

# ADDRESSING DIVERSITY IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION

# LITERACY RESEARCH, PRACTICE AND EVALUATION

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LITERACY RESEARCH, PRACTICE  
AND EVALUATION VOLUME 8

# ADDRESSING DIVERSITY IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION

BY

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# FOREWORD

Addressing diversity in literacy instruction is a cornerstone to being an effective educator. Notions of diversity are ever-changing and expanding in the global contexts in which we teach. Equitable learning opportunities are created through seeing students as unique learners, primed to achieve through building on their prior knowledge, previous experiences, and ways of seeing the world. In re-envisioning diversity as an advantage in the classroom, we can position ourselves to learn from our students and view them as resources to the learning process. The global contexts that define classrooms and workplaces today demand more from teachers and as such, literacy leaders are needed more than ever.

To meet these evolving needs, this edited book showcases chapters on leveraging native languages towards English language proficiency. Moreover, other chapters provide multicultural perspectives on the sociocultural dynamics that comprise teaching English and grammar; literacy pedagogies for K-12 diverse learners are also discussed through a lens of building on students' funds of knowledge. Some chapters provide a foundation for globally connected literacy instruction inclusive of selecting and using appropriate literature that depicts the diverse world in which we live; and finally other chapters highlight how culturally relevant pedagogical frameworks can address diversity in proactive and productive ways that optimize learning opportunities for all learners.

Evan Ortlieb

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# TOWARD EQUITY THROUGH OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN LITERACY

Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher

## ABSTRACT

*To identify actions, teachers and school leaders can take to ensure equity in terms of opportunities to learn literacy. We reviewed the professional literature in four major areas, including opportunity to learn (OTL), student mobility and its impact on learning, grade-level retention and its impact on equity and future success, and systems that can provide students access to complex text. We note the value of each of these four constructs (OTL, mobility, retention, and access to complex texts) in ensuring that schools become increasingly equitable such that all students develop as literate members of society. We provide classroom and school-based examples for readers to consider as they work toward equity. Far too many schools are inequitable and some students fail to develop their literate lives. We provide ideas and actions that teachers and school teams can take to ensure that diverse students have the best chance possible to learn.*

**Keywords:** Opportunities to learn; mobility; literacy; retention; close reading

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Issues of equity continue to plague education, despite concerted efforts to change the trajectory of student learning (Jimenez-Castellanos, 2010). Yet inequitable distributions of human and academic resources persist, and are felt most keenly within the classroom itself. Although widely acknowledged as a key to expanding the lives of children and adolescents, too many students are denied access to literacy supports that foster knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, and inquiry. Access to such supports requires examination of structures that inhibit the achievement of some students, especially those in historically low achieving schools and districts. What is necessary is a deep examination of the research on opportunities to learn as it intersects with issues of equity and literacy (Lafontaine, Baye, Vieluf, & Monseur, 2015).

Equity stands in stark contrast to equality. An equality mindset is focused on ensuring that everyone gets the same resources and experiences. But an equality mindset is predicated on the faulty assumption that students arrive at our classroom doors with similar strengths and needs. In contrast, an equity perspective begins with the knowledge that students come to us with a range of experiences and resources that must be leveraged to benefit their learning, but that might also require a redistribution of resources to accomplish this. A core value of an equity-focused classroom, school, and district is that unequal needs require unequal resources.

In this chapter, we begin with a definition of opportunity to learn (OTL) and further explore this construct across two dimensions: instructional time and degree of complexity of materials, concepts, and skills. Next, we examine the negative impact high student mobility rates and in-grade retention practices have on literacy learning, as well as the ways in which schools can ameliorate these effects. We then turn our attention to providing access to complex texts and tasks. Differential levels of OTL begin in the primary grades, as is evidenced in comparative time and curricular analyses reveal that while some children receive literacy instruction focused on critical thinking, those who are not making expected progress are relegated to discrete skills training (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989; Phelps, Corey, DeMonte, Harrison, & Loewenberg Ball, 2012). These detrimental effects are later evidenced in advanced course enrolment in high school, as too many historically under-taught students have been inadequately prepared to take challenging classes.

