their ability to access help and find success. In the US in 2020, the female literacy rate was 53.7 percent, which was 21.6 percent lower than the male literacy rate of 75.3 percent. When women with limited education, which is tied to illiteracy, become mothers, their children tend to experience lower levels of cognitive and socio-emotional functioning and academic achievement. They experience less success, both in school and later as adults in the workforce.¹

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported 85 percent of Black students in eighth grade lack proficiency in mathematics and reading skills.² The ability to read and write affects every single aspect of our lives, from the way we work to the food we eat:

Illiteracy has a far-reaching impact on women who are not proficient in the areas of prose literacy (the ability to read instruction materials, brochures, news stories), document literacy (the ability to read and comprehend job applications, maps, payroll forms, schedules), and quantitative literacy (the ability to balance a checkbook, figure out a tip, determine interest rate). (4)³

We will show the aspects of discrimination that hinder women from achieving literacy, and how reading and writing are used to create a foundation for living a creative, independent, and critically aware life.⁴

Status of Literature

Created in 1972, Title IX states that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”⁵ Title IX was meant to enact systemic change in the intellectual and creative aspects of young women’s education but sadly it has not achieved what it was created to do. This failure continues to impact generations, particularly among Black women.

The tie between illiteracy and lack of financial independence for Black women reveals complex social problems in the profiles of incarcerated Black women. These are likely to be young, low-literate, poorly skilled, and undereducated single mothers, who are unprepared for employment that pays a living wage. Often, they are survivors of physical and sexual abuse, have substance abuse problems, possess multiple physical and mental health problems, and are convicted primarily of drug-related charges.³

The literature highlights that Black women who do not achieve the foundational literacy skills through our public educational system in their youth have less opportunity for intellectual advancement, creating a vulnerable multi-generational situation for women when they become mothers and cannot help their own children to learn to read and write.⁶ Children of adults with low literacy will likely (72%) have even lower literacy skills.⁷ Education journalist Natalie Wexler emphasized that “Literacy needs its own focus because reading is the gatekeeper to functioning and succeeding academically, professionally, and civically.

It underlies access to virtually all knowledge.”²

Call to Action

The US educational systems must effectively educate its citizens and respond to the aftermath of systemic racist and sexist policy in educational institutions, which have resulted in a dis-investment in Black women’s education. Illiteracy can cost the US nearly \$225 billion in workforce productivity loss and results in expenses for federal and state welfare programs.⁸ Transformative measures must be implemented in policy to cascade changes.

Dual-generation strategies draw from findings that the wellbeing of parents is vital to their child’s socio-emotional and cognitive intelligence.⁹ “The three key components are 1) high-quality early childhood education, 2) job training for mothers that leads to a credential for high-wage/high-demand jobs and 3) family/peer support services” (4).¹

Many existing programs such as Head Start, a federal program that promotes school readiness of children from low-income families, the Workforce Investment

Act, and the Higher Education Act “could be blended with state and local funding to create new dual-generational programs” (16).¹ An example of this includes Community Action Project (CAP) Tulsa’s Career Advance program, where parents of children in Head Start are recruited for post-secondary education and workforce training.⁹ In urban communities, places such as public libraries, resource centers, healthcare clinics, churches, and employment centers could all promote or create resources for low-education women and their developing children. For example, the national Jeremiah Program operates out of 7 urban locations and provides early childhood education for children and life-skills training to single mothers.⁹

Positive educational experiences act as protective factors for young women and girls of color growing up in adverse or oppressive environments. Efforts to create intellectually stimulating and creative enrichment among young Black students must include integrating Black, Brown, and Indigenous people’s stories, and culture into educational spaces, as well as exploring alternate forms of expression and thought processing through poetry, spoken word, art, story, theater, dance, film, etc.⁴

References

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