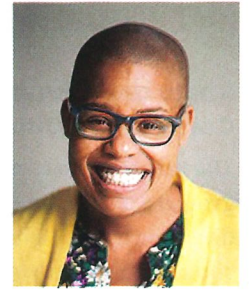


Kimberly N. Parker



The Power of Liberatory Research

Educators must be committed to consuming literacy research with an eye toward making a difference for BIPOC students.

Welcome to my EL column! I will use this space to think through instructional practices and beliefs that center Black and indigenous students and other students of color. My hope is that the more we normalize high achievement for this group by discussing actionable steps, the better we'll incorporate practices that engender transformative literacy experiences for them.



As a check-in on the effectiveness of my work with young people and educators, I often return to literacy educator Cris Tovani's directive that teachers should be able to say, "I can cite the research that informs my practice." But not all research looks at BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) children and their literacy needs from a strength-based lens. I know many educators find it challenging to keep up with academic research, citing barriers like access to articles and

time. However, there are experts who are conducting important, culturally affirming research that can help us to fundamentally change our practices for the better.

Toward Best Use of Literacy Research

These four actions can help educators reinvigorate a habit of reading literacy research in ways that might positively impact BIPOC students.

1. Acknowledge the need for research—and persist!

As we think about the current school year, we must ask if what we're planning is backed by research. For instance, if we're assigning reading logs to determine if students are reading a text, is that backed by research? (It's not). We also might need to persist past some barriers that make diving into research challenging. For instance, we might find research on literacy dense and difficult to navigate; not knowing where to look for current studies or how to access them can also get in our way. Potential sources of solid research include:

- American Educational Research Association's website offers the latest and most-cited research articles.
- Professional organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English, whose robust library of resolutions and positions statements are research-backed.
- Keyword searches in Google Scholar can yield current research—especially about theories that can fundamentally change our practice or help us reach BIPOC children (i.e., queer theory, decolonial theories, etc.).

2. Understand that not all research centers BIPOC students positively.

In 2021, the American Psychological Association issued a resolution and apology for the harm done to BIPOC

communities through its promotion of racist research and disciplinary narratives (<https://www.apa.org/about/policy/racism-apology>). We might take this admission as a moment to audit our current practices in literacy education and the research that backs them (or doesn't). Willis and colleagues (2022) contend that "Historically, literacy research has pathologized Blackness and continues to promote misinterpretations of Black readers and their life experiences that are accepted, promoted, repeated, and published" (p. 17).¹ Most of us have been conditioned to read research, especially about children of color, a certain way—unless we've had regular practice seeking out different types of research. It's imperative for us to acknowledge these truths and actively work against them by seeking out, centering, and using different research.

3. Read with criticality.

I draw on Muhammad's (2020) definition of criticality as a framework for assessing the research behind our classroom practices.² Muhammad defines criticality as: "the capacity and ability to read, write, think, and speak in ways to understand power and equity in order to understand and promote anti-oppression."

Though Muhammed was speaking of what criticality provides for students, educators must extend this lens to ourselves as we evaluate literacy research. Similarly, when we read literacy research with criticality, we can dismantle deficit theories and stop using research that seems to spring from deficit in our practices. Reading with criticality prompts us to ask questions like:

- If the study is about BIPOC children, what is the racial, ethnic, and social class background of the researchers?

- Are BIPOC students centered in humanizing, compassionate, and liberatory ways?

- Who are current researchers who are doing liberatory, exciting work with BIPOC students, providing theories and studies that encourage and inspire us to change our practices? What seminal research by those thinkers should I read?

- Is much of the language used in the overall framing of the study deficit-based and even possibly anti-Black (are BIPOC children portrayed as "lacking," or "underperforming" or "behind")?

If we ask these questions, we can start a nuanced conversation about the kinds of research that is missing from our current work with our students. If we are serious about changing our current literacy outcomes for BIPOC children so that literacy education contributes to their liberation, we must grow our ability to reject research that doesn't lead to changing BIPOC readers' lives. And we should develop our fluency and ability to read, incorporate, and share important research that is strength-based and effective with BIPOC students.

4. Discuss—and Act—in Community.

The challenge with reading research is that if we hope to incorporate the findings into our practices, we need someone to discuss, reflect, and enact it with, just as we often did when we were in graduate school preparing to enter the profession. I regularly chat with a range of educators, researchers, and young people about the research I read as I seek to understand what it could look like in particular contexts. We can circle back to each other when, in the midst of trying to incorporate some part of that research, we need feedback, reassurance, or answers to questions that arise. Because it can

be challenging to access academic research articles behind paywalls, colleagues can share ideas about where to access open-source articles or other sources that are more accessible. The added accountability of a group of colleagues—and of our students—encourages us to do something with the research rather than just read it and file it away.

Deciding To Act

Research that centers and humanizes BIPOC children must inform our literacy practices. We must see regular reading of research—the most current, culturally affirming, and transformative literacy research we can find—as part of our professional work and our ongoing professional development. Then we have to do something with what we read to positively impact our students, whether that means changing our literacy instruction to be more equitable, sharing that research with others, advocating for our students, or encouraging academic researchers to make their research more accessible to wider audiences. Let this be the school year that we strengthen our reading lives, especially when it comes to understanding and incorporating the research that can lead to powerful changes for our BIPOC students. 📖

¹Willis, A.I., McMillon, G.T., & Smith, P. (2022). *Affirming Black students' lives & literacies*. Teachers College Press.

²Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic.

Kimberly N. Parker (kimpossible97@gmail.com) is an award-winning educator and is the current director of the Crimson Summer Academy at Harvard. Her most recent book is *Literacy is Liberation: Working for Justice Through Culturally Relevant Teaching* (ASCD, 2022).