Equity in literacy education requires action. We are reminded of a slogan we have seen on T-shirts: “I don’t have a solution, but I certainly admire the problem.” In this chapter and throughout this book, we and other authors make recommendations for taking action to solve complex issues in literacy

education as it relates to equity. Our own recommendations for remedying inequitable opportunities to learn are as follows:

1. Reverse the effects of mobility to ensure students are not losing valuable ground.
2. Channel resources for early intervention in literacy development and eliminate in-grade retention practices.
3. Provide high-quality literacy instruction that provides access to complex texts.

## **EQUITY AND OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN**

The OTL is “the degree to which a student experiences classroom instruction, including a variety of approaches that address a range of cognitive processes, teaching practices, and grouping formats” (Heafner & Fitchett, 2015, p. 228).

Children in every classroom experience instruction differently. One differential factor in the OTL is time distribution. A case in point: a teacher devotes 20 minutes a day for independent reading. Some children in the class only need to hear “Take out your book...” and it is immediately in front of them. That child will probably use upwards of 19.5 of those minutes with eyes on text. But his classmate a few feet away is dragging himself to the bookshelf, listlessly picking a book, and flipping a few pages, then putting it back on the shelf. In the same 20-minute span, he has only had his eyes on text for 4 minutes. In this hypothetical classroom, the time allotted (20 minutes) differed in use in significant and cumulative ways (anywhere 4–19.5 minutes). Without teacher intervention, the second child will systematically experience far fewer opportunities to build reading fluency and stamina, following further behind his classmates (Stanovich, 1986).

Time considerations for English language arts (ELA) instruction are further amplified across the entire school year. A large-scale study of time allotted for ELA instruction in 112 elementary schools engaged in comprehensive school reform found that while the average number of minutes was 101, the range was anywhere from 74 to 129 minutes. The problems for schools in the lowest range were further compounded by student and teacher absences, thereby reducing the probability a student might receive ELA instruction on a given day as low as 58% (Phelps et al., 2012).

The OTL is further impacted by the relative complexity of the texts being utilized to teach. Previous studies have found that young children’s contact

with informational texts, while abysmal for all, was even scarcer for those living in poverty compared to their peers in high SES schools (Duke, 2000). This lack of knowledge building has a profound impact on reading comprehension, especially for those who are identified as English learners (Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010). An analysis of the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) data from more than 70 countries found that relative access to complex texts and tasks had an impact on the 15-year-olds' learning, with the authors stating that "Students attending schools with a less privileged social intake are more exposed to impoverished OTL in reading (less demanding texts and tasks)" (LaFontaine et al., 2015, p. 8). In the US, Education Trust analyzed more than 1,500 ELA assignments given to middle school students in six schools to determine the amount of text-based and cognitively challenging work students were doing. They defined high-quality assignments across four domains: (1) aligned to grade-level standards; (2) centrality of text; (3) cognitively challenging; and (4) motivating and engaging. Their analysis revealed that only 5% of the assignments met these criteria, with 85% requiring recall and reproduction only, the lowest level of cognitive challenge (Education Trust, 2015). Similarly, an analysis of the reported practices of more than 2,000 K-12 ELA teachers found that cognitive demand in their classes and courses had changed during the first decade of this century, with significant decline within schools serving high poverty, historically marginalized groups (Polikoff & Struthers, 2013). Without time with complex texts, and associated tasks that are cognitively challenging, we cannot hope to foster the knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, and inquiry that students need to achieve their true potential.

In the remainder of this chapter, we provide evidence-based recommendations for changing the OTL in literacy that students' experience. We focus on three actions that can be address: mobility, grade-level retention, and access to complex texts.

## **REDUCE THE IMPACT OF MOBILITY ON STUDENTS' LITERACY LEARNING**

Changing schools is harmful, and it is especially impactful, in a negative way, to students who are already at risk for school failure (Dauter & Fuller, 2016). Unfortunately, the students who change schools a lot are often those who live in poverty. Students from traditionally under-represented groups, who now represent the majority enrolment in urban schools, also move more frequently

than their White, middle-class, and suburban counterparts (McDonough, 2015). And students who are homeless, the majority of whom are African-American and Latino/Hispanic students, change schools more than any other group (Cowen, 2017). Homeless students move more frequently across district and state lines than their non-homeless peers who more frequently move within the same district to new schools (Cowen, 2017).

Mehana (1997) conducted a meta-analysis of the impact of mobility on students' literacy learning and found a *negative* effect of 0.27. This is a significant impact in the world of effect sizes. Hattie (2009) has collected thousands of meta-analyses and has ranked almost 200 influences on students' learning. According to his estimates, an effect size of 0.40 is equivalent to 1 year of learning for 1 year of schooling. When all of the studies on mobility are aggregated, the impact is  $-0.34$  – that is negative 0.34 – or the loss of nearly 1 year of learning over the course of the year (Hattie, 2009). In fact, considering Hattie's list of nearly 200 influences, mobility has the greatest negative impact on students' learning. Yet it's rarely discussed and almost never included in efforts to create equitable learning for all students. To our thinking, mobility has to be a part of every literacy improvement effort and schools and districts should include efforts to minimize the impact that mobility has on student learning in every school improvement plan. There are several things that schools can do to reduce the impact that mobility has on students' literacy learning, including the following steps.

### *Implement a Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum*

As DuFour and Marzano (2011) noted, there are two parts to a guaranteed and viable curriculum: “The fact that it is guaranteed assures us that specific content is taught in specific courses and at specific grade levels, regardless of the teacher to whom a student is assigned. The fact that it is viable indicates that there is enough instructional time available to actually teach the content identified as important” (p. 91). We are not suggesting that schools invest in prescriptive or scripted curriculum for reading and language arts, but rather that there are reasonable and clear expectations for what students will learn and by when (e.g., Marzano, 2003). Without this, students who move schools during the year have gaps and redundancies in their educational experiences, which contribute to their lack of learning and achievement. When districts and schools implement a guaranteed and viable literacy curriculum, teachers can still innovate instructionally. They can select materials that are culturally appropriate as well as materials that introduce students to other cultures,

times, places, and people. Having a guaranteed and viable curriculum ensures that all students have an equitable chance to master content.

*Ensure that Receiving Teachers have Accurate Information  
about the Learning Profile of the New Student*

There are a number of ways that school systems can make sure that teachers have immediate and accurate literacy learning information about new students that enroll (e.g., Titus, 2007). Until school records are fully digital, waiting for the students' cumulative folder is not an effective approach. Instead, some schools schedule an orientation day for new students that include screening information about literacy skills. Other schools collect information from the sending teacher immediately upon enrolment. In more sophisticated school systems, there is an electronic data summary tool that the sending teacher provides for the receiving teacher. This tool includes information about the students' current performance as well as areas of focus for the student and key concepts mastered. The key is providing the classroom teacher with actionable information so that learning time is maximized. In too many cases, teachers spend the first several weeks of a new enrollee's time learning about the student's instructional needs, wasting time that could have been spent focused on new learning. Imagine a student who has mastered 100 sight words, but whose new teacher does not know that. It could be weeks before the student is challenged to learn more. Contrast that situation with the experience of Hamza who has not yet demonstrated mastery on topic sentences in writing but who was receiving targeted instruction in this area. When he was forced to change schools, his sending teacher provided the receiving teacher detailed information, and she was able to pick up on Hamza's writing instruction immediately.

*Facilitate Social Relationships*

As Galton (1995) noted, when students develop close, personal friendships within the first few weeks of enrolling in a new school, the negative impact of mobility is reduced significantly. Boon (2011) has noted that providing students social support such that they could engage productively with others reduced the impact that mobility has on students' learning. It may seem beyond the scope of this book, which focuses on literacy learning, but lack of friendships and other social relationships have a powerful, but negative,

impact on students' literacy learning. Teachers must facilitate social relationships with and for their students, especially those who are new to the classroom, if they want students to develop as literate citizens. As [Hattie \(2009\)](#) states, "Whenever there is a major transition in schools, then the key success factor is whether a child makes a friend in the first month" (p. 82). These social relationships seem to reduce the affective barriers to learning that accumulate as students move. The more often students have moved, the more likely these barriers are to exist and the greater the need is to immediately remove them. It seems so simple to say that when children and youth feel safe, secured, and cared about by peers and adults, they learn a lot more.

As we noted in the Introduction to this section, mobility is an area of need in the world of literacy for diverse learners. Too many students move and are anonymous. They do not develop friendships and other social relationships, and the lessons they experience are not tailored to their needs. In some cases, the teacher did not even know that a new student was arriving and did not have a seat, much less instructional materials, ready for that student. Imagine what that communicates to the individual who is already worried about fitting in. We can do better at addressing mobility, which will improve students' social wellbeing, and in turn their literacy learning.

## **ELIMINATE RETENTION AND CHANNEL RESOURCES FOR EARLY INTERVENTION**

Teachers and administrators who want to deliver on the promise of equity in literacy must interrogate their grade-level retention policies. Holding students back is not an effective practice and contributes negatively to students' overall learning ([Hattie, 2009](#); [Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003](#)). Yes, you read that correctly. The accumulated evidence indicates that repeating a grade is negatively correlated with learning. The overall effect size across subject areas of retaining students is  $-0.16$ , but in language arts the effect is  $-0.36$  and in reading it is  $-0.54$  ([Jimerson, 2001](#)). In other words, "failing" students and requiring that they repeat a grade does not result in improved learning, and does, in fact, harm their learning and contribute in significant ways to the drop-out problem ([Foster, 1993](#)).

In addition to the obvious psychological impact on the learner of failing and being retained, there are social influences at play that likely contribute to the negative impact. In terms of the psychological impact, students who are retained exhibit signs of stress and behavioral challenges in the years that

follow their retention (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Retained students also have fewer friends (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2016). Importantly, once a teacher considers retention, that teacher reduces his or her focus on the student and instead focuses on other students who need help in the class. Further, once parents have agreed to have their child retained, they alter and lower their expectations for their child. As Holmes (1989) noted, educators would be hard-pressed to find another practice that was so unequivocally negative.

Yet the practice persists. In some states (e.g., Iowa, Florida), there is legislation demanding grade-level retention of students. The reason that we bring this to the forefront in a book about equity for diverse learners is that retention policies are not enacted in equitable, or even equal, ways. If grade-level retention were an effective practice, everyone would use it, students would learn more, and there would be few demographic differences in the application. That simply is not true. If you consider two students with the same academic achievement level, African-American and Latino/Hispanic students are four times more likely to be retained when compared to their White counterparts (Meisels & Liaw, 1993). And what data are schools using to retain the vast majority of students? Reading scores. Although some well-meaning educators suggest retention for students' social and emotional development, those same students do not score well on reading assessments. Literacy is the gatekeeper for many to progress to the next grade.

As further evidence that retention policies are not implemented in an equitable way, Warren and Saliba (2012) developed a method for determining retention rates. Overall, the average retention rate for first grade in the United States was 3.5%, or nearly one student in every classroom every year. Having said that, there are significant differences by state, with the Northern Plains having rates for first-grade retention that are essentially 0, whereas southern states have rates that exceed 5% per year. It seems that geography is one of the factors that contribute to retention.

The alternative is called social promotion and has been widely criticized, and advocates for reducing retention are told that they have low standards and expectations. There does not have to be a dichotomy between retention and social promotion. As Protheroe (2007) noted, there are a number of actions that teachers and schools can take as an alternative to retention. When students are identified as being at risk in their literacy development, additional instruction and interventions should immediately be activated. According to Hattie (2012), the effect size of response to intervention is 1.07. That's worth the effort. Retention is easy – push the problem out to a future year, despite the evidence that nothing will change for the student academically. RTI is harder because it takes a coordinated, schoolwide effort to ensure that students learn

and develop. But it works. RTI involves supplemental and intensive interventions in literacy, delivered by experts who understand literacy development. It requires that students are monitored as they participate in intervention efforts and that intervention efforts are adjusted when they are not working.

In addition to RTI, the National Association of School Psychologists developed a position statement on retention ([Center for Development and Learning, 2003](#)). They do not support it. Instead, they offer the following list of recommendations as alternatives:

- Encourage parents' involvement in their children's schools and education through frequent contact with teachers.
- Adopt age-appropriate and culturally sensitive instructional strategies that accelerate progress in all classrooms.
- Emphasize the importance of early developmental programs and preschool programs to enhance language and social skills.
- Incorporate systematic assessment strategies, including continuous progress monitoring and formative evaluation, to enable ongoing modification of instructional efforts.
- Provide effective early reading programs.
- Implement effective school-based mental health programs.
- Use student support teams to assess and identify specific learning or behavior problems, design interventions to address those problems, and evaluate the efficacy of those interventions.
- Use effective behavior management and cognitive behavior modification strategies to reduce classroom behavior problems.
- Provide appropriate education services for children with educational disabilities, including collaboration between regular, remedial, and special education professionals.
- Offer extended year, extended day, and summer school programs that focus on facilitating the development of academic skills.
- Implement tutoring and mentoring programs with peer, cross-age, or adult tutors.
- Incorporate comprehensive schoolwide programs to promote the psychosocial and academic skills of all students.
- Establish full-service schools to provide a community-based vehicle for the organization and delivery of educational, social, and health services to meet the diverse needs of at-risk students.

In sum, retention is not an effective literacy intervention, and this unwise practice is being implemented in disproportionate ways such that some

students are held back at higher rates. In fact, we could argue that retention in some schools, districts, and states has become institutionalized racism, in that it is supported by the social organization, and members of specific racial/ethnic groups are impacted. And it exacerbates and compounds the literacy problem as students fall further behind.

### **PROVIDE HIGH-QUALITY LITERACY INSTRUCTION THAT ENSURES ACCESS TO COMPLEX TEXTS**

We live in southern California, a region known worldwide for its epic traffic problems. Therefore, we spend lots of time sitting on freeways, contemplating the world. A feature common to all freeways is the access ramp, which allows vehicles to reach a sufficient speed so they can safely merge with traffic flow. We think of access to complex texts similarly, with challenging texts bearing similarity to the freeway, and instructional practices as the access ramps. High-quality literacy instruction must always keep challenging texts in mind, as we use a specific set of practices to get students safely up to speed. These practices are not confined to ELA classrooms, but instead are just as effective in secondary content classrooms. Importantly, they are a cohesive system for accessing complex texts, and are not instructional approaches done infrequently and in isolation (Fisher & Frey, 2016).

#### *Learning Intentions*

Students benefit from clear learning intentions that signal the purpose for learning and their criteria for success (Hattie, 2009). It is difficult to approach a challenging text without knowing why one is doing so or for what purpose. Is the goal to learn the content, to practice a new strategy, or to engage in a debate? It begins with stating the *content purpose* (“Today we’re going to read an article about how your brain works when you taste something”), the *language purpose* (“We’ll read this several times, and you’ll discuss it with your table”), the *social purpose* (“Remember to listen to the ideas of others so you can build on them with your comments”), and the success criteria (“You’ll know you have learned this when you can explain the sequence to your shoulder partner using the diagram in the article”). These purposes are returned to throughout the lesson so that students can reorient, and at the end of the lesson, self-assess.

### *Teacher Modeling and Think Alouds*

How we understand written texts is entirely within the mind of the reader or the writer. It is difficult for children and adolescents to make assumptions about the cognitive and meta-cognitive processes someone else is using when these are not visible to the observer. Modeling and thinking aloud about the reading comprehension processes, we are using or discarding these decisions making apparent to students. These verbalizations are planned, and not simply off-the-cuff statements. Think-aloud techniques are used to demonstrate a host of comprehension strategies such as how one monitors comprehension (“That was a complicated paragraph. I’m not sure I understood it. I’m going to go back and read it again”), or making inferences (“That statement caught my eye. The author told earlier that you don’t taste with your taste buds, but with your brain. I am seeing that the signals from those cells link between the two”). Other think-aloud approaches are used to the model making connections, resolving unknown vocabulary, determining importance, and visualizing and organizing information. [McClintock, Pesco, and Martin-Chang \(2014\)](#) found the think-aloud approach for comprehension was especially useful for children with language impairments, as it resulted in improved ability for the student to derive literal and inferential meaning from texts. In this chapter, we demonstrated the positive impact that think alouds had on students’ literacy development ([Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2011](#)).

### *Close Reading*

Close reading is an instructional routine intended to foster text-based discussion and deep comprehension of complex texts, with the teacher guiding thinking rather than telling students what to think. This approach is dialogic and is anchored by text-dependent questions that cause students to reread, use evidence, and critically analyze the reading. These text-dependent questions move students through three phases of understanding. The first phase focuses on the literal-level meaning of the text through questions about the general understanding and key details (*What does the text say?*). The second phase poses structural questions about the vocabulary, word choice, organization, and author’s craft (*How does the text work?*). Once student have a solid understanding of the text’s literal meaning and organization, the third phase of critical and inferential analysis begins, especially by examining intention, intertextual links, and discussion of the arguments (*What does the text mean?*). Systematic movement through these phases has been shown to

be effective for middle-school students who are not yet reading at expected levels (Fisher & Frey, 2014).

### *Scaffolding Reading with More Complex Texts*

As students move out of the primary grades, their experiences with texts should reflect their evolving ability to handle more complex texts. Small group reading instruction remains of great value, but the texts themselves should change from those that scaffold the foundational skills of decoding, to those that offer more challenging content. The debate over the use of reading levels has been a contentious one, but there is agreement that reading instruction requires more than simply matching readers and text and then hoping for the best. Engagement, interest, and motivation play an important role in what children can read and comprehend, and in their ability to manage their cognitive resources. In fact, student interest appears to have a moderating effect on text difficulty and aids in the self-regulation required in reading (Fulmer, D’Mello, Strain, & Graesser, 2015). In other words, high levels of interest make it possible for students to read and comprehend more challenging texts.

### *Text-Based Collaborative Discussions with Peers*

Peer-led reading tasks can aid students in further consolidating their understanding of text, and promote the use of self-regulated comprehension skills. One of the most robust examples is reciprocal teaching, a peer-led discussion of text (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Four students engage in a discussion protocol of segmented portions of a text, including asking each other clarifying questions and answering them, summarizing the passage, and making predictions about what the author will tell them next, based on the information thus far. As with think alouds, the purpose is for students to verbalize the internal dialog that occurs as readers comprehend text. Students are not only teaching one another, but are also heightening their own awareness of how they learn.

### *Wide Reading for Pleasure and Study*

We read for a number of reasons, but especially for enjoyment and to gain knowledge. Students of all ages need lots of experiences with texts that address

both of these purposes. Wide reading in general builds knowledge, and fosters an understanding of other perspectives and experiences. Correlational studies have demonstrated a link between reading outside of school and performance on standardized tests (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988). In addition to autonomous reading, students need daily experience reading on the topic of study. The effects of prior knowledge on reading comprehension have been noted in decades' worth of studies, with more recent studies demonstrating its mediating effects on conceptual understandings, the so-called "higher-order thinking" needed for deep learning (Tarchi, 2010). Knowledge acquisition through texts in turn impacts one's ability to understand more complex texts on a similar topic.

## CONCLUSION

Differential access to the OTL is not an abstract concept. OTL is enacted each day, in each classroom. These opportunities to learn have a multiplicative effect over the course of a child's academic career. The trajectories are established early and are compounded by frequent moves, in-grade retentions, and decreased access to complex texts. Inequitable access to OTL can be mitigated by taking action at the classroom, school, and district levels. At the classroom level, teachers must provide sound, research-based instruction that provides every student access to complex texts. Appropriately challenging texts with teacher- and peer-led discussion builds knowledge, fosters high-order thinking skills, and develops conceptual understandings needed as they advance in their school careers. At the school level, caring educators can mobilize their efforts to ensure that student mobility is addressed head-on and proactively. We do not need to simply accept it as an existing condition; we have the ability to influence what happens once a new student has arrived. However, we must put systems into place to do so. At the district level, educators, administrators, and related services personnel can collaborate to eliminate in-grade retention and mobilize literacy interventions, especially response to intervention efforts.

Issues of equity may seem intractable, and to be sure there are societal and fiscal factors that are outside the scope of our influence. But not being able to change *everything* doesn't give any of us the license to change *nothing*. It is time we reframe our thinking. It's not an "achievement gap that needs to be decreased." We need to increase the OTL for students who have been historically under-taught. Literacy is the gatekeeper for attainment in academics and in life. When literacy and equity are discussed in the same breath,

the conversation takes a turn from admiring a problem to finding solutions. How will you start the conversation?

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